



Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

## Working with or as an interpreter

OSCE handbooks for fieldwork





*“Education alone can conduct us to that enjoyment which is, at once, best in quality and infinite in quantity.”*

*Horace Mann*



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# Introduction

*“I have a prejudice against people who print things in a foreign language and add no translation. When I am the reader, and the other considers me able to do the translating myself, he pays me quite a nice compliment -- but if he would do the translating for me I would try to get along without the compliment.”*

Mark Twain  
*A Tramp Abroad*



## About this handbook

The OSCE is a unique and young organization that has developed quickly over the last few years and gained international recognition for its specific expertise, geographical coverage and ability to operate in the field.

In the past decade, there has been a steady increase in the number of field activities and staff deployed under the OSCE flag. Currently, there are approximately 1,200 OSCE international staff (hereafter referred to as “mission members”) deployed in almost 20 missions and field activities (hereafter referred to as “missions”).

During virtually every deployment in the field, mission members find themselves often relying on interpreters to communicate with the local population and their leaders.

OSCE missions provide interpretation services to overcome communication difficulties. For this purpose missions will recruit a number of interpreters from the local population. However, since certified professional interpreters are not always available, missions must often rely on individuals who lack training in interpretation skills although proficient in the English language: the so-called language assistants.

Newly arrived OSCE international personnel may or may not have worked with professional interpreters or language assistants before. Very often new mission members will not have received formal training on how to work with an interpreter.

# Introduction

After a great deal of frustration, field staff usually develops techniques and procedures to ensure an effective use of interpreters in their area of work.

Interpretation requires teamwork, close collaboration and a high level of trust. Becoming proficient requires practice and commitment.

This handbook gathers some of the lessons that the Organization has learnt from its experience in missions. Its purpose is to serve as a guide for OSCE staff interested in developing these skills, either on their own or within the framework of formal training.

It aims at raising awareness among OSCE field staff of the particularities of interpreted communication in missions and assisting them in getting familiar with the basic skills required for it, both from the perspective of the person requiring an interpreter and the person acting as communication assistant.

In particular, OSCE mission members will find in this handbook:

- a tool to understand the difficulties in maintaining conversations indirectly;
- a number of tips to assist language assistants in providing a high quality interpretation service;
- a set of guidelines to help them to plan and conduct communication through a third person.

OSCE local staff providing interpretation may use this handbook to:

- learn the elements that characterize a good interpreter;
- learn a number of tips that can assist them in providing a high quality service.

In addition, this handbook contains a set of simple exercises designed to help OSCE field staff to practice these skills, either as a self-development tool or as part of a formal training session.

The Training Section of the OSCE Secretariat remains committed to contribute to making OSCE missions more effective as well as a rewarding experience for all their staff. We hope that this handbook proves to be useful in that regard.

*Training & Capacity Building Section  
Department of Human Resources  
OSCE Secretariat*

# Introduction

## How to use this handbook

This handbook is divided into three modular sections, a workbook and appendices.

Section one is common to all readers. Sections two and three are function-specific: section two is addressed particularly to mission members, while section three focuses on the needs of interpreters.

*Section one: About interpretation* introduces OSCE staff to basic concepts of interpreted communication.

*Section two: Guidelines for mission members* introduces international staff to good practice in preparing for and conducting effective interpreted communication.

*Section three: Guidelines for interpreters* will assist OSCE local staff hired as language assistants in developing professional skills in interpretation.

OSCE staff using this handbook should read section one followed by the relevant function-specific section. It would be advisable, however, for OSCE staff to read the other function-specific section after completing their own. Since OSCE activities in the field are a matter of teamwork, the better each other's roles and difficulties are understood, the more efficient teams are likely to become.

The *Workbook* included in this handbook contains a number of exercises that can be carried out individually, as part of a self-development plan, or within the framework of a training programme.

The workbook also includes a self-assessment sheet for both mission members and interpreters. This template will assist OSCE staff in identifying their particular needs and expectations, which will contribute to building a mutually rewarding professional relationship when communicated effectively.

Finally, the *Appendices* include a number of quick reference checklists designed to assist both mission members and interpreters in preparing and conducting interpreted communication.

# Section one



The principles of interpretation

The role of an interpreter

Definitions

## Section One: About interpretation



# Principles

*“Having been born across the world, we are translated men. It is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation; I cling stubbornly to the notion that something can also be gained.”*

*Salman Rushdie  
Imaginary Homelands*



## The principles of interpretation

Multi-language communication has a long and honourable tradition. Historically, the military has been one of the most important users (the Romans, Genghis Khan).

Within the Ottoman Empire, the ‘*dragoman*’ or translator held a prestigious position. Explorers and adventurers also relied heavily on interpreters. In today’s conflicts, access to skilled, competent interpreters is essential.

A good interpreter – skilled in language and techniques of effective interpretation - can literally save our lives. They are very important people to whom we often do not give adequate attention. It is important not to make assumptions or take them for granted.

More important, the success or failure of our service in an OSCE mission cannot be considered the responsibility of a single person. OSCE field activities are a matter of teamwork, and, as in all teams, individual members bear some responsibility for making the experience worthwhile and rewarding.

### The principle of responsibility

The need for mission members to acknowledge and accept responsibility cannot be stressed enough. In many situations interpreters will look to mission members for guidance, advice, information and, sometimes, even protection. It is their responsibility to provide it.

To get the best results from interpretation mission members must be in the lead. Interpreters have a right to expect this.

# Principles

Unless the interpreter's skills are grossly inadequate – in terms of both language and techniques– the success or failure of an encounter will be the responsibility of the mission member.

## The principle of leadership

Interpreters will expect mission members to take the lead in professional activities. Mission members, not interpreters, hold meetings. It will be their discussions, their outcomes and their decisions.

It is the mission member's responsibility to choose a style and content for the encounter. The way mission members manage meetings will influence their relationship with their counterparts in the host society.

The outcome, in terms of the quality of interpretation, will depend greatly on the amount of time invested in preparation. This applies mainly to mission members, although working together with the interpreter(s) is a necessary component of the preparation.

Although a poor outcome is unlikely to be the interpreter's fault, very often they may feel responsible.

Mission members are responsible for leading the discussions, while interpreters limit themselves to assist in that task, mainly by acting as a bridge for communication across language barriers. Interpreters should NEVER be in the lead during meetings or discussions.

## The principle of teamwork

A good team is one in which participants understand the clear responsibilities and boundaries that its members have set, but maintain close contact and keep each other informed – in the interests of doing the best possible job.

A good team is one in which individual expectations of each other are realistic, difficulties and obstacles are openly discussed, and team members support each other.

A good team demonstrates mutual respect, consideration and understanding.

A good team will be successful at interpretation.



It is of the uttermost importance to invest some time, particularly in the early days, in defining relationships and expectations whenever setting up a new team. Take the time to get it right!

*Interpretation skills can be learned.  
This is the first step.*



# ***The role of interpreters***

## **The role of an interpreter**

### **Language conversion**

According to dictionaries, an interpreter is a person who translates orally for people speaking different languages. However, although their most obvious role is to serve as communication assistants, this would be a very limited description of their work. Interpreters contribute much more to the effectiveness of an OSCE mission with additional roles.

### **Source of information**

Interpreters can provide valuable background information on the community in which the mission works. Although individuals may have their bias, preferences and personal opinions, they can still be a useful source of information.

Interpreters will prove particularly valuable in the first days of assignment of new mission members. They can answer questions such as: What is it important to know about this community? Who lives here? What do they do? Where do they work? Where can you find people, offices, services, etc.?

Questions are endless. By working together on these questions mission members and interpreters can start to develop – and then strengthen – their professional relationship.

Mission members are encouraged, however, to exert caution in order not to compromise OSCE local staff with uncomfortable or inappropriate questions. It is advisable to ensure that interpreters have an opportunity to indicate if a particular question makes them uncomfortable.

### **Filter on attitude, environment and mood**

Mission members are usually foreigners in the host society. It may therefore be difficult for them to interpret specific body language, or the mood or atmosphere in the local community. Here also interpreters can prove to be of great assistance.

After a meeting or discussion, interpreters will be able to judge, for instance, how our proposals were received or the response to the conversation. Were people trustful? Were words and actions compatible? Were these actually the decision-makers, or were they staying in the background while others did the groundwork? Were they who they pretended to be? Were there indications of anger, humour, affection or other emotions which could have gone unnoticed?

### **Cultural guide**

Interpreters can lead mission members through the minefield of customs, courtesy gestures, practices with which they are likely to be unfamiliar and which, if neglected, can easily lead to offence or misunderstanding and conflict.

Mission members are encouraged to discuss with their respective interpreters the roles that they would expect to be taken both “at the table” and “away from the table”. The workbook in this handbook contains a template that may be useful for this purpose.

# Definitions

## Definitions



VS.



**Translation**

vs.

**interpretation**

Although both terms imply expressing the sense of one language into another, they refer to different situations:

- *Interpreting* involves conveying messages from one language into another, orally.
- *Translating* is conveying messages from one language to another, in written form.

Unlike translators, interpreters are visible, known, vulnerable and cannot easily rest.

### Source and target

Professional interpreting is a profession with its own jargon, techniques, and underlying theories. Interpreters must be familiar with this terminology and especially with the concepts regarding languages involved in interpretation.

### About interpreter's languages

The *A-language* is the language with which the interpreter is most comfortable. Most often, this is the first language of the person or the language with which the person was brought up.

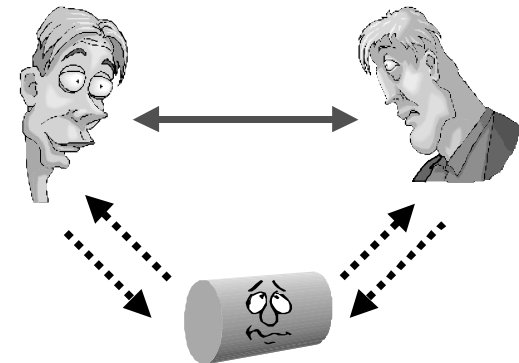
The *B-language* is the interpreter's second language.

- *Example:* For a woman who was born and brought up Germany and emigrated to the United States as an adult, German is her A-language and English her B-language.

### About languages used in interpreting situations

The language from which the interpretation is carried out is called the '**source**' language. The language into which the words are interpreted is called the '**target**' language.

- *Example:* A conference presentation carried out in English for a non-English speaking audience in Germany. English is the source language. The interpreter interprets the presentation into German for the listeners; German is the target language.



During interpretation, interpreters act as a **conduit** or channel between the two parties, translating orally the words from one language into the other and vice-versa

# Definitions

## Types of interpretation

### *Simultaneous interpretation*

Simultaneous interpreting means that the interpreter follows just a few words behind the speaker. Both the speaker and the interpreter are speaking at the same time – simultaneously.

This technique is used either when, in addition to the interpreter, there are more people in the room than just the mission member and the local representative; or when the mission member is not able to speak in short sentences and cannot be stopped to give the interpreter time to interpret what was said.

Sometimes it may be difficult to interrupt the mission member to give the interpreter time to interpret what was said. Instead, the interpreter interprets simultaneously.

In simultaneous interpretation the interpreter is normally isolated in a booth. The interpreter speaks at the same time as the mission member and therefore has no need to memorize or jot down what is said. Moreover, the processes of analysis-comprehension and of reconstruction-expression are telescoped. The interpreter works on the message bit by bit, giving the portion he or she has understood while analysing and assimilating the next idea.

This type of interpretation, which is common at very formal events including large numbers of people, requires special equipment and 'shifts' of fixed periods between relays of interpreters, and is, therefore, rarely used by mission members.



### *Consecutive interpretation*

In consecutive interpretation the interpreter does not start speaking until the original speaker has stopped. When using consecutive interpretation, one person speaks at a time. The speaker speaks in short sentences. When the speaker has finished, the interpreter interprets from the source language into the target language. The interpreter, therefore, has time to analyse the message as a whole, which makes it easier for him or her to understand its meaning. The fact that the interpreter is in the same room and that the speaker has stopped talking before the interpreter begins, means that the interpreter speaks to his or her listeners face to face and actually becomes the speaker.

This technique is the most commonly preferred form of interpreting in meetings and negotiations by mission members. It is the least confusing for the interpreter and results in a more accurate oral translation than simultaneous interpreting for interpreters who do not have years of training: interpreters do not have to listen and speak at the same time when using the consecutive method.

This technique, however, is very demanding for interpreters: they will be exposed, visible, and vulnerable; and since it may require going back and forth between two interlocutors, it is also very tiring, requiring great fluency and concentration.

### *Whispered interpreting*

Whispered interpreting is also known as *chuchotage*. When equipment for simultaneous interpretation is not available, one participant speaks and simultaneously an interpreter whispers into the ear of the one or maximum two people who require interpreting services.

# Definitions

This technique is less stressful for the interpreter as their presence is more discreet and it makes them less vulnerable. Interpreters usually sit at the side of one party when using this technique.

Mission members are likely to prefer this technique when observing events conducted entirely in a language other than English such as, for instance, attending a meeting of a municipal council.

## *Other types of interpreting in technical literature*

There are some additional types of interpretation mentioned in technical literature. Although mostly describing particular situations in which either simultaneous or consecutive interpreting techniques are used, it is advisable to become familiar with the terminology.

### *Escort interpreting*

Escort interpreting refers to the interpreting services provided for government officials, business executives, investors, observers, and the like, who are conducting on-site visits. Escort interpretation is marked by the spontaneity and the broad spectrum of situations interpreters may find themselves in, from formal meetings to tours of factories to cocktail parties. The mode most often used in this type of interpretation is consecutive, and is usually limited to a few sentences at a time.

### *Media interpreting*

Media interpreting is a catch-all term encompassing the interpreting performed at press conferences, publicity appearances, and interviews, as well as films, videos, videoconferences, and television and radio programmes.

### *Court interpreting*

Court interpreting is also known as legal or forensic interpreting. It refers to interpreting services provided in courts of law and in legal cases of any sort.

### *Sight translation*

This refers to situations when interpreters are asked to translate documents from written to spoken language on spot (when confronted with an official certificate, for instance). It is essential that interpreters familiarize themselves with these documents prior to interpreting, as the language is frequently very technical.

### *Relay interpreting*

Relay interpreting is a technique that is seldom used and is very vulnerable to communication errors, although it is sometimes absolutely essential. It is used when a person speaks a language for which there is no interpreter into English. In this case, two interpreters are needed to facilitate communication.

- *Example:* a refugee speaks only an unusual dialect that the OSCE interpreter cannot speak. Unfortunately, no person can be identified who speaks this particular dialect and English. However, there is one person who speaks such a dialect and French, and the OSCE interpreter happens to speak French and English. The mission member will ask questions in English, the OSCE interpreter will convey them in French, while the second interpreter translates orally the questions from French into the dialect that the refugee can understand. And, of course, the reverse process takes place when the refugee communicates with the mission member.

## ***Section two***



**Preparing to use interpretation**

**Conducting a conversation through an interpreter**

**Difficult situations for interpretation**

**Summary**

## **Section Two: Guidelines for mission members**



# Preparation

“Language is the dress of thought”

Samuel Johnson  
*Lives of the English Poets*



## Preparing to use interpretation

### About the need for using an interpreter

Although more and more people around the world are learning English and mission members usually speak several languages, OSCE missions still offer the assistance of interpreters for meetings and negotiations.

Mission members should not assume that people do not speak English, just because they belong to a particular community or because they may not say anything in English openly. Making this assumption can lead to embarrassing situations and hinder any achievements.

On the other hand, mission members should not assume that everyone speaks English, even if you find people nodding and acknowledging your comments. This may just be their way of being polite.

Many people, even though they may be quite fluent in the *lingua franca* of the mission area, still prefer to use an interpreter for several reasons, such as:

- even a few mistakes can be costly or embarrassing; and
- using an interpreter is a way of buying time, giving mission members the opportunity to formulate an adequate response or evaluate what is being said.

However, communicating effectively through an interpreter is a skill that must be learnt and requires careful preparation, good teamwork and constant improvement. This section outlines some of the issues that mission members should address.

# Preparation

## Meeting interpreters for the first time

Upon arrival in a new field station, it is important that mission members establish a good professional relationship with the interpreter(s).

Mission members will probably find interpreters extremely helpful in the process of orientating themselves in the new area. Interpreters can assist mission members in getting to know the community, its traditions and customs, its problems, its leaders, etc.

When new interpreters are hired, they cannot be expected to know every technical term and OSCE expression. Mission members should assess possible gaps in their preparedness or proficiency in English with regard to the specific topics they may be interpreting. Mission members should help them to improve where and when required.

It is essential to invest some time, particularly in the early days, in defining relationships and expectations. This is the only way of forming a good team. Mission members should take the necessary time to discuss expectations, from both sides, and thus to set the basis for mutual understanding and respect.

## Planning an event using interpretation

While due preparation is key to any successful meeting, this is even more true if the meeting needs the assistance of interpreters. There are a number of issues that OSCE mission members should address prior to the event. These include briefing the interpreter beforehand and arranging the agenda and the specific logistics of the event.

## *Briefing interpreters*

There is no substitute for a good briefing, as far in advance of the interpreting session as possible. Just as nobody would ever think of hiring an assistant and telling him or her: “Here's your desk, get to work”, mission members should not expect an interpreter to just step in and perform without a briefing.

To the extent that mission members can make the interpreter aware of the subject matter to be discussed, in advance of the session, the interpreter's productivity will be correspondingly greater.

The more time mission members spend preparing the session and assisting the interpreter to prepare for it, the more effective the meeting or session will be.

Whenever possible, try to give interpreter a list of specialized terms several days in advance. If there are materials that place these terms in context, it is enormously valuable to the interpreter to receive these as well. The same applies to acronyms.

A good briefing includes:

- information on the agenda of the meeting, purpose of the trip, content of the speech, etc.;
- information on the timing and location of the meeting or event and any possible back-up arrangements;
- information on the level of formality of the event and the participants;
- the desired interpreting style for the event (consecutive, simultaneous or whispering);

# Preparation

- an indication as to whether there will be other interpreters present or not;
- a list of any technical vocabulary, specialized language and acronyms likely to be used during the meeting;
- a copy of the script or outline of the presentation, should there be one;
- a request for information on appropriate cultural courtesies and any other preliminary comments the interpreter may consider useful for the event.



*Unfortunately, there is sometimes little time for preparation and mission members may have little information on the event.*

*Briefing often takes place while hurrying to an unexpected event, in a vehicle on the way to a meeting with unknown counterparts. This is the nature of the work, but the principle remains:*

*The better prepared interpreters are, the more successful mission members can be!*

## *Specific requirements for interpreted events*

Meetings and events involving interpretation have additional requirements to standard meetings. Mission members must consider them carefully in order not to frustrate the desired professional output.

Mission members must bear in mind, first of all, that interpreted communication takes much longer than direct communication between two parties. The time required may actually double

especially if consecutive interpretation is to be used. Mission members should ensure that the agenda provides enough time to conduct the negotiation or gather the required information.

Whenever possible, it is preferable to have two interpreters if a meeting will last more than an hour and a half, so that they can act on a rotating basis. Interpreting is a demanding exercise. Interpreters may find it difficult to concentrate for more than an hour and a half.

Mission members should also ensure that there are breaks scheduled during the meeting. Both interpreters and participants need a pause to maintain concentration.

Interpreters should be treated as professional colleagues. Mission members should attend to the interpreter's special needs, such as a glass of water, a straight backed chair, etc. If the interpreting situation involves lunch or other meals, the interpreter should be given the same benefits as the other group members. The same rule should apply to duty trips requiring an overnight stay: the interpreter's accommodation should be of a comparable standard to that of the mission member.

Any travel arrangements made in advance must also include the interpreter. In addition, mission members must ensure that interpreters are included in any security arrangements whenever planning a trip to an unsafe area.

## *Positioning the interpreter*

The seating arrangements for the interpreter will depend very much on the type of interpretation mission members choose for the specific event and on the presence or not of additional interpreters.





# Preparation

As a general rule, the presence of interpreters should be as discreet as possible. They should not be the centre of attention. Meetings are the responsibility of the mission member conducting them.

Ensuring that the interpreter's position in the room does not prevent direct communication between the mission member and his or her addressee is not a simple formality. There is also a security dimension. Subjects, arguments and proposals put forward during the meeting may not always be well received by the addressee. It is important that mission members take ownership of these in order to avoid giving any suggestion of the personal involvement of the interpreter. After all, the interpreter's role in the meeting is primarily that of a communication tool.

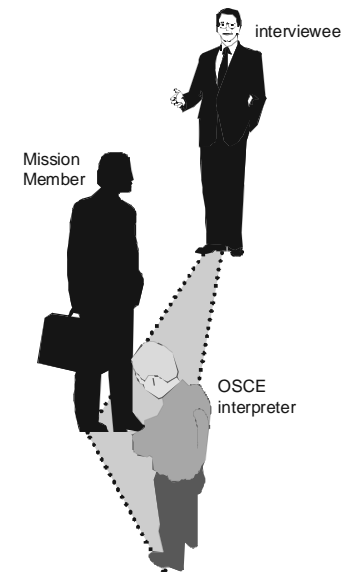
On the other hand, unless the situation requires whispering interpretation, it is important that interpreters can be seen and heard.

Mission members meeting with another person while seated may prefer to position the interpreter right beside them, but not in between the interviewee and themselves. Positioning the interpreter at the side of the mission member makes him or her clearly visible to the other party while protecting them from possible harassment or being addressed directly.



The same rule applies if the other party brings its own interpreter. Under these circumstances, placing the interpreters at the side of each party ensures both of them will be easily seen and heard without interfering in the direct communication between mission members and their interviewees.

On the other hand, mission members meeting with another person while standing may prefer to place the interpreter slightly behind and to the side, however. This reinforces the idea that the mission member is the person in charge of the conversation and reduces the risk of interviewees addressing interpreters directly.



Finally, when giving presentations and formal speeches, the interpreter should stand a short distance from the mission member, with a microphone if necessary.

*Remember: mission members have a responsibility for their support staff. Do not endanger them by not respecting their role during assignments!*

# Speaking tips

## Conducting a conversation through an interpreter

### Preliminary introductions

Mission members should greet all participants in a meeting themselves. Allowing the interpreter to assume this role may give the impression that the interpreter's involvement goes beyond that of a communication tool.

Mission members should also introduce the interpreter to the participants and confirm that the interpreter has the correct spelling and pronunciation of all participants' names.

It is advisable to keep OSCE ID cards visible at all times during meetings. Doing this not only identifies OSCE personnel to all the participants, but also helps interviewees remembering the names.

Exceptions may be made when working in difficult areas, such as across ethnic conflict lines. Under these circumstances, it may be safer for the interpreter not to display an OSCE ID card. Ask the interpreter whether they wish to use their real name or not.

### Rules of thumb for speakers

#### Phraseology

Careful consideration of what is to be said becomes crucial whenever speaking through an interpreter. Mission members must appreciate that somebody else is listening to their words, trying to understand and analyse them, and then having to resynthesize them in the appropriate form in a different language. If Mission Members' speech is confused and lacks a

clear and logical order, it will be impossible for the interpreter to convey any messages clearly.

Mission members should also control their pace while speaking through an interpreter. Use a normal speed and tone of voice. Check regularly that the interpreter is actually keeping up with the speech.

Do not allow more than one person to speak at a time during group discussions. Interpreters cannot follow several people speaking at the same time.

Avoid long, complex sentences. Try to speak in short sentences instead. When using consecutive translation, make sure that pauses are made regularly to allow the interpreter to catch up. Pause after sixty seconds, after completing a thought (if not too long) or after making major points.

Speak clearly. Mission members should make every effort to pronounce words in a form that prevents any mistake. Remember there is a big difference in meaning between "trader" and "traitor", but not much difference phonetically.



*Remember: Raising the voice will not help the other party to understand. Emotion cannot be translated. Use language to stress a point.*

*Example: Instead of saying: "I am AGAINST that proposal", say: "I am completely against that proposal."*

## Speaking tips

### *Jargon, acronyms, idioms and slang*

Mission members should avoid all of these. If the use of acronyms is inevitable, (UNHCR, AOR, OSCE, NGO, etc.) make sure the interpreter is familiar with them and can ensure the other party understands what is meant by them. It may be necessary to provide the interpreter with a list of acronyms and their meaning. A summary of the activities of entities and institutions may also be helpful to the interpreter.

Avoid puns and metaphors that do not easily translate into the other language. Remember that interpreting is mentally very taxing and make sure that interpreters are given regular breaks. Often, a meeting will break up and the participants will go to lunch or dinner for a more informal session. Remember that the interpreter will still be working during the meal!

### *Humour*

Mission members should avoid jokes and humorous stories. Humour does not travel well! Also avoid cultural allusions to politicians, sport and customs as these do not translate easily either.

### *Body language*

Unless inadvisable for cultural reasons, it is recommended that eye contact be maintained with counterparts while speaking. Mission members should look at the addressees, not at the interpreter. Maintaining eye contact is a form of reinforcing the leading role of the mission member during the meeting. Addressees will tend to look at the person that looks at them, thus protecting the interpreter from undesired involvement in the discussion.

Verify with the interpreter the cultural interpretation of gestures such as nodding or shaking the head, crossing the arms in front of the chest, etc.

Address statements and remarks to the audience. Do not address remarks to the interpreter. By doing so, mission members would be involving the interpreter in the discussion and, consequently, he or she might find themselves in a difficult position with regard to the local community.

#### DO

- Use only the language which is being translated
- Listen and pay attention to counterparts' body language and tone
- Ask questions for clarification whenever necessary and encourage the interpreter to do the same
- Speak only through the interpreter



#### DO NOT

- Assume others do not speak English
- Speak directly to the interpreter
- Have private discussions with the interpreter (ask politely to be excused for a moment)
- Allow interpreters to be intimidated or compromised



## Speaking tips

### *Symbols and signals:*

Mission members should agree a signalling system with interpreters. Interpreters must be able to discreetly inform mission members, for instance, when their pace is too fast, they require a break, the other party is being threatening or other interpreters are not being accurate in their interpretation. Doing this will improve mission members' ability to conduct meetings and negotiations adequately.

### **About direct and indirect styles of interpreting**

Interpreters may be tempted to use an indirect style for interpretation instead of direct oral translation of the mission member's statement. For example, the interpreter might rephrase the mission member's statements in the third person ("he (or she) wants to know", "he (or she) said that ...")



*A direct style of interpreting can be a great advantage in difficult circumstances, as it allows interpreters to remain distant from the subject discussed. It focuses the attention of the addressee on the mission member rather than on the interpreter.*

This is a dangerous practice. It undermines the interpreter's role as merely a communication tool to bridge language barriers. Interpreters thus become more vulnerable to being seen as presenting their own ideas or "re-interpreting mission members' statements. Finally, an erroneous appearance of involvement by the interpreter may also obstruct the ability of the mission member to lead the conversation.

As a general rule, an indirect style of interpreting would only be appropriate during consecutive interpreting in an informal environment such as social gatherings. Otherwise, interpreters should always use a direct style for interpreting.

### **Concluding interpretation: Debriefing the interpreter**



Debriefing is as important as preparation for the development of a professional relationship and an atmosphere of trust between mission members and interpreters.

By asking for feedback, mission members acknowledge the teamwork dimension of fieldwork. They show an interest in modifying their own behaviour where necessary to better assist interpreters in the performance of their duties.

Debriefing also allows mission members to learn about the way they were perceived, and remarks and other incidentals that may have passed them by unnoticed during the interpretation.

A good debriefing includes:

- thanking the interpreter for the service performed;
- the interpreter's comments about the atmosphere and mood, side conversations, remarks, etc;
- the mission member's feedback on the accuracy and performance of the interpreter (e.g., tone, style, etc.);
- the interpreter's feedback on the behaviour of the mission member (e.g., pace, language, respect for cultural rules, etc.).

## Difficult situations

*“It is not always by plugging away at a difficulty and sticking at it that one overcomes it; but, rather, often by working on the one next to it. Certain people and certain things require to be approached on an angle.”*

*Matthew Arnold*



## Difficult situations for interpretation

### Difficult subjects

The subject matter under discussion may be distasteful and shocking. There are many subjects within fieldwork, particularly in a society in conflict, which may be difficult to deal with emotionally, such as those relating to violations of human rights for instance.

Interpreters may find such discussions difficult, reminding them of dreadful memories. Under these circumstances interpreters may be compromised. If the experience is too raw and painful, it is advisable to look for alternative arrangements, such as changing interpreters temporarily.



*Put interpreters' needs first. There is little point in working with human rights issues and not considering the needs of the humans with whom we work.*

### Difficult people

Occasionally, mission members may need to hold a meeting with individuals whose behaviour or attitude may not be the most appropriate for a satisfactory result. Some of the factors that may lead to such a situation may include:

- counterparts being unfamiliar with working with interpreters, resulting in confusion or even hostility;
- counterparts choosing a speaking style that favours oration over simplicity, accuracy or direct language;

## Difficult situations

- counterparts adopting an intimidating attitude, e.g. through harangues, soliloquies and monologues;
- counterparts wanting to re-educate their audience in the entire history of the region; and
- counterparts attempting to test the professionalism of mission members or to intimidate interpreters.

It will be the mission member's duty to redirect the course of, or even put an end to, the discussion. It is their responsibility to find a professional balance that respects cultural requirements without jeopardizing the mission's goals and mandate.

There is no harm in pointing out politely the uselessness of further historical education, or that time is limited, or reminding participants of the purpose of the meeting.

If challenged, mission members should provide clear and consistent responses that focus on the task and the professionalism of the mission, thus ensuring the security of the staff.



*Do not be bullied. Assertiveness may be all that is required. It is the responsibility of mission members – not the interpreter – to ensure that meetings are productive and opinions adequately channelled.*

### Female staff

Mission members need to be aware of the special circumstances that may surround the employment of female local staff.

Having a job, a public role and an income may be a new social phenomenon for women in the area where the mission operates. A common phenomenon in post-conflict societies is that women often assume more public and private responsibilities, become heads of households and take on employment. With most men conscripted, it is very likely that a large portion of interpretation staff will be female.

In addition, working closely with men, travelling unchaperoned, staying away from home, etc., could make female staff more vulnerable to criticism and harassment from other members of the community.

It is important to consider possible gender implications when planning travel, meetings, transportation to work, and accommodation. The OSCE and its mission members bear a responsibility to protect the reputation of OSCE local staff.

*During interpretation counterparts may feel at liberty to intimidate female interpreters.*

*Mission members bear a responsibility to protect all support staff.*



## Summary

Skills and techniques can be learned, practiced and improved to ensure that a high quality technical interpretation is conducted professionally and efficiently.

### *Preparation*

- Brief interpreters as far in advance as possible. The outcome depends to a great extent on preparation.
- Place interpreters so that they can be easily seen and heard but do not impede the establishment of a direct dialogue with counterparts.

### *Conversation*

- Speak directly to the person, not the interpreter. Interpreters are not part of the conversation, rather a language conversion tool.
- Speak clearly and in a normal tone. Remember to use short sentences and simple language, making pauses so that interpreters can do their job.
- Permit only one person to speak at a time during group discussions. It is impossible for the interpreter to follow several people speaking at the same time.

### *Debriefing*

- Provide feedback to interpreters to assist them in improving their service to the mission. Be receptive to their suggestions on how to improve teamwork.

### *Security*

- Interpreters will not leave the area when mission members do. Mission members must do their best not to compromise interpreters.

### *Confidentiality*

- Indiscretion can put other lives at risk. Discuss with interpreters the need for confidentiality and the consequences of indiscretion.
- Do not expose interpreters to additional danger by sharing confidential information they do not need to know.

### *Beliefs and ideology*

- Everyone has beliefs and biases. As long as these beliefs do not affect work performance, they are not an issue.

### *Emotional involvement*

- Interpreters may be affected by their own experience of the conflict. Be sympathetic and understanding.
- Consider the implications of the work to be done. You may need a different interpreter in some situations.

### *Exhaustion*

- Interpreting is a very demanding activity. Ensure adequate rest for interpreters to guarantee a high level of performance.

## ***Section three***



**About interpreters**

**Preparing oneself to interpret**

**Interpreting tips**

**Interpreting in difficult situations**

**Interpreters' code of ethics**

## **Section Three: Guidelines for interpreters**





# About interpreters

## About interpreters

### Interpreter's competencies

Interpreting is a hard and honourable job which, in the context of OSCE missions, plays a crucial role in the success of any operation.

Interpreting itself can be described in simple terms: "(T)he interpreter has first to listen to the speaker, understand and analyse what is being said, and then resynthesize the speech in the appropriate form in a different language (...)".

In order to fulfil this role, interpreters need to have a set of basic competencies, which include:

#### *Cultural guide*

A competent interpreter is a intermediary not only for language but also for culture. This is extremely important. As the task of the interpreter is to facilitate communication, the interpreter must know not only the meaning of words in another language, but he or she must also understand the meaning of concepts in both cultures.

It is important to note that although the same language may be spoken in different countries, words may have different meanings. An interpreter needs to educate him or herself on the meanings of different words in different countries to help avoid a breakdown in communication.

#### *Confidentiality*

Interpreters must maintain confidentiality at all times.

#### *Accuracy*

An interpreter must interpret accurately. No information should be added or omitted. In addition, a professional interpreter will also convey the spirit of the message, and interpret in a way that the listener will understand.

- *Example:* An interviewee uses foul language and expresses dislike of the mission member. Even though the interpreter may feel uncomfortable about possibly offending the mission member, he or she has to interpret as accurately as possible so that the mission member gets all the information and can make an accurate assessment.

#### *Objectivity*

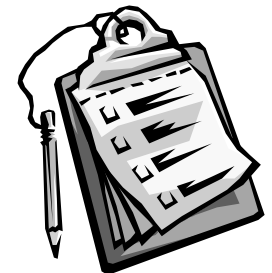
Interpreters must not provide advice or give their own opinions. The interpreter facilitates communication only, and does not accept responsibility for the communication outcome.

#### *Neutrality*

The interpreter uses the same form of speech as the speaker: i.e., the first person.

#### *Assertiveness*

The interpreter must be assertive when necessary to prevent a breakdown in communication. If the interpreter notices that the mission member and the addressee are not understanding each other despite the fact that he or



# About interpreters

she is interpreting correctly, the interpreter needs to be assertive in asking for a pause to give him or her time to explain.

## *Responsibility*

The interpreter must be well informed before providing interpretation. An interpreter who knows what to expect when going on an assignment can prepare him or herself for the occasion, thus improving the quality of the interpretation.

## *Preparedness*

The interpreter must be familiar with the terms commonly used during fieldwork in meetings, negotiations, etc.; i.e. that is the OSCE's own vocabulary and jargon. In order to interpret this correctly, interpreters should be familiar with the terminology in both English and the non-English language. Some concepts may not be familiar in one or the other culture, and interpreters should be able to interpret them in a meaningful way to the addressee.

## *Knowledge*

Interpreters must have extensive general knowledge. Any topic can come up in an encounter between a mission member and a local person. It is very difficult to interpret what you don't understand. Interpreters must therefore be well-read and familiar with a wide range of issues and topics.

## *Professionalism*

It is a sign of professionalism to ask mission members to describe a concept in different words when an interpreter does not know the exact meaning.

## Qualities of professional interpreters

A survey of the literature reveals a great deal of overlap in the descriptions of the ideal interpreter, regardless of which particular type of interpretation is involved (simultaneous, continuous, court, conference, etc.).

The following qualities are commonly mentioned as essential for good general interpreting:

### *Language skills*

Interpreters need to have a good command of their working languages to interpret accurately.

### *Analytical skills*

Analysis is foremost among the strategies employed by interpreters. It is so essential that it can be considered an intrinsic part of the process. It is very important to analyse a speech before interpreting it.

### *Listening and recall*

Effective interpreting requires effective listening skills. The particular kind of listening that interpreters perform is defined as "active listening". This attentive listening is quite different from other forms of listening, and has to be learned by the interpreter.

Virtually all experts on interpreting also identify memory or recall as essential. In interpretation, memory and understanding are inseparable: the one is a function of the other. Having a good memory is especially important.

# About interpreters

## *Interpersonal skills*

Despite the stereotype of the conference interpreter who spends all day in the booth addressing faceless bureaucrats in a disembodied voice, many conferences involve direct contact between interpreters and participants.

## *Ethical behaviour*

Ethics are a major consideration for all interpreters. Delicate situations can arise in meetings, particularly when working across ethnic boundaries in post-conflict communities. These situations require interpreters to thoroughly understand their role and exercise good judgement.

## *Speaking skills*

Most people associate speaking skills with appearances before large audiences at public events such as congresses or press conferences. Indeed, public speaking is a key component in the training of all types of interpreters. Even those interpreters who generally interpret in more intimate settings need to be able to express ideas well.

Effective speaking skills range from quality of voice to choice of idiom, vocabulary, phrasing etc. So both words and delivery are important in the overall effectiveness of the interpretation.

## *Cultural knowledge*

It is almost universally acknowledged that interpreters working in certain settings need to be acutely aware of cultural differences. Interpreters are not just linguistic but also cultural intermediaries.

In all of their work, interpreters must bridge the cultural and conceptual gaps between mission members and other participants in a meeting.

## *Subject knowledge*

Some mission members may wrongly believe that interpreters do not need to prepare beforehand and gain some understanding of the subjects to be discussed in order to interpret accurately (“*You don't need to understand it, just translate it!*”).

However, all experts on interpreting recognize the need to acquire both technical terminology and knowledge of the subject in relevant fields.

*If lacking any of these qualities, do not despair: interpretation skills can be learned! Practice the recommendations contained in this handbook to improve.*

# Preparing to interpret

## Preparing oneself to interpret

### Meeting supervisors for the first time

During their service for an OSCE mission interpreters are likely to work with several different mission members. It is important to invest some time, particularly in the early days, in defining relationships and expectations. This is the only way of forming a good team. Discuss expectations, from both sides, to establish the basis for mutual understanding and respect.

In addition, newly arrived mission members will probably require some time to get a grip on the tasks and the area. Interpreters can help mission members a great deal by introducing them to the community's traditions, problems, leaders, etc.

### Preparing for an interpreted event

A successful outcome to a meeting depends very much on the quality and quantity of preparation for it. There are a number of issues that should be addressed before any interpreted event.

#### *Preliminary briefings*

There is no substitute for a good briefing, as far in advance of the interpreting session as possible. Ensure that time is allocated to discuss the details of an interpreted event with the relevant mission member(s).

A good briefing should include:

- information on the agenda of the meeting, purpose of the trip, content of the speech, etc.;

- information on the timing and location of the meeting or event and any possible back-up arrangements;
- information on the level of formality of the event and on the participants;
- the desired interpreting style for the event (consecutive, simultaneous or whispering);
- confirmation of the presence or absence of other interpreters during the event;
- a list of any technical vocabulary, specialized language and acronyms likely to be used during the meeting;
- a copy of the script or outline of the presentation, should there be one;
- information on appropriate cultural courtesies and any other preliminary comments to assist mission members in achieving the best results from the event.



*Although sometimes there may be little information to share prior to an event or very limited time to prepare for it, the principle remains:*

*The better interpreters prepare, the better the results of interpreting will be!*

### *Specific requirements of interpreted events*

Meetings and events involving interpretation have additional requirements to standard meetings. Interpreting is a very demanding activity. Make sure that this is reflected in the arrangements for the event.

# Preparing to interpret

Meeting agendas should allocate sufficient time for interpreted communication. Communicating through an interpreter obviously takes much longer than direct communication between two parties.

Meeting agendas should also anticipate breaks in order to recover during continuous interpreting. It may be difficult to concentrate for more than an hour and a half. Both interpreters and participants will need a pause to maintain concentration.

Interpreters must take good care of their health. Drink water during long meetings. Sweets may also be helpful.

Travel and security arrangements for the meeting should also be considered, especially when working across ethnic boundary lines in post conflict communities.

## Seating arrangements

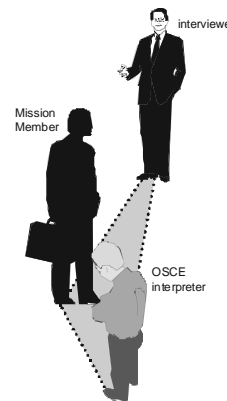
The positioning of interpreters depends very much on the type of interpretation mission members choose for the specific event and on the presence or otherwise of additional interpreters.



As a general rule, the presence of interpreters should be as discreet as possible. They should not be the centre of attention. Ensuring a neutral placement for interpreters also has a security dimension. It is important to reinforce the message that it is mission members who conduct meetings and that the interpreter's involvement is merely as a communication tool. This is especially the case when dealing with controversial matters and proposals.

On the other hand, unless the situation requires whispering interpretation, it is important that interpreters can be seen and heard.

When mission members hold meetings while seated, interpreters should sit beside the relevant mission member.



When interpreting for a mission member who is meeting another person while standing, the interpreter should normally be placed slightly behind and to the side of the relevant mission member.

Finally, when giving presentations and formal speeches, interpreters usually stand a short distance from the relevant mission member, with a microphone if necessary.

*Remember: Meetings are the responsibility of mission members. Do not hamper them by inappropriate behaviour!*

## Interpreting tips

*“The reputation of a thousand years may be determined by the conduct of one hour.”*

*Japanese proverb*



## Interpreting tips

### Preliminary introductions

It is the responsibility of the mission members conducting an event to greet all participants. It is also their responsibility to introduce the interpreter to all participants and to reiterate that his or her participation is simply as a communication tool.

Keep OSCE ID cards visible at all times during meetings. Exceptions may be made when working in difficult areas, such as across ethnic conflict lines. Tell the relevant mission member if you prefer to hide your real identity for security reasons.

### Rules of thumb for interpreters

#### Phraseology

Speak clearly, using a normal speed and tone of voice. Do not mumble. Pronounce words carefully: there is a big difference between “trader” and “traitor”. Remember: raising the voice will not help the other party to understand.

Unless expressly told otherwise, always use a direct style for interpreting. Do not rephrase mission members’ statements in the third person (“he or she says that...”).



*A direct style for interpreting can be a great advantage in difficult circumstances, as it allows interpreters to remain distant from the subject discussed. It focuses the attention of the addressee on the mission member rather than on the interpreter.*

# Interpreting tips

## *Jargon, acronyms, idioms and slang*

It is advisable to avoid the use of any of these. If the use of acronyms is inevitable, (UNHCR, AOR, OSCE, NGO, etc.), get familiar with them and their meaning. It may be advisable to request in advance a list of acronyms indicating what they stand for. Some information on the activities of agencies and institutions likely to be mentioned may also be helpful.

## *Humour*

Advise mission members against the use of jokes and humorous stories. Humour does not travel well! Also avoid cultural allusions to politicians, sport and customs as these do not translate easily either.

## *Body language*

Avoid obstructing the eye contact between mission members and their local counterparts during interpretation. A good interpreter is “invisible”.

## *Symbols and signals:*

Agree on a signalling system with the mission member in charge to indicate, e.g., when you need a pause, their pace is too fast, the other party is being threatening, or other interpreters are not being accurate in their interpretation.

## **Concluding interpretation: Debriefing**

Debriefing is a way to indicate to mission members how they could help interpreters more in the performance of their duties. It also allows mission members to learn about the way they were perceived, and about remarks and other incidentals that may have passed them by unnoticed during interpretation.

During a debriefing:

- talk about the atmosphere and mood, any relevant side conversations, remarks, etc; and
- provide feedback to mission members on their behaviour (e.g., pace, language, respect for cultural rules, etc.) and indicate how their behaviour might be modified to make interpreting more effective.

### DO

- Interpret everything. Do not edit!
- Request clarifications whenever necessary.
- Avoid hampering the mission member’s effort to establish a direct relationship with his or her counterpart by inappropriate behaviour. Remain “invisible”.



### DO NOT

- Take control of the conversation or answer questions from the counterpart yourself.
- Let the counterpart’s interpreter “talk over you”.
- Allow yourself to be intimidated or compromised.
- Add comments, questions or responses to interpreted statements.
- Have private discussions with mission members during a meeting.



# Difficult situations

## Interpreting in difficult situations

### Difficult subjects

The subject matter under discussion may be distasteful and shocking. It is very difficult to listen to graphic descriptions of torture, intense emotional distress, loss, rape, bereavement and displacement, and then to find appropriate and adequate words to translate them into another language. In addition, there are the associated images - the more eloquent and articulate the narrator, the more powerful and intrusive are the images.

The ability of interpreters to interpret accurately may be compromised if the experience is too raw and painful. Do not hesitate to signal such feelings to the relevant mission member(s). Mission members have a responsibility for support staff. Under these circumstances alternative arrangements should be made.

*Interpreters need to maintain a high degree of concentration. Withdrawing from interpreting when objectivity is compromised is the sign of a highly professional attitude!*

### Difficult people

Occasionally, some individuals may display behaviour or an attitude that makes it difficult to maintain a professional encounter.

Remember that it is the mission member's responsibility to decide what should be tolerated, whether it is worth putting up

with or interrupting this behaviour, the significance of the relationship, and the issues involved.

It is the interpreter's responsibility to remain faithful to what is said by both parties. It is important to inform the relevant mission member(s) whenever feeling intimidated or under an unacceptable level of pressure from the other party.

It will be the mission member's duty to redirect the course of, or even put an end to, the discussion. It is their responsibility to find a professional balance that respects cultural requirements without jeopardizing the mission's goals and mandate.

*Interpreters are not responsible for the inappropriate behaviour of counterparts, but they are responsible for reporting it.*

### Female staff

Female local staff may find themselves under pressure because of their work for the mission. Having a job, a public role and an income may be a new social phenomenon for women in the area where the mission is operating.

In addition, working closely with men, travelling unchaperoned, staying away from home, etc., could make female staff more vulnerable to criticism and harassment from other members of the community.

Do not hesitate to indicate concern if you find any plans for travel, accommodation, meetings, etc., inappropriate for cultural reasons. Report as well any difficulties or pressure from the community. The OSCE and its mission members bear a responsibility to protect the reputation of OSCE local staff.



# Code of ethics

*“Organizations rarely progress in absence of well defined codes of conduct and system to ensure that these are strictly adhered to. Same is true for society.”*

*B. J. Gupta*



## Interpreters' code of ethics

### *Professional conduct*

Interpreters should display a professional attitude at all times. Interpreters must:

- always be polite and courteous, unobtrusive, firm and dignified;
- acknowledge the mission members' role in maintaining control of interpreted conversations;
- allow nothing to prejudice or influence their work, and disclose any possible conflict of interest;
- decline gifts and tips, explaining that accepting them could compromise their professional integrity;
- be punctual at all times and let it be known immediately if lateness is unavoidable;
- dress in a discreet and professional manner appropriate to their employment with a diplomatic mission;
- prepare appropriately for assignments and ensure they are completed;
- refrain from unprofessional or dishonourable behaviour and fully respect OSCE's code of conduct.

### *Confidentiality*

Interpreters should not disclose information acquired during the course of their assignments.

- Interpreters may only disclose information with the permission of the mission.

# Code of ethics

- If other interpreters are involved in the same assignment and require briefing, the responsible mission member's permission must be obtained beforehand.

## *Impartiality*

Interpreters should observe impartiality at all times.

- Interpreters should not accept, or should withdraw from, assignments in which impartiality may be jeopardized because of personal beliefs or circumstances.
- Interpreters are not responsible for what mission members say. They should not voice or write an opinion on anything or anyone concerned with an assignment.
- Interpreters may assist mission members by providing or restating information that will assist them in making a decision. Interpreters may not influence the opinion of either mission members or their addressees by telling them what action to take.
- Interpreters should treat all parties involved with equal dignity and respect regardless of race, colour, gender, religion, nationality, political persuasion or life-style choice.

## *Accuracy*

Interpreters should take all reasonable care to be accurate. They must:

- relay accurately and fully all that is said by all parties in a meeting - including derogatory or vulgar remarks and anything they know to be untrue. Interpreters should not alter, add to or omit anything.

- Acknowledge and promptly rectify any interpreting mistakes. If anything is unclear, interpreters must ask for a repetition, rephrasing or explanation. If interpreters have lapses of memory which lead to inadequate interpreting, they should ask for a pause and signal when they are ready to continue.
- Ensure speech is clearly heard and understood by all present.

## *Conveying cultural frameworks*

Interpreters should explain cultural differences or practices to mission members and their addressees when appropriate.

## *Professional development*

Interpreters should continue to develop their professional knowledge and skills.

- They should constantly review and re-evaluate their work performance.
- They should maintain and enhance their skills by study and experience, and keep up to date with relevant languages and cultures.

## *Professional solidarity*

Interpreters should respect and support their fellow professionals. They should:

- assist and further the interests of colleagues, refraining from comments injurious to the reputation of a colleague. Differences of opinion should be expressed with candour and respect - not by denigration.

# Workbook



About the exercises

Exercise One – Guidelines

Exercise Two – Preparation

Exercise Three - Simulation

Self-assessment sheet

**Workbook:  
Drills and exercises**



## About the exercises

*“What we have to learn to do, we learn by doing.”*

*Aristotle*



## About the exercises

### Content

The following exercises are intended to provide an opportunity to practice some of the skills described in this handbook. Readers can conduct exercises One and Two at the conclusion of the handbook on their own. Exercise Three requires interaction with others.

All three exercises could also constitute part of a training session. They will be most effective if participants rotate through all three of the exercises as they are designed to test a variety of skills in different situations at different times in the “interpretation” cycle.

In addition to these exercises, this section contains a self-assessment sheet. It is designed to assist OSCE staff in preparing themselves to build a successful interpreter-mission member team. It can also be used as part of a training programme, making participants work out how to develop a professional relationship which is rewarding for both interpreters and mission members.

### Proposed model for trainers

Divide participants into groups of six. Further divide the six into three separate groups of one, two and three participants.

Each group of six will ideally rotate through each of the three short exercises.

# About the exercises

Total time required is approximately ninety minutes for the exercises and twenty to thirty minutes for debriefing.

If the participants are a mixed group of interpreters and mission members, adapt the selection of the six-person group accordingly.

## Outline

### *Exercise One*

This exercise is designed to test the ability of the individual to draft guidelines for the use of interpreting services.

#### *Materials required:*

- Instruction sheet.

### *Exercise Two*

This exercise is designed to test a number of practical skills necessary to prepare for interpretation.

#### *Materials required:*

- A copy of the instruction sheet for each player.
- Role information sheets.

### *Exercise Three*

This exercise is a role-play designed to test a number of practical skills required for conducting an interpreted conversation.

#### *Materials required:*

- A copy of the instruction sheet for each player.
- A copy of the scenario for each player.

- Role information sheets (interpreter, mission member using the interpreter and local representative).

## Timeframe

- Read-in time: ten minutes per exercise.
- To conduct the exercise: twenty minutes per exercise.
- Debriefing time: thirty minutes in total at the conclusion of all three exercises.

## Debriefing

Debriefing should bring a conclusion to the exercises. However, it should not involve a detailed inquiry into each of the exercises.

Trainers should ask general questions about what was learned, what was significant and what were the most useful lessons to be drawn from the experience.

Trainers should inform participants at the beginning of the exercise cycle that a general debriefing will take place.



# Exercise One

## Exercise One – Guidelines

### Instructions

You have recently been appointed to a senior position in a department that requires extensive use of interpreters in its work. You quickly realize that there are no established guidelines or procedures for the use of interpreters' services.

A quick assessment of the problems reveals:

- interpreters are often asked to do written translation, although they are not all comfortable doing this as their written English skills vary considerably;
- travel and accommodation arrangements are often haphazard;
- interpreters are required at very short notice to provide consecutive interpretation at public events and official meetings;
- there is no roster or planned schedule of activities or events;
- in spite of being a department with a high degree of specialized language and terminology there are only basic English dictionaries;
- interpreters have little knowledge of multimedia presentations but are often expected to function as 'technicians' for those for whom they interpret.

There is a high staff turnover and an atmosphere of mild resentment. You are aware of general dissatisfaction about working conditions among the interpreters.

You have heard specific complaints by the female staff regarding their security and the hours they are expected to work – with little planning or forewarning.

You are determined to improve the situation both in the interests of improved service and job satisfaction.

### **Write draft guidelines for appropriate use of interpreters' services.**

(Bullet points are sufficient.)

After twenty minutes compare and consult with other participants completing the same exercise and prepare for debrief.

*If you are doing this exercise on your own, as part of your personal development programme, compare your ideas and results with the checklists contained in the appendices.*

# Exercise Two

## Exercise Two – Preparation

### Instructions

Ideally, this exercise requires two people. Both players should read their respective **role information sheet**. These will provide some background information on an upcoming meeting which they are to attend on the following day.

Each player should then separately outline how they would prepare for this meeting.

The following questions should be considered:

- What specific information do you require?
- What questions would you like to ask of your interpreter or supervisor?
- What information can you provide to your partner?
- How can you both prepare yourselves for tomorrow?
- Other questions?

After twenty minutes of separate work, the two players should compare notes and complete the preparation together.

*If you are doing this exercise on your own, as part of your personal development programme, try to answer the questions from both points of view.*

### Role information sheet: Interpreter

You work as an interpreter in the Human Rights department. The interpreters work on a rotation system so that they get exposure to many different circumstances. This also means that through working with different staff members you become used to different styles of work, different accents and language skills.



You have been informed that tomorrow you will accompany the senior human rights officer to a meeting at one of the Field Offices. You have worked with him or her before and you are familiar with his or her style of work.

At the moment you have very little information about the purpose of the meeting, the requirements, location, other personnel attending, etc.

Conduct your preparation.

## Exercise Two

### Role information sheet:

#### Mission member using the interpreter

Tomorrow's meeting is with a local community leader about difficulties experienced conducting human rights investigations. Historically there has been a good deal of confusion regarding areas of responsibility in such investigations. The OSCE staff, UN Civpol, local police, UN staff – and the media - have all claimed the need for information for their inquiries. Privately, you acknowledge the confusion and lack of clarity, but you need to focus on tomorrow's meeting with the local politician who has asked to meet with you as the senior human rights officer.



The politician represents interests which you suspect of wanting to stall or terminate the investigations. You suspect the meeting is a device to do this rather than solve the problems of responsibility and jurisdiction.

The politician comes from a region historically engaged in intermittent hostilities with the people from the area your interpreter comes from. He or she is a good interpreter with an excellent command of English – and you have no other choice as everyone else is busy. The politician is locally respected for his senior status in the community – if not for his political beliefs.

Your intention is to avoid a discussion of the rights and wrongs of the past; to agree on a plan for the future management of investigations and to not give in to any political pressure.

The meeting will be conducted in the OSCE Field Office close to, but not within, the politician's area of support. You expect he will come with a few supporters as always, but intend to limit the number of people in the meeting room. He has no interpreter with a sufficient command of English, and has agreed to use your interpreter for the discussion.

You anticipate tension and aggressive questions but not dangerous behaviour. It will be difficult and demanding. It will be only a day-trip.



# Exercise Three

## Exercise Three - Simulation

### Instructions

Take ten minutes to read-in and prepare for an interpreted conversation based on the following scenario and your own role information sheet.

There are three roles involved in this exercise:

- An interpreter.
- A mission member using the interpreter's services.
- An individual from the host country where the mission operates.

Conduct a short exchange of approximately ten minutes – in a common language – with all three players at the table.

In the final ten minutes discuss the outcome and experience of the discussion with all three players and prepare for debriefing.

The “mission member” should take the lead in setting up the conversation, maintaining it and reaching a conclusion.

*This exercise not be carried out by an individual reader of the handbook. It can only be conducted in a trio as a role-play exercise in a training setting.*

### Scenario

A meeting has been arranged in the local OSCE office between a representative of a local activist group and the Democratization Officer.

The representative will be bringing some information concerning local political parties, their distribution, activities, membership and contact details. These parties are in their infancy, following the conclusion of a protracted conflict. It is an encouraging sign that the parties are collaborating in providing this information.

This is hoped to be a preliminary meeting upon which a solid working relationship can be built. This hope is shared, in spite of some initial hesitancy, by both the OSCE and the local group.

The representative does not speak any English. An interpreter from Democratization has been tasked to interpret.



## Exercise Three

### Role information sheet: Interpreter

Prepare to :

- Ask any questions for clarification.
- Act as interpreter for both parties.
- Listen to what is said and repeat it in the first person, word for word.
- Remain focussed and professional at all times.



### Role information sheet: Mission member using the interpreter

Prepare to:

- Welcome the representative and introduce your interpreter.
- Encourage the representative and attempt to develop a relationship of trust.
- Request and thank him or her for the information that he or she promised to bring.
- Invite his or her questions and comments.
- Maintain a calm and professional manner throughout the discussion.
- Avoid political or personal comments.
- Practice the key skills of working with an interpreter:
  - ✓ short, simple, clear sentences;
  - ✓ no jargon or acronyms;
  - ✓ use of first person;
  - ✓ appropriate body language;
  - ✓ support for integrity of interpreter.



## Exercise Three

### Role information sheet: Local representative

You have the information that has been requested and you are prepared to give it to the officer at the OSCE.



You are shocked to meet the interpreter. You recognize him or her as a member of a rival group with whom your group is in open conflict. During the war you were on opposite sides and the bitter feelings are still strong.

At first you are polite and begin the discussion. However, as time goes on, you become increasingly agitated and you finally accuse him or her of “being one of them” – people who cannot be trusted.

You claim that therefore you cannot trust the interpreter to be impartial and use your words exactly. You continue to repeat that you cannot trust this person. Past experience has left you very suspicious of “them.”

You are not easily pacified.

Prepare to:

- be hostile and accusing towards the interpreter;
- use confusing acronyms about the name of your group and the names of the political parties;
- be slow to be convinced of the honour and trustworthiness of the interpreter.

### Notes for debriefing

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# Self-assessment

*“I hear and I forget,  
I see and I remember,  
I do and I understand.”*

Chinese proverb



## Self-assessment sheet

### *Mission members*

- As well as linguistic accuracy and fidelity to the script what do you expect of an interpreter?

### *Interpreters*

- As well as linguistic clarity and effective supervision what do you expect of a mission member?

### *ANSWER: SKILLS*

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### *ANSWER: PERSONAL QUALITIES*

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# Appendices



Organizing events with interpreters

Speaking through an interpreter

Evaluating interpreters



## Appendices: Quick reference checklists

# Checklists

## Organizing events with interpreters

- ❑ **Inform in advance** – as many working days ahead of time as possible.

This allows interpreters to prepare, to select the most appropriate person for the job and to schedule their working – and travel time – as necessary.

- ❑ Provide as much **written information** as possible, as far ahead as possible.

This leads to a better result in terms of interpreting. Include, for example:

- ✓ programme for the event, list and titles of speakers;
- ✓ copies of documents to be distributed at the event;
- ✓ list of technical words.

This also applies to written information provided to participants – they will have more time to digest the information you give them if it is provided in advance in translated form.

- ❑ **Brief the interpreter** about the event and the exact role expected of him or her.

For example:

- ✓ Will they be expected to provide consecutive translation of an unseen presentation?
- ✓ Will they be given a copy of the presentation ahead of time?
- ✓ Will there be interpretation into a number of languages?

# Organising events

- ✓ Will one or more people be speaking?
- ✓ Will there be a group, a panel or one sole speaker?
- ✓ Will they be visible “on stage” or in a booth?
- ✓ Will there be an unscripted Question Time?

- ❑ Confirm whether the interpreter will require assistance with **transport** to the event.

- ❑ Be mindful of any potential **security problems** that might arise and keep the interpreter informed.

Mission members are responsible for ensuring adequate security for interpreters. Pay particular attention to the needs of female interpreters.

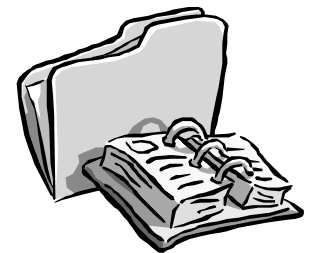
- ❑ Do **acknowledge** the interpreter’s presence by introducing him or her to speakers and other participants before starting.

- ❑ Provide **water** close at hand, and a **short rest** after each speaker or after 30 minutes.

If there are other interpreters available, it may be worth rotating them after approximately one hour; perhaps even overlap for some minutes to get a ‘feel’ for the subject, the speaker and the audience.

- ❑ Always **thank the interpreter**.

- ❑ Provide **transport** back if necessary



# Checklists

## Speaking through an interpreter

There are many things that speakers can do to ensure that the interpreter(s) clearly communicate messages and intentions to the audience.

- ❑ Provide as much **information in advance** as possible. Give the interpreter the most current version of any speech or presentation. Include:
  - ✓ a transcript, or if you do not have a detailed script, provide a detailed outline;
  - ✓ copies of audio-visual presentation;
  - ✓ handouts for participants;
  - ✓ technical and promotional material regarding the topic or project to be discussed;
  - ✓ minutes from previous meetings;
  - ✓ information about yourself;
  - ✓ a specialist dictionary or list of obscure and any specialized terminology;
- ❑ **Meet the interpreter(s) ahead of time** to answer any questions they may have about terminology and technical language, the meeting process, etc.
- ❑ **Do not interrupt** another speaker as only one voice can be heard at a time.
- ❑ **Speak clearly, at a regular, moderate speed.** It is tempting to speed up when reading a prepared script. The interpreter cannot go faster.
- ❑ **Avoid statistics** or strings of numbers. Their significance is often lost in interpretation.

# Using interpreters

- ❑ **Avoid idiomatic language**, jokes, puns and slang. These are difficult or impossible to translate and usually lose their impact.
- ❑ **Speak to the audience**, not the interpreter.
- ❑ Use **short, concise, simple sentences** and pause regularly for the interpreter to catch up.
- ❑ Allow time for the interpreter to take **additional notes** – particularly if a speech is not tightly scripted, speaking off the cuff or replying to questions.
- ❑ **Be sensitive to the local culture.** Follow customary rules of introduction, greeting and other courtesies. Include the interpreter. Use this as an opportunity to feel comfortable working together.



# Checklists

## Evaluating interpreters

Interpreters need feedback on how well expectations were met, and what could be done to improve both their performance and teamwork.

### Expectations

- Do interpreters **know** what is expected from them?
- Has this been **discussed** with them?
- Have they been briefed on individual **preferences**?

### Accuracy

Mission members need to clearly identify their requirements in this regard. It is worth considering:

- How the interpreter is received by the different groups or people with whom they work. If not well received, why?
- Is the interpreter respected by his or her peers?
- Does the interpreter provide feedback readily ?
- Does the interpreter show an interest in improving performance?
- Does the interpreter provide the information required?
- Does the interpreter behave professionally?
- Is the interpreter reliable?

# Evaluating interpreters

## Results

It is difficult for mission members to evaluate the results of interpreting as they are dealing with a language they do not know.

Continuously unsuccessful meetings are usually the result of a deficient process. However, the quality of interpretation could also play a role.

Mission members may hear rumours about an interpreter consistently doing poor quality work. Mission members should investigate whether there is any truth in such comments, bearing in mind that this is a common intimidation tactic used against interpreters. Mission members may:

- Invite someone with a good command of the languages being translated to assess the interpreter's performance based on meetings at which this person was also present.
- Include idioms and colloquialisms in speaking and see whether the interpreter asks for clarification.
- Invest some time in strengthening their negotiation skills.
- Check for improvement over time.

