



Speakers, mind your microphone manners

Tips on public speaking in multilingual meetings with interpretation, or how to make the microphone your friend.

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Let's get one thing clear from the get-go: microphones are unforgiving, so treat them with care. Actors and voiceover artists spend years perfecting the art of using one and, as a public speaker, you should learn the basics of good practice to the point of making proper microphone etiquette a matter of course. You'll make things much easier for yourself, your audience and the interpreters.

General tips for speakers

Today's microphones are extremely sensitive. There is no need to raise your voice; leave volume control to the sound technicians. If you speak too loudly and tense your throat, your voice will suffer. If you whisper, your speech may not come across with full flavor.

Refrain from tapping the microphone to make sure it's on and functioning. Never blow or whistle into it. These sounds may seem harmless over the PA system, but interpreters wear headsets and you are banging or blowing directly into their ears. More than one interpreter has been seen grimacing in pain when pen hits mic.

Do everything in your power not to drop or bump an open or "hot" microphone. People in the room will jump out of their seats and the acoustic shock and feedback coursing through interpreters' headsets may not only distract them, but also damage their hearing. Although hearing protection is sometimes incorporated into modern simultaneous interpretation equipment, its use is far from universal.

Types of microphones

Neck-worn: Probably the easiest kind to handle and commonly used in big conventions and stage presentations. Think TED, for example. The microphone fits comfortably around your neck, and you do not need to manipulate it after it's been fitted. Used jointly with a wireless transmitter.

Lapel: The second most convenient type of microphone. It is easier to put on and take off, but being further away from the mouth, it can let in background noise. Also rustling sounds may be generated by a piece of clothing accidentally rubbing against it. Used jointly with a wireless transmitter as well.



Tabletop: Commonly used for round tables and panel discussions. When a small group is using tabletop



mics, each participant should turn the microphone off when done speaking (hint: look at the on/off light). This is important because when two or more microphones are open at the same time, interference and background noise are the result. Participants can be distracted, as will your interpreters, making their jobs all the more difficult.

Handheld: The least convenient, usually used for Q&A. It requires strict microphone discipline, and can either be installed on a stand or held by the speaker. The recommended mouth-to-mic distance is 4-6 inches (10-15 cm). If the microphone is too close (the most common mistake when using a handheld), it will pick up the hissing and popping of sibilants and plosives (“S”, “P”, “T”, etc.), possibly distorting speech beyond recognition.

Tips for conference organizers

If you decide to use one or more handheld microphones for Q&A, consider the options:

- Install one or more wireless or wired handheld microphones on a stand in the conference room and ask people to come to it to ask questions. This solution works best in large rooms.
- Assign “microphone pages” - aides who will bring a microphone to anyone who wants to ask a question and hold it at the appropriate distance as they speak. Recommended for medium to small rooms.
- Allow participants to pass the mic to each other. This practice is not recommended as it can take more time and the microphone may be turned off accidentally as it goes from hand to hand.



Short tip for moderators

What the microphone has not picked up will not be audible to a large part of the public or to your interpreters. If someone asks a question without a microphone, either repeat it or ask the speaker to do so with a microphone.

In sum...

Microphone manners should be incorporated into public speaking skills. Meeting organizers and moderators should be aware of proper microphone etiquette, especially in multilingual settings.

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