

Interpretation and Translation: Strategies for Sharing Power in Our Multilingual Movement

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Why Is A Commitment to Multilingual Organizing Important?

A community's strength depends in large part on the strength of its culture, and language is an essential aspect of one's culture, in terms of cultural transmission, regeneration, and collective power. Translation and interpretation are language tools that can be wielded to achieve different political goals. They can be used to marginalize the power, culture, and voice of a community in ways that maintain the status quo of power, privilege, and oppression between peoples, or they can be used to create space for new community voices and strength in ways that transform race relationships and empower marginalized groups. As a multilingual movement, immigrants, refugees, and allies can use the tools of translation and interpretation to create bridges of communication, to strengthen the voices of traditionally excluded groups, to deeply promote cross-racial, cross-cultural, broad-based community participation, and to create political power for change.

The following article is based on the experience of El Centro Hispano, a Latino community organization based in Durham, NC. This information is presented here to encourage others to explore the potential of using interpretation and translation as a critical tool for social change. This article will explore several different modes of interpretation, translation, and provide some best practices and logistical tips on integrating interpretation, translation, and multi-lingual spaces into our work. Interpretation refers to verbal communication, while translation applies to written documents. For the purpose of this article, we assume that English is the primary, dominant language, since we are writing from a U.S.-based perspective, although that is not always the case.

Types of Interpretation:

- Consecutive interpretation
- Simultaneous Interpretation:
 - One-way
- Simultaneous interpretation:
 - Bi-Directional
- Simultaneous Interpretation:
 - Multi-Directional

Other Topics:

- Comprehensive Written Translation
- Creating a Multilingual Space in Organizing
- Some Tips for Successful Interpretation at Meetings and Events

Consecutive Interpretation:

What Is It?

Consecutive interpretation is a mode of interpretation where a speaker speaks a few sentences and then pauses to allow the interpreter to repeat them in the other language. The speaker and interpreter alternate turns talking. This method requires interpreters with good memory retention skills, but does not require any special audio equipment.

When it's OK to Use:

- Most useful with very big crowds and for limited periods of time, hopefully not more than 5-10 minutes. It is best for speeches to an audience rather than for a more intimate interactive discussion.
- Using consecutive interpreting for a day-long workshop is frustrating and could easily give grassroots leaders a negative attitude toward cross-language work.

How It Works:

- Speakers talk for a short segment and then pause for the interpreters to interpret the segment, and so alternate back and forth.

What You Need:

- No special audio interpreting equipment needed
- Experienced interpreters who can manage a discussion that moves forward in short segments. Interpreters may serve an organization as a volunteer, or charge for their services.

The Upside:

- Everyone is able to participate more, in their language of choice
- Both languages are more equally represented in the discussion
- Requires no special equipment, and it can accommodate any number of participants

The Downside:

- Repeating every comment sequentially makes the process take twice as long
- Establishing a rhythm between speaker and interpreter can be tricky, so that neither one speaks for too long or too short
- Participants usually listen when their language is being spoken, and may disengage when the other language is being spoken
- Participants tend to look at the interpreter and not at each other, thus building relationships with the interpreter and not with each other
- It is easy for the interpreter to “take control” of the meeting, basically assuming the role of moderator and sidelining the speaker

Consecutive Interpretation

Contribution to Leadership Development:

- Allows monolingual immigrant leaders to speak up publicly and have their voices heard in an English-speaking public space, which can be very empowering for individual leaders
- Can allow a group to share power and responsibility among participants: everyone gets to speak up in the language of their choice, and everyone has to wait for the interpreter in order to hear or be heard
- Choppy stop-start discussion style is equally inconvenient to everyone

Simultaneous Interpretation: An Overview

What Is It?

Simultaneous interpretation is a mode of interpretation where an interpreter interprets at the same time that the speaker is talking, without interrupting the flow of discussion. Special audio equipment is usually used. While a speaker is talking, the interpreter speaks quietly into a microphone that transmits to headphones worn by those listening to the interpretation.

There are three types of simultaneous interpretation, which we will discuss further:

- One-way interpretation: used when only a small number of listeners in the group don't understand a "majority" language
- Bi-directional interpretation: used in a group where two languages are spoken
- Multi-directional interpretation: used in a group where three or more languages are spoken

When It's OK To Use:

- Group events, such as meetings and workshops, where there are two or more languages spoken

How It Works:

- Participants are given a set of headphones and a small walkman style "receiver," which are plastic, electronic boxes that have a volume control, sometimes a channel control, and headphones.
- Interpreters hold a "transmitter," and speak quietly into the transmitter's microphone. Their voices are heard through the receiver-headphones worn by the folks who need interpretation.
- The interpreter's job is to completely repeat the message of the speakers in the group, rendering it into the language of the listeners, and to do so at the same time that the speakers are talking.

Simultaneous Interpretation: An Overview

- Simultaneous interpreting has virtually no delay (not more than 2-4 seconds) in getting the message from one language to into the other. The speakers do not pause to wait for the interpreter, nor do they alternate turns talking between speaker and interpreter, as is done in consecutive interpreting.

What You Need:

- Audio equipment with transmitters and enough receivers for participants. These may be purchased, rented, or borrowed. When using the equipment, the organizers will need to arrange a table to put it on: a seemingly small detail, until you find yourself spreading electronic equipment all over the meeting room floor.
- Plenty of time: Good interpreters will want to be contacted at the beginning of the planning, so that they will have time to discuss with the organizers the special arrangements needed in a multilingual setting.
- A pair of talented interpreters: simultaneous interpretation is an intense job that requires high levels of mental concentration, and works best when interpreters can alternate every 20-30 minutes. Simultaneous interpreters must have special skills to work “simultaneously”— it is not enough to simply be bilingual. Most skilled simultaneous interpreters will work on contract for a fee.

One-way Simultaneous Interpretation

What is it?

One-way simultaneous interpretation is used when only a small number of listeners in the group don't understand the language of most of the participants, and only they wear headphones to listen to the interpreter. When those listeners want to speak to the group, they speak in their language and the interpreter interprets for them consecutively.

When It's OK To Use:

- Group events, such as meetings and workshops, where there are two languages spoken
- Used when only a small number of listeners in the group don't understand a “dominant” language
- When one-way simultaneous interpreting is the only option available

One-way Simultaneous Interpretation

How it works:

- Same as simultaneous interpretation in general, but only participants who need interpretation from the “dominant” language are given a set of headphones and receiver.
- When those who are wearing headsets want to talk, the interpreter switches into consecutive interpretation, speaking out loud to the whole group.

What you need:

- Same as simultaneous interpretation in general

The Upside:

- Best as a last resort when there are not enough listening receivers to hand out to all the folks in the group, or when there are so few people who require interpretation that bi-directional simultaneous interpretation will not work (i.e. a ratio of 1 Spanish-speaker for every 20 English-speakers.)
- This method, in the long-term, exposes all participants to the use of simultaneous interpretation and can result in better cross-cultural awareness and confidence.

The Downside:

- Giving headphones to only one group of participants allows them to listen to everything passively, but doesn't really allow them to speak up and join in the discussions in a spontaneous way. This method can keep some participants from integrating into the group and bonding equally with everyone else.
- This style constructs a dynamic where the group with headsets are seen by the other participants as passive listeners, rarely speaking up and connecting with the rest of the group. This does not challenge the social structure or dynamic in the group and can even have the effect of making one group appear to be the quiet folks, grateful to be invited but in no way affecting the way in which the group operates.

Contribution to Leadership Development:

- One-way, passive simultaneous interpreting allows monolingual community leaders some access to growth and training opportunities, but is limited in its ability to fully integrate community leaders into the larger grassroots leadership forum.

Bi-directional Interpretation

What is it?

Bi-directional interpretation is used in a group where two languages are spoken. In this setup, all those who do not understand both languages wear headphones. Everyone speaks in their language of choice, and the interpreter switches language directions, depending on what language is spoken at the given moment. Everyone who is not bilingual will at some point have to listen and understand through the interpretation.

When It's OK To Use:

- We believe that bi-directional, interactive interpreting should be used whenever possible in multilingual settings.
- Group events, such as meetings and workshops, where there are two languages spoken. It works best in groups that are small enough to facilitate such interaction—many would say that groups of less than 30 folks are ideal for this.
- Works best when there at least some balance between the numbers of speakers for both languages.

How It Works:

- Same as simultaneous interpretation in general, but any participant who does not understand both languages receives headphones.
- Everyone speaks in their language, and the interpreter will switch between the two languages.

What You Need:

- Same as simultaneous interpretation in general, although it is important to make sure that the interpreters will be able to switch back and forth seamlessly between both languages.
- Advance planning with the organizers, facilitators, and interpreters

The Upside:

- Virtually no “translation lag time,” no matter what language is being spoken
- All participants are free to join in spontaneously
- There's no overtone that one language is a “handicap,” both languages (i.e.: cultures and communities) are on more equal footing in the group
- Participants look each other in the eye, bonding with each other and not the interpreter
- Huge contributions to leadership development (see below)

Bi-directional Interpretation

The Downside:

- Requires more concentration for all participants, as the listener has to decide to listen to the speaker or the earphone, and filter out the other voice when not needed. This may be a new experience, particularly for English-speakers.
- Resistance from participants new to interpretation can look like:
 - flatly refusing to put on the headset;
 - frequently removing the headset and consistently being unprepared for when interpretation is needed;
 - interrupting the interpreter to make her repeat everything because the participant wasn't listening or zoned out for a minute; or
 - interrupting the discussion because their receiver's battery got low (instead of quietly getting up and going to the designated battery-changing station in the room).
- On the flipside, non-English-speaking immigrant participants may have the opposite problem, never speaking up for their needs at all.

Contribution to Leadership Development:

- Offers real development opportunities for both mono-lingual immigrant leaders and their fellow English speaking grassroots leaders.
- Eliminates language barriers in group settings, and frees all participants to participate spontaneously, helping to de-stigmatize speaking languages other than English.
- The discomfort or resistance to bi-directional interpreting shown by English-speakers highlights the potential contribution to their leadership. Reflecting on this is in itself an experience in dismantling racism and examining internalized assumptions of language privilege.

Multi-directional Interpretation

What Is It?

Multi-directional interpretation is a mode of interpretation when there are three or more languages spoken in one setting. All participants who are not fluent in all represented languages will wear a headset, and all interpreters must have at least one language in common.

Multi-directional interpretation can be done in a variety of ways, from simple to complex. The simplest way we have come across is to designate one of the languages as the "Hub Language." All interpreters of the various languages represented would interpret in and out of the central hub language. In the U.S., English would likely be a common hub language for multi-directional interpreted events, though not necessarily.

Multi-directional Interpretation

When It's OK To Use:

- Group events, such as meetings and workshops, where there are three or more languages spoken and/or cultural communities represented.

How it works:

- Each language has a transmitter channel dedicated for interpreting into that language (for example: English will always be transmitted on Channel 1, Spanish always on Channel 2, Creole on Channel 3, and Hmong on Channel 4). If English is designated as the Hub Language, then each interpreter pair for Spanish, Creole, and Hmong must be able to interpret between English and their respective language, but they are not required to interpret between two non-English languages.

For instance, the Hmong interpreters are not expected to understand Creole, nor are Creole interpreters expected to understand Hmong. In such an instance, when Creole is spoken out loud, the Hmong interpreter herself listens to the English interpretation of the Creole, and then interprets THAT into Hmong. Thus the interpreters act like daisy-chains for each other, linking the message from Creole into Hmong via the English interpretation. When the hub language of English is spoken out loud, then all the interpreters just go straight into their respective other languages.

What you need:

- Same as simultaneous interpretation in general, and all participants who do not understand the “hub language” wear a headset, tuned to the language channel they want to listen in.
- Transmitters with separate channels for each language spoken.
- A pair of interpreters for each language combo with English; and the interpreters must be very skilled and experienced with conference-style simultaneous interpreting
- Steadfast commitment to the conviction that Language = Power, plus a sense of adventure and good humor, because multi-directional simultaneous interpreting can be daunting for organizers and participants alike.

The Upside:

- Allows many more communities to participate and bring their cultural voice into the group space.
- Begins to reduce the barrier that permits immigrant communities to only come together across languages with English-speaking groups.
- Allows speakers of various languages/cultures to come together directly, without having English-speakers brokering the relationship-building between different immigrant groups.

The Downside:

- Because it is so complex to organize, there is a higher chance of things going wrong.
- It can be very expensive to pull together, and very difficult to find enough interpreters with the required conference simultaneous interpreting skills needed for an event.
- Groups wanting to do an event with multi-directional interpreting should first become accustomed to bi-directional interpreting in their events, before expanding.

Contribution to Leadership Development:

- Everyone who participates in an event with multi-directional interpreting will gain more skills in cross-cultural exposure and competence than they would through other kinds of interpreting in events.
- This is the beginning of multilingual, multicultural grassroots base-building in the U.S. that goes beyond the dualism of traditional U.S. English/one other language.
- This is a critical tool for authentically inclusive and empowering multiracial, multicultural, multi-issue movements for social change in the U.S.

Translation is the act of rendering written messages in one language into another language, without losing any of its content, meaning or intent. Translation applies to written documents, while interpretation refers to verbal communication.

Comprehensive Written Translation in Organizing

What is it?

Comprehensive written translation is simply the idea of collecting every single document that is related to a program or event, and producing it in both English and in all the languages of the participants. For example, it's fairly common practice for meetings in the U.S. for English-speaking participants to receive full packets of reading materials in their language. Often the only materials available for speakers of other languages are copies of the draft agenda and a one-page summary of the rest of the materials. Comprehensive translation efforts by grassroots groups in the U.S. are best used when they strive to generate original materials in both English and other languages, not only writing in English and then translating into other languages.

How it works:

- Be sure to establish a relationship with outside translators, so they know as much as possible about your work and the purpose of your translations. Each translation done by an outside contractor should be reviewed by a native speaker on staff; contractors are not immune from mistakes in terminology, tone, and meaning.

Comprehensive Written Translation in Organizing

- Make sure to ask permission to translate something not written by your group. The author may already have it ready in the other language, or may allow you to translate it under only certain conditions.
- Be sure to name the translator with the author's by-line, which helps other organizations locate skilled translators, and also keeps translators accountable for their work.

When It's OK To Use:

- At all times, in fact the more the better.

What you need:

- Time and effort for organizations to analyze the whole collection of their materials, and to plan a system for producing them in more than one language.
- Skilled translators: A good translator needs to be fully bilingual, think methodically, and have excellent writing skills. It is also preferable that the translator be a native speaker of the translation language. For example, a document translated into Spanish is best translated by a native-Spanish speaker/writer.
- Staff to coordinate translation through outside contractors, or qualified on-staff translators who are fairly compensated and have translation included in their job description.
- A budget for translation: both hiring outside contractors or staff time for translation needs financial support. A safe estimate for outside translation costs – as of 2002 – is approximately \$50/page, though prices vary by language and content. Also, as more translators begin entering the profession, prices will likely go down. However, an organization with talented in-house translators has a treasure on their hands.

The Upside:

- Comprehensive translation makes it easier for all members of the community to access the organization and provides further transparency and empowerment.
- Producing all its documents in the languages of its grassroots constituents makes a political statement that everyone deserves access to the same information, and puts participants on more equal ground.

The Downside:

- Translation is costly and time-consuming, and can be tricky to do right. As one major translation journal noted, "everybody has something to say about your copy," even years after the document has been published.

- Poorly translated documents can seriously hurt a group’s credibility and trust with an allied/immigrant community, and the printed document floating around can haunt them for years.

Contribution to Leadership Development:

- When all materials are available to everyone in the language of their choice, participants can more fully take part in the process, and makes everyone feel more welcomed and part of the whole group. Non-English speakers are better positioned to take on a leadership role within the multilingual group, as opposed to being passive listeners.

Multilingual Space

What is it?

A multilingual space is developed when there is a collective commitment by grassroots leaders who speak different languages with one another and share leadership roles, in both languages at all times. For example, the facilitators of a Spanish-English workshop might easily be Spanish-only speakers, or a combination of two trainers—one speaking only Spanish, and one speaking only English, who are able to jointly work together and lead the group through a workshop.

How it works:

It goes without saying that a multilingual space cannot happen without superb bi-directional / multi-directional simultaneous interpretation, yet this is not enough to make it a success. It also requires:

- A collective commitment by everyone in the group, the facilitators, and the organization, to fully bring both / all languages and cultures to a discussion.
- A shared political analysis of the way language and culture can be used to both empower and oppress, to include and exclude.
- Co-facilitation with bilingual and bicultural facilitators, who can lead the process in both languages, and who can draw out and reflect the group’s different cultural reference points.
- Comprehensive written translation, so that every single thing on paper for the group is produced fully in all represented languages.

When It’s OK To Use:

- Any setting where you would use simultaneous interpretation, such as community meetings and trainings.

Multilingual Space

What you need:

A multilingual space needs the same basic things needed for bi-directional simultaneous interpreting:

- Special interpreter equipment (with techies to manage it)
- Skilled and politically educated simultaneous interpreters
- Politically educated facilitators/trainers, preferably multilingual/multicultural
- Organizers committed to creating a multilingual space---from the get-go
- Preparation of all written materials in all languages, in advance
- Time for advance planning
- A budget to pay for the additional translation and interpretation costs

The Upside:

- Politically, multilingual space recognizes the imbalance of power and access between the speakers of the different languages in the group.
- Multilingual spaces uses language inclusion as a means to empower non-English speaking participants who are oppressed in our society, and to encourage the English-speaking participants to reflect on and alter the ways in which their language privilege makes them participants in this oppression.

The Downside:

- Very little: there is everything to be gained, and very little to lose.
- Some points to keep in mind in making it work:
- As important as it is to bring both Spanish and English to the table in multilingual space, it is also key to be conscious and intentional about including cultural references and norms from each participant group.
- Facilitators should anticipate the enormous diversity of experiences discussed in a multilingual space, and find ways for the group to make linkages between their unique backgrounds. Facilitators can gently remind participants to explain cultural or historical references in a group with vastly different backgrounds.

Contribution to Leadership Development:

- A multilingual space is where a non-English-speaking immigrant leader can most expansively use their leadership and cross-cultural skills.
- A multilingual space is inherently multicultural as well as multiracial: grassroots leaders of different races, cultures, and languages gain experience working together to build broad based alliances for social change.
- Undergoing the political education process for a multilingual space also helps groups recognize and integrate the diversity in the room, and can make the space more open for other marginalized and excluded groups.

Some Tips for Successful Interpretation at Meetings and Events

- Prepare your interpreter about terminology before the meeting. Be sure to check in with interpreters about the subject matter of the event and some background on the participants so they can familiarize themselves with relevant vocabulary. Make sure that the interpreter receives in advance copies of materials to be used in the meeting to review in preparation for interpreting. An ethical interpreter will also let you know immediately if the subject matter is out of their scope of knowledge.
- Interpreters should work in pairs. In the meeting itself, interpreters should be contracted to work in pairs, alternating every 20-30 minutes. This is part of what makes interpreting so costly, as each interpreter is paid an hourly or daily rate. Be advised that any knowledgeable and ethical interpreter will avoid, if not flatly refuse, an interpreting assignment without a co-interpreter.
- Conduct a brief interpretation orientation with participants before starting a meeting. The agenda should allow the interpreters to give a brief orientation covering how the interpreting will work, how the audio equipment works, where to go for technical difficulties, establish some hand signals for the interpreters to request folks to talk louder, or slow down, and answer any initial questions.
- Interpreters should never participate in the meeting! No matter how tense or chaotic the discussion, the interpreter must simply render what's being said into the other language, without interrupting, editing, or adding anything.
- Interpreters should honor the message of participants. When interpreting, interpreters render everything in the same voice as the speaker, in first person. In addition, interpreters must interpret absolutely everything that the speaker says. It can be useful to have a bilingual person monitoring the interpreter for completeness and accuracy.
- Be clear about fees and payment beforehand. Interpreters usually serve as independent contractors and will need to submit an invoice with their tax information. While interpreting costs may seem extremely expensive for a small organization, the success of a multilingual gathering will only be as good as its interpreters. Poor, or unskilled volunteer interpreters can ruin an otherwise well-planned event.
- Designate an "equipment techie" to monitor equipment used by the participants, facilitators, and interpreters. It is useful to have a "techie" to hand out and collect equipment for the session, and to observe the group and watch for folks who are fiddling with their equipment and looking "lost," then go offer them fresh receivers, etc.

Some Tips for Successful Interpretation at Meetings and Events

- Replace your batteries. Most interpretation equipment takes 9 Volt batteries, which last roughly 8-16 hours in the devices. A tip: the battery that needs changing most will often be the interpreter transmitter!
- Conduct an in-room sound check before the event. “Techies” should test the equipment to see if new batteries are needed, or to determine if the room has spots in the room where the transmission of the interpreting equipment does not work.
- Love and care for interpreters. Make sure that interpreters have access to water and snacks (and restrooms when possible). If they are to interpret through a “working lunch,” time should be planned in for them to eat, too. In gatherings with overnight stays, it’s a good idea to put the interpreters in single, quiet rooms as even mild sleep deprivation can significantly lower an interpreter’s performance during the day and jeopardize the success of the meeting.