

Simultaneous Translation of English
to English Can Streamline
Scientific Meetings!

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During my career I've attended many international meetings. Undoubtedly many such meetings create lasting friendships but they may also prove anticlimatic, as sometimes happens when finally meeting longtime correspondents.

Recently, I've suggested that information encounter groups might make meetings more productive.¹ However, there is an area of improvement that no one to my knowledge has yet addressed. Even the excellent congresses organized in Dahlem may not yet deal with this problem.² I call this the scientific version of the blind leading the blind.

There can be no doubt that English has become the main language of international scientific conferences. But it is sad and ludicrous that so many of our non-English-speaking colleagues do not realize that while their written English is understandable, their spoken English is less than comprehensible. I recently witnessed a group of East European scientists, none of whom felt comfortable speaking English (and with good reason), trying to listen to a South East Asian scientist speaking English even I could not comprehend. Since I pride myself on being a good listener to all sorts of English dialects, I know that these non-English-speaking scientists must have been in agony.

No wonder such meetings are so exhausting. Speaker after speaker is permitted to drone on in absolutely incomprehensible English. It is well-known that simultaneous translation, e.g., from Japanese to English or from Russian to English, is almost useless in such conferences. The expense is not trivial and the results usually bad.

I once was involved in a South American meeting where simultaneous translation from English to Spanish was taking place. Having observed the disastrous impact of incomprehensible simultaneous (sic) translation (sic) on the audience I arranged to have my talk translated into Spanish in advance. I worked with the translator (a professional information scientist) to insure technical accuracy. I then told the conference translator she should read my Spanish version. She said that this was an insult to her ability as a simultaneous translator and that she would lose face with her colleagues if she read my draft. I then informed her that if she didn't use the prepared translation I would read my talk in Spanish and give out copies of the English version to the English-speaking delegates. She quickly gave in and was subsequently rewarded with praise of her magnificent job of simultaneous translation.

What I am going to suggest now is that we use simultaneous English to

English translation. Each non-English speaker would rehearse his talk by reciting it to a dictation machine. He would then help transcribe the spoken version. Of course this would be unnecessary if he is willing to prepare all this in advance and stick to the prepared version. If this approach is not feasible then the meeting chairman should simply have the good sense to ask some member of the conference, in advance, to read the prepared paper for our non-English English-speaking colleague. This requires interviewing each speaker to determine how well he speaks English.

I know that much of this must seem cruel or ruthless. After all, most Americans and Englishmen do not know a word of Japanese, Russian, or other languages. But I believe we are long past the point of discussing the importance of using English at meetings, so why torment each other. The fact is that the importance of oral exercises (elocution) in learning English is not adequately stressed in foreign countries. It is particularly difficult for our Japanese or Slavic friends to learn English diction but the barrier is as much psychological as physical.

I once remember listening to a speaker who was an Alsatian with a Franco-German accent. He had discovered the term "mouthpiece" used figuratively to mean "voice" or "spokesman". The first time he said that our professional society should become the *mousepiece* of the profession, there were mild chuckles. The second time there was loud laughter, which he attributed to his humorous

remarks. The third and final time he said "*mousepiece*" the audience of 300 scientists was in a state of uncontrollable laughter.

Well, I think it is time we not only became our brothers' keepers but their mouthpieces as well. Maybe I will be accused of Yankee imperialism for this suggestion, but it's worth the accusation if it helps improve future meetings.

Postscript and Apologia

Having written the essay above, I somehow felt that I had not adequately indicated how much I appreciate the difficulties faced by our foreign colleagues. I was reminded of a time in 1960 when I was asked to speak at a seminar of the computing center of the University of Mexico in Mexico City. My host, Sergio Beltran, had been telling me for two days why he considered it important for Spanish-speaking countries to have the capability of translating English into Spanish by computer. In spite of this he assured me that the seminar group would understand my talk in English. I was suspicious of his assertion on the basis of an earlier experience with a class of medical students. Consequently, I went to the library and using an English-Spanish dictionary wrote out my talk in Spanish having studied the language in high school for several years. I read my talk and received the usual round of applause. In closing the session Dr. Beltran thanked me graciously but added, "You see, mechanical translation from English to Spanish can be understood."

1. Garfield E. Information encounter groups. *Current Contents*® (CC®) No. 23, 7 June 1976, p. 5-6.
2. Anon. Must congresses really be so boring? A new kind of scientific conference. *Die Zeit* (No. 8) 14 February 1975.