



Booth manners

Everything you ever wanted to know about what should go on in an interpreting booth but didn't know whom to ask.

Manuel SANT'IAGO RIBEIRO.

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We all know them, most of us have them and some of us try to explain them. I thought we could all benefit from thinking deeply about them and thus decided to have a go at setting them down on “paper” for late night perusal by young and my cohort alike.

Whatever happens to be the case, viz. inexperience, callousness, force majeure or simple absentmindedness, my sole aim in putting finger to keyboard is to help concentrate the mind . . . not unlike that famous article on medical/surgical prefixes and suffixes, René Pinhas’ structured attempt at staving off the massive coronary that well nigh befell him when listening to a young female colleague at an obstetrics meeting, gently transposing a reference to the Fallopian tube as “la pipe de salope”!

In concluding this introduction I take great pleasure in acknowledging the contributions made by both course members and faculty at St. Catharine's CIC/95 to my original talk on booth manners, whence this article stems as well as the countless colleagues who, by kindly refraining from over chastising me, gradually let me benefit from their example in amassing the gleaming pearls of wisdom I'm about to share with y'all.

1/

Booth manners or the awareness thereof start well before one gets there, namely over the phone with one’s recruiting interpreter and upon receiving one’s contract.

Make sure you know who the head of team and your boothmate(s) are. You may well want to get in touch beforehand to clear up any well founded doubts - logistic, linguistic or thematic - and, incidentally, to introduce yourself, particularly if you're a fraction less well known than, say, Elvis Presley.

Needless to say, you will take good note of all relay/à cheval situations. Upon getting there, well in advance, introduce yourself you shall, in any case, to the other members of the team, interpreters and technician: the latter’s goodwill - his/her competence being taken for granted just like yours - *can* make a world of difference ... and the same goes for security and catering staff. It may also be a good idea, when working at a new venue, to reconnoitre a bit - sharing a shortcut to the coffee bar will be warmly appreciated by the team when beating 300 delegates to the counter is of the essence ... and the same applies to the location of the nearest photocopying machine, parking spaces, etc.

There, I said the magic word: *share!* As if we needed another source of schizophrenia, this work of ours, individual and some would say individualistic in nature, is never of a higher quality than when an organised team effort comes into play ... and teams, like *auberges espagnoles*, only give back if you put something in to begin with. Don't expect to keep sharing your colleague's glossaries if you don't bother to make your own ... maxime if you don't share what you've got.

2/

Right, now we enter the booth: a confined space, normally adjacent to similar ones, temporarily coinhabited for the processing of audio/visual information (i.e. spatial arrangements, acoustics and line of sight are crucial) and sources of potential aggro all, bless them - as well as cleanliness, consensual paper pushing and noiseless communication.

First hurdle, who sits where?

Don't go "really, must we make such a to-do about so simple a thing"... *ordres de service* have been written, signed and published thereon in hallowed institutions not a million miles away from Brussels! Although booths may seat from 2 to 4, the places of contention are the right and left, even in these post-wall days, nobody caring much for the 1 or 2 in-between, if any.

So, how to go about it, bearing in mind that once decided upon, seating arrangements should stand (!) for the whole conference, except perhaps in those cases where there's a manifest hindrance that must be fairly shared out?

Well, by putting conventional wisdom to good use: let senior colleagues in first and let them have first choice ... if they don't or won't, ask whether they mind your sitting down on whatever chair you happen to be standing next to. If you do have strong preferences and still haven't had your head examined, state them and trust the kindness of strangers ... and never ignore signs of previous occupancy.

O.K., now that you are sitting down, the time has come for some spatial geometry (oh, you thought languages meant an end to maths, did you?): mentally divide the working area available by 2, 3 or 4 as the case may be and draw imaginary parallel lines on either side of you ... presto, you've got your boundaries. You may want to subtly mark them, using the outer (non-cutting please) edges of whatever's handy. If neighbouring colleagues tend to invade ... you obviously won't, nor will you impede circulation behind you or communication in front of you.

Inside this space, you will be sole master of all you survey: individual light source, if available - take care not to dazzle your concabins or other booths - console panel, microphone and bottle of water - provided you each have your own - headset and glass or cup, plus your own set of documents, writing paper and implements, visual aids ... yes, it does sound progressively less obvious, doesn't it?

An agreement should be struck in re: central lightning, ventilation/air conditioning settings, if any, as well as door status - open or, normally, shut ... depending on ventilation and sound coming in and out - plus where and how to use, mark, store and discard collective documents - throwing them about the nether regions is rather messy and not very efficient ... though you had better decide on something before they refer back to that (in)famous rev. 2, German version of doc. 465/94-AG, on which the Austrian Delegation issued a disclaimer on Tuesday, by which time you'll be coming up for air, from those same nether regions, still lacking the effing piece of paper.

By the way, colleagues whose doors are open and who complain about noise coming out of *your* open door should be politely told to shut ... theirs.

As to strong body odours and heady perfumes: wash hard and dabble light, particularly after having put your foot down in the matter of smoking ... admissible only if everybody indulges and

no other team is due to take over (all depending on the laws of the country in which you happen to find yourself).

Second major hurdle: work sharing (as to who gets to start working, apply the “seating rules” *mutatis mutandis*). If you're lucky, this may have been worked out for/with you beforehand. If not remember to keep an open mind - there is life after the half-hour, you know. Even going by the half-hour does *not* mean that your presence will only be required in the booth, say, from 9 to 9.30, 10.30 to 11 and 12 to half past, if there are three of you.

Listen to experience: a colleague with previous knowledge of that meeting may tell you what lies hidden behind an innocuous looking agenda item ... and above all be flexible - a mixed system of time/speaker/language may well do the trick. Quality, as always, should be paramount: neither should relay be taken for a language your booth mate has, provided s/he hasn't been working non-stop, nor should you feel barred by a rigid system from leaving for a breather, thus impairing your quality next time round (more on leaving/staying anon).

Regarding extra-booth work (dinners, visits, etc ...): each booth together with the head of team should decide who does what and when. Remember that although some allowances will be made for private lives, equity demands a fair sharing of the burden - be warned though, consecutive assignments tend to clash with a disproportionate number of previous unavoidable engagements.

Lest you be young and/or impressionable, let me hasten to add that the picture you are probably now conjuring up in your mind's eye is not entirely correct: Air Lingo's cockpit crew going through a checklist while the engines warm up isn't what I have in mind: some items on the checklist will be dealt with intuitively, others later on or not at all through spoken or non-spoken agreement. Again, the aim is to concentrate the mind, not flood it!

One final word to the wise (and probably bored, by now) before we get on to chapter 3 where, lo and behold, we actually start working - remember, what we get paid for? It pays (ah!) to study the panel controls before using them - they are getting to be increasingly complex - and even to test them (the head of team and sound technician should have tested the overall system), particularly that all important mute/cough button that lets us utter our lofty comments on whatever hopes the speaker's forebears had for their offspring, thereby - if operational - keeping our sanity or - if not - kissing our careers goodbye! ...

Simply tune into your own outgoing channel, by means of the incoming channel selector plus relay switch if available, turn your mike on, press mute/cough and speak: sweet silence should be heard. Release: your own sweeter voice? All's well ... if not, let the technician know; s/he may be able to fix it straightaway. S/he's also the one to go to for a different headset or one that works, or a spare bulb, or extra volume (do use bass/treble control though, they're there - when they're there - for a good reason, namely so you can avoid turning the volume up needlessly, potentially harming your hearing and disturbing your colleagues) ... or info on how to operate the system, or how to get above-zero temperatures out of the air-conditioning or...see why I told you to be nice to him/her??

Speaking of being nice to people ... heads of team, as you well know, are coordinators and facilitators - as well as generally having their own in-booth workloads to cope with, so remember - provided you abide by the golden rule: don't initiate any contacts with the outside world and if *it* contacts you don't commit the team; politely defer any action and report to the head of team forthwith.

As to visiting cards, *never* hand them out: if requested, give the recruiter's name and contact and let him/her know about it. Likewise for cards you may be given: pass them on to the recruiter or head of team.

... **Mesdames et Messieurs, veuillez avoir la gentillesse de bien vouloir occuper vos places** pour qu'on puisse commencer ... this is it, sound will henceforth be coming out of your booth... and I do mean sound, not noise, which means anything that clinks, clicks, beeps, rustles, cracks or rings - God forbid - should not go into the booth, or if it does, should be duly neutralized!

Remember that not only can you look out of the booth, people outside often can and do look in. Avoid reading table cloth-like newspapers, mending your bedspread or working at your Bayeux tapestry ... and if you must grab a quick snack inside the booth, noiselessly chew on it with your back turned to the room.

Remember the cough button? You've tested it, now *use* it: don't, please don't utter an extraneous sound with a microphone on, nor have it turned off - the speaker's voice would suddenly and inexplicably flood the poor participants' ears, whereas if you use the cough button only silence will ensue.

It's easier said than done, I know, particularly when your colleague looks at you with pleading eyes and the two of you know that you caught the missing word ... either write it down or signal him/her to press his/her cough button.

Try and make space on neutral ground (i.e. astride the boundary) for a note pad where both may jot down short helpful hints - figures, names, references ... and make sure you don't paper up the dividing panes of glass with lists of participants, agendas, etc...

Helping out is an art form in itself: don't force your booth mate to take notice or feel offended if s/he doesn't. Just knowing that it's there for him/her to use, if needed, may be all the help required. Likewise, do tell your colleagues the kind of help you appreciate, particularly if you don't much like the help - or lack of same - you're getting.

Sign language of sorts - not necessarily ASL or BSL, that's another story - comes in very handy in the booth, common sense, experience and some mutual knowledge of your boothmates provided. You should develop silent ways of signalling e.g. stop, speed up, slow down, ignore, jump over that bit, O.K., brilliant, so-so, the other way round, change over ... ah, change over, our third major hurdle - and microphages, which of course you are not:

Rule 1: You will have agreed on a system beforehand

Rule 2: You will mutually signal your willingness to change over

Rule 3: Changeovers shall be seamless

Rule 4: Normal mike on-off sequence, if more than one is being used, shall be thus: first his/her mike off, then yours on

Rule 5: If willingness is not forthcoming, signal a second time; if unsuccessful, try placing your watch in a prominent position; if still unsuccessful, turn your volume down, leave quietly, breath deep, come back in and wait. It serves no purpose to keep harping on and eventually s/he will handover the mike - or drop dead ... now, now, let us be Christian, it is *not* the better option...

Whatever happens bear three things in mind:

- *Nothing* justifies a row in the booth (if row there must be, have it outside, after work, out of ear-shot);
- However long s/he worked *you're* not departing from your previously agreed system;
- *Never, ever* "steal" a mike. Nice, grey haired Laura Ashley-clad ladies and benign, portly gentlemen will turn into something very ugly if you do, believe me.

Right, on to what one does when not interpreting and still on duty.

Bearing in mind that there are no steadfast rules on this, here's what I do: I tend to stay put during my first rest period(s), later staying only for a few minutes and leaving for say 10/15 - if I feel like leaving, of course - then coming back and sitting in for the remainder.

Why? At first, I sit/listen in to get the hang of the conference, validate lexical options, find out about the day's agenda, soundlessly organise documents ... and roughly get the measure of my colleagues, if they're unknown to me. Later I leave, for breathers, smokes, leg stretching, cups of coffee (why not signal or jot down "coffee?" when leaving for that purpose and bring one back for your colleague?) ... and to give one's colleague some space and avoid over creating the impression of listening in to his/her less-than-felicitous *trouvailles*, which of course one can't help doing ... but that's life and it works both ways. Later still I come back and listen in before taking over, for obvious reasons.

Well, there you have it: almost 20 years worth of distilled (which reminds me, avoid excessive imbibing while on duty) tongue-in-cheek advice, well meant and I hope well taken ... and a bit more of the same:

- Silence criticism of the team's work and, needless to say, don't indulge in any yourself. Share compliments, even if directed to you personally and, when acknowledging them, do likewise.
- Avoid noise outside the booths and enlighten culprits thereof.
- Treat other booths like you want yours to be treated: don't barge in - but don't knock; don't - need I say it? - speak before you've checked mike status; don't sit down unless asked to do so ... and leave the door as you found it.
- By all means, periodically record yourself, but only yourself and only at public meetings and after explaining to your boothmate what you propose to do.
- Remember professional secrecy (if unclear on why, read Christopher Thierry's "[La responsabilite de l'interprete de conference professionnel ou pourquoi nous ne pouvons pas ecrire nos memoires](#)") and avoid discussing the conference ... walls do have ears.
- Clean up before you leave. Particularly with mobile booths, the technicians should not have to get rid of a week's worth of debris before they can go home ... and please destroy the more intimate or sarcastic notes.
- Don't forget to take leave and thank technicians and interpreters, colleagues all, particularly those you may have taken relay from - never mind clients (unless they're your own!) as the head of team will take care of them.
- Beaming relatives and/or toddling infants are a fact of life, I'll grant you that, but of yours, not your team mates' ... so don't bring them along. If you must show a significant other/doting ancestor/ex-financial backer where you further international communication, do so before/after hours or, better yet, take a picture.

Taken it all in? Agreed with most of it? Do send me your availability card ... and don't forget your "survival (non-tropical) kit":

- Jotting paper and consecutive note pad.
- Writing implements and pencil sharpener.
- Ear pads and/or cleansing tissues.
- Decapsulator and penknife.
- Cough drops and painkillers.
- Small self-adhesive labels and paperclips.
- Small binoculars and hand fan.

- Blank receipts!
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