

An aerial photograph of a large agricultural field, likely corn, with a road intersection in the center. The field is divided into several sections by roads and ditches. The color of the crops is a golden-brown, suggesting they are ripe. The road intersection is a prominent feature, with one road running vertically and another running horizontally, crossing each other in the middle of the field.

ATA/Midwest Association of Translators and Interpreters Court Interpreting Seminar

By Eric Vidoni

The Court Interpreting Seminar, a professional development opportunity co-hosted by ATA and the Midwest Association of Translators and Interpreters on June 21-22 at the Embassy Suites O'Hare in Chicago, Illinois, was without a doubt an "ear-opening experience." This two-day event featured four guest speakers and attracted attendees from all over the country.

Retention Enhancement for Consecutive Interpreters

Janis Palma, a federally certified interpreter for the U.S. District Court for the District of Puerto Rico, was the first speaker on the program. Her presentation on retention techniques for consecutive interpreters began with a brief overview of the interpreter's work ethics and environment. Her main message was that to excel as an interpreter, you have to identify with the speaker.

Palma mentioned a short list of specific and practical keys for a successful consecutive interpreting session:

- Create images to accompany the verbal information that the brain is processing to help you grasp the message more clearly and ascertain its meaning.
- Relate to how the speaker is communicating the information: stay with the story and focus on the speaker's feelings.
- Focus on the actual message.
- Maintain the pauses, inflection, and intonation of the speaker.
- Forget all distractions in the courtroom: look at your note pad.

- Do not sabotage yourself: thinking about forgetting will make you forget.
- Do not isolate the words; keep them in context.
- Do your homework.

Palma talked about the importance of advanced preparation in aiding the court interpreter. Interpreters should have a thorough understanding of the legal process. This includes courtroom procedure, such as the typical questions that are likely to be asked during the session (e.g., “How close were you to the defendant?” or “How did you come to learn about this?”). Having these commonplace utterances already “prepackaged” in your head will help smooth the wrinkles in your performance, freeing up your mind to focus on the more important information. On a similar note, Palma discussed elocution, stressing that the concept of what is being expressed is more important than the words. For example, *se me vino el mundo encima* should be rendered as “this is the end of the world,” rather than “the world crumbled upon me.”

Another aspect of preparing ahead, as Palma noted, is to familiarize yourself with the parties involved in the case by reviewing the file record and taking note of the names, dates, and other case-specific information. (Please keep in mind that attaining this kind of information is not always possible and varies according to each court.) Several attendees agreed with this suggestion, including a certified interpreter from Greeley, Colorado, who recognized and praised the help of the court staff where she has worked in providing her with case information ahead of time.

To excel as an interpreter, you have to put yourself in the speaker’s shoes.

Memory and Notes


After the break, Palma presented the “seven chunks of information theory” and discussed different ways to help retain information. According to this theory, our brains are capable of storing an average of seven units of information. As a way of improving memory capability, Palma suggested that instead of remembering isolated words, we should try to group words together that have strong associations with one another. This memory training technique is also known as chunking. For example, while recalling a mobile phone number such as 9849523450, we might break this into 98 495 234 50. Thus, instead of remembering 10 separate digits, which would stretch our short-term memory capacity, we only need to remember four groups of numbers. As another example, if the speaker starts off a sentence with “The cherry red sports car with dark tinted windows...,” instead of taking in every single word as a unit (and thus, running out of memory), visualize the “car” along with its identifying characteristics as a whole concept. Grouping like items together will free up more memory and allow you to focus on the units of information that will follow in the rest of the sentence.

Palma stressed that note taking is key for consecutive interpreting. However, she pointed out that interpreters should not rely on their notes alone, but rather use them as a complementary tool to perform their job. Here are few tips for effective note taking:

- Do not be stingy with the paper.
- Write down the exact words you heard and do not change the language.
- Underline or circle inflected and stressed words.
- Use the easiest abbreviations.
- Do not get lost in your notes.

Palma followed her talk with an exhaustive and useful retention enhancement exercise in which several attendees were asked to participate. She started with one sentence and asked a person to repeat it. She then added an extra sentence to the previous one and asked another person to repeat the whole passage. The process went on until a long paragraph made of eight sentences had to be repeated. Even though there were different levels of expertise among the participants, the exercise proved to be practical (it was done in English only) and valuable, since it tied in all the elements and techniques that had been discussed earlier in the presentation. After a round of questions and answers, Palma closed the presentation with words of encouragement for the attendees and provided a packet with several memory retention and note taking exercises.

Simultaneous Interpreting

Following a relaxing lunch, the 

afternoon session ensued with a presentation covering advanced simultaneous interpreting techniques offered by María Cecilia Marty, a federally certified interpreter and translator.

The presentation began with a quick review of the different interpreting modes, such as simultaneous, consecu-

Are You Good Enough?

Marty discussed the importance of sharpening your skills as an interpreter, emphasizing that practice is the only way to improve. Setting aside just five minutes per day to work on an aspect of your interpreting performance that needs improvement

ments in oral delivery. The practice logs included the type of exercise (such as condensing), the type of text being interpreted (jury instructions regarding various kinds of evidence), the area of improvement (vocabulary), and the self-evaluations (before and after listening to the recording).

Setting aside just five minutes per day to work on an aspect of your interpreting performance that needs improvement will help tremendously.

tive, and sight translation. Simultaneous interpreting is actually a misnomer, in that the word simultaneous suggests that the interpreter is interpreting a message as he or she hears it. In fact, there is a delay between the moment the interpreter hears a thought and the moment he or she renders that thought into the target language, because it takes time to understand the original message and generate a target-language rendition of it. Meanwhile, the speaker goes on to the next thought, so the interpreter must generate the target-language version of the first thought while processing the speaker's second thought, and so on. Marty explained that this delay is known as *décalage*, from the French word for time lag. The longer the interpreter is able to wait before beginning the target-language version, the more information he or she will have and the more accurate the target-language version will be. Marty cautioned that each interpreter should know his or her comfort zone in order to avoid getting caught too far behind the speaker. This will help minimize the risk of information getting lost in the interpretation.

will help tremendously. Here are a few aspects of delivery to keep in mind as you practice:

Diction: Do not take shortcuts; pronounce every sound of each word in the sentence.

Speed: Begin slowly; as you progress, increase your speed.

Pitch: Project your voice so that everyone in the room can hear you.

Stress: Make sure the right syllable is being stressed.

During the session, Marty made good use of several tongue twisters to demonstrate how to develop your skills. She started slowly, deliberately pronouncing every sound within each word: "Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers...." She then sped up her delivery while still emphasizing every sound. Marty explained that it is immensely helpful for interpreters to record and listen to their delivery, and provided attendees with a sample log sheet as a means of tracking improve-

Do You Have an Accent?

Marty emphasized the interpreter's accent. Since interpreting is a profession that spans the globe, accents are frequently present in this field. Although a neutral accent is always preferred because it is easier to understand, Marty explained that it is acceptable for an interpreter to retain an accent during his or her delivery provided that it does not create a distraction or a communication barrier. As with the morning presentation, Marty concluded with a round of questions and answers.

Sight Translation

On Sunday, certified interpreter Patricia González Marañá discussed how to practice sight translation as a springboard for simultaneous interpreting. She explained that translators and interpreters who are new to the profession often find it hard to transition from written translation or consecutive interpreting to the more demanding mode of simultaneous interpreting. Furthermore, seasoned professionals may face the challenge of delivering a smooth rendition when sight translating more complex texts.

After mentioning the use of sight translation in court, González Marañá asked attendees if they could read and translate at the same time. After receiving a few puzzled looks, she explained that it is in fact possible and that the same variables that apply to simultaneous interpreting are also found in sight translation. To demonstrate this,

she proposed the following technique:

Deverbalize: Focus on ideas and concepts and the words will follow.

Anticipate: Start activating your long-term memory with words you may have to use.

Scan: Speed read for key words.

Produce: Fill in the blanks (“sight-closing”).

As an exercise, González Maraña provided attendees with an Advisement of Rights, a document frequently used during trials. She asked attendees to think about words that are frequently encountered in this type of document and to scan quickly for them. When asked to read the document (which had a number of words intentionally left out), attendees were able to fill in the blanks with relative ease. A simple scan for key words and concepts combined with the anticipation of the words that would likely appear in such a document had activated their long-term memory, allowing attendees to plug in all the missing words. These exercises helped equip participants with the self-study tools needed to transition from translation or consecutive interpreting to simultaneous interpreting. The tools provided by the speaker also assisted experienced professionals in honing their skills to improve their performance in the sight translation or simultaneous modes.

Interpreting in the Juvenile Courts

The last session of the weekend was presented by Alexandra Wirth, a certified court interpreter, who spoke about interpreting in juvenile or family court. Wirth noted that under-

Resources for Court Interpreters



Federal Court Interpreter Certification Examination Program

www.ncsconline.org/d_research/Consort-interp/fcice_exam/index.htm

Federal Court Terminology

www.id.uscourts.gov/glossary.htm

Federal Interpreter, Translator, and Training Services

www.fittservices.com
www.acebo.com

Juvenile Court/Child Welfare

<http://courtcafe.com/glossary>

National Association of Judiciary Interpreters and Translators

www.najit.org

National Center for State Courts

www.ncsconline.org/wc/CourTopics/ResourceGuide.asp?topic=CtInte

U.S. Courts Case Management Electronic Case Files

www.uscourts.gov/cmecf/cmecf.html

U.S. District Court for the District of Puerto Rico

www.prd.uscourts.gov

standing the legal system is essential to becoming a good interpreter. Although sometimes incorrectly regarded as a lesser responsibility, interpreting in juvenile courts is often nerve-racking and extremely stressful due to the age of the participants (children and teens), the nature of the issues being treated, and the life-long consequences stemming from the case results (such as the termination of parental rights).

Wirth explained that with more participants required to be present in the courtroom (such as the guardian *ad litem*, the court appointed special advocate, and the social worker), juvenile court proceedings can add another layer of difficulty for the inexperienced interpreter. She then shared some examples of how adult and juvenile courts use different terminology to express the same concept. In her article in this issue, “Interpreting in Juvenile Court,”

Alexandra Wirth lists a few of the terminological differences between adult and juvenile court. Please see Figure 2 on page 20.

Final Thoughts

Overall, the two-day seminar proved to be particularly insightful in terms of the information covered, and provided useful techniques to become a better interpreter. The featured speakers showed a clear understanding of the subject and were able to transmit the content so that attendees could immediately relate to it. In addition, attendees were given ample opportunity to meet with the speakers, network, and share their experiences with colleagues.

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