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Innovative Practices in Team Interpreting

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Getting the most out of it. Developing the individual and the team

Irma Sluis a Maya De Wit

Consumers and interpreters must get used to the fact that many assignments are best carried out by a team of interpreters, rather than typically by a single interpreter. In our view, a team consists of all the parties involved in the interpreting assignment: consumers and interpreters.

Assignment for one or two?

It is not always obvious when there is more than one interpreter needed for an assignment. To determine if an assignment has to have two interpreters, you could consider the following:

- **Duration:** all day conference, seminar, or a presentation in a third language of one hour.
- **Complexity:** university classes, multilingual conferences, presentation by the deaf person, multiple speakers.
- **Dynamics of the assignment:** more than two deaf consumers
- **Special needs of the consumer:** for example deaf-blind

If an interpreting situation may have considerable consequences, there might also be a need for two interpreters, for example in a judicial setting.

To accept or not accept

Before accepting any assignment, the interpreters should answer some basic questions. The interpreters need to consider their individual skills and qualities. For example: "Knowing my skills and qualities could I interpret in such a situation?" Content and duration of the assignment should also be considered. If the interpreter needs to interpret a job interview for a deaf person who is highly knowledgeable of the profession, and you as an inter-



preter are not, would you be able to fully interpret the content? And of course there are potential ethical dilemmas, such as the topic of the assignment, or if the consumer is a friend for whom the interpreter does not want to interpret in that environment.

When asking a consumer on this issue, the consumer said that the deaf person should be knowledgeable about the subject, should feel attracted to the subject, or both. If not, the interpreting skills will not be sufficient to fill the gap of knowledge: yawning interpreters or interpreters who fingerspell every single unknown word.

The question in the end should be, will I be able to provide the best possible interpreting services, or do we need to be more than one interpreter?

What are the risks, when not interpreting in a team?

A study conducted in 1997 by Barbara Moser at the University of Geneva shows that interpreter accuracy is directly related to the length of time that a person interprets.



Maya de Wit was born in Zürich, Switzerland, in 1968. After graduating with a BA in Special Education in Nijmegen, the Netherlands, she attended the Health Care Interpreting Program at St. Mary's Campus of the College of St. Catherine, in Minneapolis (USA), qualifying as RID Certified ASL interpreter in 1993. In 2003 Maya became certified as a Dutch Sign Language interpreter. Since 1993, she runs her own business in international interpreting services, based in the Netherlands. Maya is also the policy maker of the Dutch Association of Sign Language Interpreters (NBTG), representing the Dutch Sign Language interpreters at national and international forums.



Irma Sluis has attended the Dutch Sign Language Interpreter training program at the College of Utrecht. In 2001 she received her degree as a Dutch Sign Language Interpreter. She is officially registered at the Dutch Registry of Sign Language Interpreters. Irma Sluis interprets between spoken Dutch and English into Dutch Sign Language (NGT) and visa versa. She has experience in international settings, conference interpreting, academic and higher education, team interpreting and linguistics.

The study was done among spoken language interpreters who had between 12 and 15 years experience. During the first 30 minutes the frequency of errors rose steadily, and even doubled from 15 to 30 minutes. The interpreters however were unaware of this.

The errors included different categories by which quality can be determined. The category of most serious errors, for example errors in meaning, rose consistently. The conclusion of Moser was that the increase in the number of meaning errors combined with the interpreter's lack of awareness of this drastic decrease in quality shed some light on the validity of interpreter's judgment of their own output quality.

Another study done in 1989 by RIT in New York focused on repetitive motion injury. RIT concluded that all assignments that included many large stress factors had to have a team of interpreters. In addition it was advised that some of the stress could be reduced by preparation with the speaker on content and terminology.

As interpreters we can look for stress factors to help us to determine if we need a team of interpreters. In 1975 H. McIlvaine Parsons found that the most important stress factors for interpreters are a fast speaker and the lack of cohesion in the discourse of the speaker. If interpreters can determine these and other stress factors before the start of the assignment, they can request a team of interpreters. The study conducted by AICC confirmed these stress factors for interpreters and in addition named: speaker reading their presentation, frequent change of topic, no preparation materials, speaker with a difficult accent, and insufficient preparation time.

Who should be on the team?

Who picks the team interpreter? Is it the first interpreter or the consumer? When some consumers were asked, they stated that the consumer picks the first interpreter and states which preference he or she has for a second interpreter. The interpreter can inform the consumer if he does not want the team with the second interpreter and can suggest a different interpreter. The reasoning of the consumer is that the interpreters have to work in closer cooperation than the deaf person and the second interpreter.

Is the deaf or the hearing person also on the team? The deaf consumer wants to be on the team, but does not consider the hearing part of the (interpreting) team. Generally speaking, there is always a stronger connection between the deaf person and the interpreters, than between the interpreters and the hearing person. Of course there are a few exceptions, mainly of hearing people who are involved in the deaf world or for example in therapeutic sessions with deaf consumers.

How to develop the individual?

In order to make a successful team, it is not just the team work, but also the individual interpreter who contributes to a good team.

The interpreter must be aware of her own capacities. The interpreter needs to consider the linguistic and interpreting areas that have been problematic in the past. Interpreters who know their own capacities can inform their team members and can monitor those more closely and be more alert. This is essential in the preparation for the assignment.

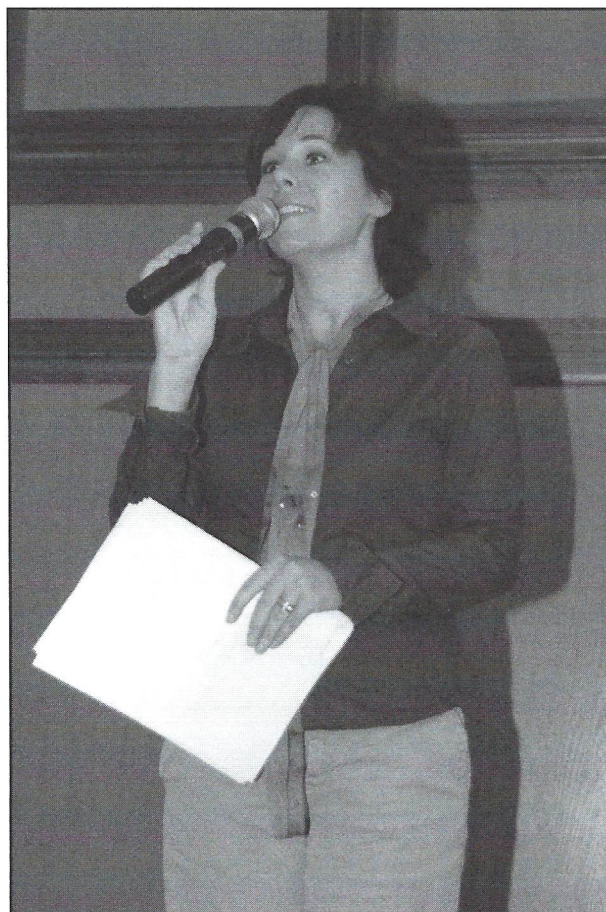
A study conducted by Cokely and Hawkins concluded that interpreters in their preparation time hardly ever share this information. However, if this information is shared beforehand, the request for support during the assignment becomes much smoother.

In addition to the self assessment, the interpreter also needs to prepare individually for the assignment. Studying the preparation materials and looking into potential interpreting problems or things that are not understood.

Feedback is an essential part of the team work. The interpreters should ask themselves how they want to receive the feedback, and inform their colleague of their preferences. If the feedback is received well, it will positively affect the team

What do you need to work as a team?

There are some essential elements that are needed to work together as a team: trust, feeling at ease, openness, humor, and professional qualities. Another important part is the preparation together as a team. The interpreters and the other members of the team need to



prepare together. During the preparation the content of the assignment should be discussed, but also the placement of all the participants, and which signals the interpreters will use to show that you need support or that something should be changed.

Creating awareness

There is still a lack of awareness in the area of team interpreting. Consumers (deaf and hearing) as well as interpreters are not all aware of the need of two interpreters in specific situations. Providing insight into what an interpreter does and what you need to do as an interpreter is essential. Our profession has developed rapidly during the last decade. We should sometimes take a deep breath, and not forget the people we are interpreting for, and take them with us on the journey of providing better quality interpretation.

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