

Five Essential Coping Tactics

“The pessimist complains about the wind; the optimist expects it to change; the realist adjusts the sails.”

—William Arthur Ward, writer

Upon setting sail from the Spanish port of Seville in 1519, Ferdinand Magellan was unsure of just what to expect. He had a hunch that he should sail west, believing this route would take him to the lucrative spices that grew in the Indies.

He took along the best technological and human resources available to him and left port with a flotilla of five ships loaded to the hilt with provisions, hoping for the best in a voyage whose duration he could not estimate. Under his command sailed a contingent of 260 men seduced by the promise of fortune and glory, their only chance to escape a miserable existence.

The captain general knew he would be up against more than just the ferocity of the southern seas. He had dared to question age-old tenets of pseudo-religious beliefs, and many among his peers were certain that, despite his conviction, Magellan was attempting the impossible.

The intrepid navigator would have to prove the foolishness of countless medieval superstitions. Legends spoke of sailors swallowed up by boiling waters south of the Equator and of ships torn apart by magnetic isles that could pull the nails out from the hull. Ferdinand Magellan was a determined explorer, ready to put his life on the line. But he was also a man of the times and certainly not immune to the superstitions of the day.

GOING BEYOND THE EDGE

Like sailors contemplating an imminent journey into uncharted waters, interpreters, too, have to grapple with a number of ghosts as they prepare for, and later reminisce about, their maiden voyage. Myths abound and are bred by ignorance and by panicky fantasies



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that tend to beset the unsure mind. Fear—be it endogenous or induced by circumstance—is how humans react to the unknown.

Yet, deliverance comes only from experience, and one has to muster the courage to set out to sea, hoping there is no cliff at the edge of the world after all. As they sail away from safe harbor, interpreters would do well to master at least some basic tricks while still ashore. So, lantern in hand, let us shed light on five important coping tactics every interpreter should have in their toolbox as they prepare to weigh anchor.¹

1. **Simplifying discourse through acronyms and generalizations:**

This common strategy, which soon becomes second nature, is a safe way to deal with speed, as it saves time while preserving content. For example, United Nations becomes UN; International Monetary Fund becomes IMF; and *pyruvate dehydrogenase* might be rendered simply as “the enzyme in question.” The downside is that acronyms do at times get translated, and the effort required in realigning the letters may take longer than simply repeating a mouthful.

2. **Keeping a word or term in the original language:** This is somewhat counterintuitive. Aren't interpreters supposed to translate every word?

Well, not quite. Rather, their job is to convey ideas, which occasionally means recognizing which concepts are better left unchanged. But this tactic can also be used as a temporary crutch in a fix until a linguistic equivalent can be recalled for use a second time around. If relevant, a term will certainly occur innumerable times and will eventually be rendered satisfactorily. If not, keeping it in the original language won't have been all that unforgivable.

3. **Changing the order of elements in an enumeration:** Here's a rather elaborate yet very useful strategy. Say the interpreter is lagging behind in a sentence as the speaker suddenly rushes through a long list of countries. Anticipating an imminent clogging of his short-term memory, the interpreter stores in his mind the first two or three names on the list and jumps straight to the ones being spoken next, which he renders immediately as heard. Once the list comes to an end, only the first few names he skipped need to be recovered from memory. The result is usually 100% retrieval and zero overload.
4. **Reconstructing meaning from context:** This is a dangerous yet useful tactic, where the loss of a word or idea is compensated for by the introduction of the most probable corollary to a preceding argument or semantic construct. At such times, besides their linguistic skills and their ability to improvise, interpreters rely heavily on extra-linguistic information (i.e., previous knowledge about the subject matter being discussed or the content they have gained in the course of the conference itself). This is time-consuming and requires a good sense of timing to be done properly. Given the possible loss of content and the reputational risk, this tactic ought to be avoided to the extent possible. There will be situations, though, when nothing else works.
5. **Knowing when to acknowledge mistakes:** As much as we hate to admit it, interpreters do make mistakes, and handling them properly is an important survival skill. It is also

tricky. Saying "sorry" or "rather" may solve the problem of context, but it leaves the impression that the mistake was the speaker's and that she is the one apologizing. This tactic doesn't go unnoticed to more experienced interpreters, most of whom have occasionally passed blame in cases of immaterial omissions. Yet, when dealing with a serious misnomer or inaccuracy, ethics dictate that the interpreter rectify a potential misunderstanding, making sure to speak in the third person to avoid confusion. This momentary admission of guilt is important specifically to protect the speaker, and while it could potentially undermine the interpreter's credibility, it may also enhance it. Admitting a mistake denotes self-assurance. Working to fix it denotes conscientiousness.

SAILING ON

The mechanisms listed above don't even scratch the surface, but they are a good starting point. To grow as an interpreter one has to expand this repertoire of coping tactics while working hard to question any nonsensical myths. In a world long haunted by imaginary demons and shadows, lighting a candle still works better than cursing the darkness. The ghosts of our time must be challenged, one by one. And while these specters may impress us with their power, they are seldom unknown.

Other than scurvy, whose cause would remain a mystery for another three centuries, all of Magellan's adversaries were known and very powerful—the violent seas, the raging storms, the mutinous sailors, the famine. The captain general never did encounter boiling waters or magnetic rocks. When he finally succumbed while still *en route*, it wasn't in the jaws of a mythical sea creature. Rather, he got himself killed during an ill-considered and unnecessary show of force against a tribe in the Philippines.

Ultimately, Magellan's expedition paid a high price for challenging established myths and traditions. Four of five ships were lost and over 200 men were killed. It was, by most objective standards, an unqualified failure. Yet in confronting

and debunking many medieval myths, it changed the world forever. ●

NOTE

- ¹ For additional coping tactics in interpretation, please see chapter 8 ("Coping Tactics in Interpretation") in Daniel Gile's *Basic Concepts and Models for Interpreter and Translator Training* (John Benjamins, 1997).



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