A glimpse into the life of a consultant interpreter in Israel

Life is not easy for a consultant interpreter in a country where everyone is convinced he/she would make a better Prime Minister than the one in office, and many people speak foreign languages.

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"No, thanks, we don't need interpreters; we have already ordered 100 earphones...."

"Why 2 interpreters? We only have ONE speaker/listener for the entire day..."

"One interpreter will do. The clients are elderly and will, surely, tire and wish to leave in the middle... (And what if one of them stays?) Well, he'll probably fall asleep..."

These are but a few of the arguments one may hear when dealing with a prospective client in Israel.

Life is not easy for the consultant interpreter in a country where everyone is convinced he/she would make a better Prime Minister than the one in office, and many people speak foreign languages. That is why quite a number of organisers tend to think that most international events don't need interpretation which is "superfluous, costly and a nuisance" anyway.

Even more, the English language is regarded as a sine qua non of being educated. It is considered 'embarrassing' not to be able to understand or speak English, since it is one of the main requirements to pass university entrance exams and read textbooks. Many professionals won't admit that they find it difficult to understand a full day of lectures in English, particularly because they are familiar with the specialised terminology and jargon, but not so much with everyday language. The various foreign accents of the speakers do not help matters. The organisers, ever ready to cut financial corners wherever possible, leap at the opportunity to avoid booking interpretation from English into Hebrew. In contrast, where other languages such as Spanish, German or French are concerned, they tend to agree that interpreters should be booked.

Once you have overcome the language barrier, you still have to convince the client that conference interpretation is, in fact, a real profession that requires many years of study and training, as well as vast experience in the field. Take into account that all those who visited Tante Juliette in France for 3 months or spent a whole summer as "mochileros" in South America, think they are sufficiently versed in the local language to be able to offer their services as full fledged, inexpensive (and "professional") interpreters.

These "volunteers" also hamper us in our (often futile) attempts to convey the simple idea that minimal work conditions are required in order to offer quality interpretation: a legible screen, background material ahead of time, a functioning sound system, a direct view of the room, eye contact with the speaker, etc. We are often considered bothersome and overly demanding (dare we
say spoiled?) and have to spend valuable time convincing clients of the importance of such details. Sometimes it is discouraging that we are forced to make efforts to explain issues that are self evident in many other places in the world.

A similar difficulty turns up in court interpreting: unless a rich client with powerful lawyers is involved and pays the bill, the authorities are unwilling to pay a decent fee for interpretation services. As a result, it turns out that the "interpreter" is someone who happens to speak the same language as the plaintiff/defendant or the witness without being duly fluent in Hebrew or Arabic, Israel's official languages and hence the two working languages in Israel's courts. It goes without saying that the absence of professional interpreters may jeopardize the civil rights of the defendant or the witness.

Recently, however, a new window of opportunity has opened! Since it is typical for Israelis to have many relatives abroad, people are now requesting SI in weddings, Bar - Mitzvah parties and other family gatherings where the ceremony and most of the speeches are in Hebrew. You can be assured that the foreign guests are grateful to be able to follow the proceedings in their own language.

Perhaps the best testimony to language diversity in this country is that the Israeli region of AIIC (a small piece in the colorful mosaic that is our association) has only 25 members but covers a range of 10 languages: Hebrew, English, French, German, Spanish, Russian, Italian, Portuguese, Ukrainian and... Yiddish.

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