



## Simultaneous interpretation and the media: interpreting live for television

Interpreting live for television requires special skills, namely even greater rapidity than for normal conference interpretation as well as constraints for delivery (pleasant lively voice, regular rhythm, good diction). Examples will be taken primarily from the coverage of the US Presidential elections for France 2 and from the new Franco-German Channel "Arte" (Channel 5). I will attempt to sketch the present live TV interpretation "scene" and to give some historical references.

---

Eliane BROS-BRANN.

Veröffentlicht: January 21, 2002 Letzte Aktualisierung: December 2, 2015

---

In the usual international conference situation, certain standard languages are used, the main ones being French, English, Spanish, Russian, Arabic, and Chinese for conferences in the United Nations family of organisations. In the European "circuit", the main languages are English + the language of the country where the conference is being held (German, French, etc.) or sometimes 3 or 4 languages such as English, French, Spanish and German. For EEC-related conferences, Italian is sometimes used as well, either in addition or replacing one of the above languages. EEC and the European Parliament actually have interpretation, albeit not at all meetings, using French, English, German, Italian, Spanish, Dutch, Danish, Greek, Portuguese and sometimes Gaelic! On television, non-conference languages are often required because of topical events in the news. This means that requests come in for languages such as Serbo-Croatian, Latvian, Polish, Turkish, Thai, Tagalog, Farsi and/or Persian etc, etc, etc. As there are virtually no professional conference interpreters trained for these "exotic" languages, let alone for live simultaneous interpretation on TV, this is a real headache!

Having cleared the ground language-wise, let me illustrate this talk with an example from the live coverage of the US Presidential Elections. Needless to say, there was interpretation on all the major French TV channels, meaning that interpreters with the right voice, the right accent and the right sex were in great demand. Let's not forget that TV anchormen and journalists insist on having male voices for male speakers, as this goes back to a notion that interpretation and dubbing are similar beasts. As there are far more women interpreters and far fewer women being interviewed, this of course compounds the problem when trying to find the right person on a busy night such as US election night. France2, for which I work and for which I handle recruitment of interpreters for the news department actually had two



teams of interpreters that night, one in the studios, and one at a major hotel where the American community in Paris had a big celebration from 8pm to 6am, including a buffet of typical American food, live entertainment and a France2 set complete with anchormen, guest speakers, many of whom were American, coming in every hour or so to comment on events as they took place, and constant tallying of election results. The team of interpreters, one man (into French) and one woman (into English), actually did nothing all night long as all guests spoke French, a frustrating and yet typical situation!

The other team, 2 bilinguals, one male, one female, working at France2 studios, were a little busier than we were. However, a series of gags were to inaugurate that auspicious night and basically to continue into the wee hours of the morning. Since nothing was happening, the interpreters were sent to monitor CNN and explain what was going on to the local team of journalists (believe it or not, most of the journalists working for TV do not master English!). Someone noticed on another screen that people were being interviewed for France2 on the streets of New York in English (some nerve!), but it was too late for the interpreters to go down to their booth in time to interpret. Too bad! The next "event" was another live coverage with guests in the USA. At that point it was impossible to hear what was going on because there was a strange female voice which could vaguely be heard covering the sound track. What was all this about? Nothing special: the New York offices of France2 had forgotten to inform headquarters that they had their own Interpreter in New York! This little incident having been cleared up, with instructions to use the interpreters in Paris, there was basically nothing to do. Would it be fair to say that there was some lack of communication between the US offices and headquarters? On the early morning news (6:30am to 8am: news + various features and guests) President elect Clinton was interviewed live. The team interpreted this and then went home to catch up on lost sleep.

That was for the humorous note. Don't get me wrong, however: there is a lot of interpretation on France2 and other French channels and everything usually works out as expected with no comic relief of the type described above, thank goodness! One can ascribe the rather chaotic conditions to the unusual circumstances of this US Presidential election with all likelihood of the incumbents being voted out and a Democrat being elected for the first time in many years.

Actually, interpretation on TV began back in the 60's with several unusual programs being interpreted on a regular weekly basis: "Les Dossiers de l'Ecran" (screen files), a program in which a fiction feature film was shown, followed by a live discussion between guests, including foreigners, having some relationship to the subject of the film. This popular program shown at prime time ran for close to 20 years, usually lasting from 8:30pm till about midnight and often using interpretation, as the producers seemed to feel that what was then a novelty was an added feature. "Apostrophes", the world-famous literary program anchored by the equally famous Bernard Pivot was another pioneer in TV interpretation: guest authors from various countries (mostly the USA) discussing their respective books



with interpretation for about 2 hours (Nadine Gordimer, P.D. James, John Irving, Norman Mailer, Joyce Carol Oates, William Styron, John Updike, and a host of other literary celebrities). This program also lasted over 20 years ending only because Pivot wanted to do something different.

At present, one of the most popular programs often using interpretation is "La Marche du Siècle" (the century moves on) on France3, the second major public TV station. It is a talk show involving topical subjects, usually of political or social import, where short documentaries are shown interspersed with debates between participants related to the topic, including people speaking foreign languages (there has recently been Serbo-Croatian, Russian, and of course English). This runs once a week at prime time for about 2 hours. There is also another popular programme on France2, "Envoyé Spécial", (special correspondent) shown weekly on prime time (about an hour and a half) and dealing with various political and social events: this programme does not feature live interpretation but requires lots of interpreters and translators to translate tapes brought back by journalists from remote areas of the world. "Apostrophes" has been replaced by another literary programme with a new anchorman, also using interpretation from time to time and Bernard Pivot has a new programme which is both literary and artistic in the broadest sense of the word and which sometimes uses interpretation. A popular sports programme on France2, "Stade2" (stadium 2) uses interpretation for interviews with foreign sports celebrities, and there are of course interviews from time to time during the major tennis matches, sailing events, soccer games...

Live TV interpretation can even exist between a space shuttle and a set on terra firma: last August, there was a special programme on France2 called "La Nuit des Etoiles Filantes" (the night of the shooting stars) where there was interpretation from Russian into French between the inhabitants of the Russian Space Shuttle and a group of people, including scientists and astrophysicists who had gone to the Montpellier area to observe a special meteor shower phenomenon at its best. The miracle is that all went well, with bilingual interpretation, despite numerous obstacles, less related to the cosmos than to down-to-earth (literally) matters such as not having the right headphone for the interpreter and interference with the PA system. But communication was established between outer space and the earth, no small feat!

Last, but certainly not least, I shall talk about "ARTE", the Franco-German channel which has been broadcasting on an ordinary (microwave) TV link for about a year. This channel, located symbolically in Strasbourg, by virtue of its very nature and purpose, translates everything from French into German and German into French, not to mention other languages into both French and German. There are three staff interpreters and a host of freelance interpreters working on a regular basis, most of whom come from Strasbourg or neighbouring Germany, but many of whom come from Paris and elsewhere. As far as live interpretation is concerned, the weekly programme "Transit", Friday evening prime time for



55 minutes, always uses interpretation. A team of 4-6 interpreters handle the interpretation from French into German and vice versa. Added to that, there are evenings devoted to special "themes", some of which also with interpretation. All told, Arte involves about 600/interpreter days a year for freelance interpreters. All interpreters work into their mother tongue (what we call our "A language"), and bilinguals are chosen to interpret into what is deemed to be their "better" language as regards voice, diction and general delivery. There are 4 interpreters' booths installed in the Arte studios in Strasbourg and mobile booths are added from time to time when necessary. From an interpreter's vantage point, Arte has "everything going for it": there is an in-house interpreter in charge of interpretation, a most unusual feature; equipment and technical facilities (not to mention pay scales) are based on German standards; 30 years or more of interpretation on French TV seems to have played a positive ground-breaking role.

Recently a new venture has begun: "Euronews", a European cable news TV station along the lines of CNN, located in Lyons. This channel has interpretation into English, German, Spanish and French and intends to add on Arabic and a few other languages. It is too new for me to be able to give a comprehensive report. I can only mention in passing that the Spanish elections were covered with interpretation from Spanish into French, English, German and Italian. This will probably turn out to be another major user of interpreters' skills!

As you can see, TV interpretation is not a minor phenomenon in France and seems to not only be here to stay but on the up and up. Pouvu que ça dure!

---

*Montreuil, 1997*

**Recommended citation format:**

Eliane BROS-BRANN. "Simultaneous interpretation and the media: interpreting live for television". *aiic.net*. January 21, 2002. Accessed June 2, 2020. <<https://aiic.net/p/630>>.