Revisiting the ABCs of interpreting: The question of retour

Interpreting into a non-native language, in this case English, presents specific problems for the conscientious interpreter. Continuing professional development in this area is in demand.

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Having A, B and/or C languages seems normal to interpreters; moreover there are practical reasons for them. The needs of multilingual events often cannot be met by interpreters working into their A language from their Cs. The absence of native speakers with a good understanding of a number of international languages means that many of us have a retour: as the French term for ‘return’ implies, we work back into a B from our A language.

This is the case at the United Nations for the Arabic and Chinese booths. In the European Institutions, the sheer number of working languages (24) means that many booths provide interpretation from their language as well as into it. This practical approach has determined developments with respect to other languages and markets too. For example, on the private market, clients may prefer to have three bilingual interpreters rather than two English As and two French As. This is particularly the case in contexts where English has become the main language of communication: organisers prefer to have interpreters working for the most part into their A who are able to interpret occasional statements in languages other than English.

Tradition and market trends mean that there is a clear need for English Bs. It occurred to us a couple of years ago that our experience of running the University of Westminster MA, Conference Interpreting, might translate into London-based short courses for colleagues with English B who would enjoy time out of working life to examine the particular challenges of their work into English. In thinking about these issues, it's a good idea to go back to basics and consider just what it means to have an English B. The AIIC definition of a B is necessarily brief and general:

“A language other than the interpreter’s native language, of which she or he has a perfect command and into which she or her works from one or more of her or his other languages. Some interpreters work into a ‘B’ language in only one of the two modes of interpreting.”

It covers all possible B languages and ranks them in between those we understand completely and those which are native, implying that your full command of a language involves a full understanding of its vagaries as well as an ability to deliver a clear message in it. When you move on to specific Bs, there are other things to consider.

To turn to English B, there are recurring problems that can be usefully addressed in a ‘time out of work’ course. The most common areas of discussion have proved to be prepositions, tenses, register,
intonation and pronunciation. Interpreters working into a B have some grammatical room for manoeuvre but frequent mistakes with prepositions or tenses can distract listeners. Renewed awareness of, say, phrasal verbs and the use of the present perfect can sharpen delivery, as can a reminder of the difference between the simple past and the present perfect. It is also good to bear in that mind that English readily lends itself to short, direct sentences. That can make it easier to keep a grip on the target message, using your voice to help convey it. Intonation is useful is indicating priorities, respect, scepticism and the like. As for pronunciation, the main concern is to deliver a clear message. There is no need to try to sound like a native speaker – in fact having an accent can lend a certain authenticity to delivery, as long as it does not impede understanding. A few days of privileging such consideration gives colleagues ways of refreshing their English B once they are back in the booth at work.

[i] Article 7 of the Regulation governing admissions and language classification: /admissions-procedure

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