

# Conversing via an interpreter

A brief guide

When two people need to communicate with each other but lack a common language, an interpreter acting as an intermediary enables them to converse. The aim of an interpreted conversation is that it should resemble a normal conversation as far as possible. There are, however, certain considerations that you should bear in mind when using an interpreter.

This brochure provides a brief account of the interpreter's function in a conversation, and how this affects you when using an interpreter's services. It also mentions a few points that you should pay special attention to when conversing via an interpreter.

## The function of the interpreter

is determined by the professional code of ethics for interpreters. Interpreters adhere to the following ethical principles in their work:

- Interpreters must translate everything that is said during a conversation and must not omit, change or add anything.
- Interpreters must be impartial in an interpreting situation and their own opinions must not influence the interpretation.
- Interpreters must not undertake other work arising from the interpreting assignment.
- Interpreters must observe professional secrecy.

The interpreter's obligation of professional secrecy means that

- all information made known to the interpreter during the interpreting assignment is treated as strictly confidential
- the interpreter must observe professional secrecy at all times, including when talking to his or her superiors, colleagues or family members
- all information remains confidential even after the interpreter has stopped working in the interpreting service.

When you use an interpreter this means that

- you are personally responsible for everything you say during the conversation
- the interpreter is not responsible for ensuring that information given by you and your interlocutor is correct
- the interpreter cannot keep track of what you have said to each other
- the interpreter cannot act as proxy for either party
- the interpreter is obliged to tell you if he or she is disqualified from acting as your interpreter because he or she
  - is related, married or engaged to either party
  - is personally involved in the matter
  - has acted in the matter on behalf of one of the parties.
- the interpreter must tell you if he or she is unable to perform the task competently.

## Important points to remember when conversing via an interpreter

- Talk to your interlocutor, not about him or her.
- Address your interlocutor, not the interpreter. For example, instead of saying, "Ask him if he wants to...", ask directly, "Do you want to...". The interpreter will then translate this, and the interpreted conversation will seem more like a normal conversation.
- If something is unclear to you or if you are unsure about what your interlocutor has understood, just ask him or her, and the interpreter will translate the question.

## Plan what you want to say

- emphasise the points that are important to you
- be concise, and give the interpreter time to translate.  
The interpretation will then be as accurate as possible and your interlocutor will be able to reply or comment – as in a normal conversation.
- be clear and specific. If you use sayings, for example, you should also explain what you mean by them.

You should also be aware that

**facial expressions and body language** which normally support what we say in a normal conversation will have less effect in an interpreted conversation. Communicating through an interpreter is therefore a little like talking on the telephone – a situation where we also only have words and our voice to help us

certain **gestures** may actually mean different things in different cultures (e.g. nodding means "yes" in English but "no" in some other languages). You should take this into account when expressing yourself via an interpreter

**interpreting is hard work.** The interpreter must concentrate entirely on the interpretation and cannot perform other tasks in addition to this. The interpreter will also get tired sooner than you will, and will need to take breaks

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