

# A FEW THOUGHTS ON 'B' LANGUAGES

## What is a 'B' language?

I should start by defining the precise nature, in the conference interpretation context, of a 'B' language. We are talking about an active language which should, in my opinion, be useable in consecutive and simultaneous modes. Some in the profession accept that the C>B combination may not be offered, or that it may cover consecutive interpretation only; the author's own position is that a professional active language should be such from all other languages in the interpreter's combination.

The AIIC definition of a 'B' language is as follows, although I feel that the word 'perfect' is poorly chosen in this context:

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

When speaking here about an 'A' language or mother tongue, I am assuming an outstanding level of linguistic ability and depth, as it is not enough simply to be a national of a particular country to lay claim to the conference interpreter's mastery of that language. It follows that certain 'B' languages will be superior, as vectors of expression and argument, to the average 'A' language.

We should not forget either that 'biactive' and 'bilingual' are not synonymous ; true bilinguals (cultural, functional, emotional, linguistic...) are extremely rare, and their bilingualism does not *necessarily* make them gifted interpreters. To quite a purely empirical example, of the 35 staff interpreters currently working at NATO Headquarters, all of whom are biactive, only a handful would be classed as AIIC 'double A's.

It is also quite common to encounter aspiring interpreters who do not actually possess a true 'A' language. Despite a background which may well seem propitious to bilingualism, they in fact possess two 'B' languages, neither of which is of a depth or level required for conference interpreting, but which may serve perfectly adequately in other situations. In such cases, a career as a conference interpreter is, sadly, not usually a realistic aspiration.

It is also possible to encounter interpreters who are truly capable of working into three languages, but this is an extremely rare phenomenon – It is perhaps wise to be sceptical of many such claims, as they often (but not always) go hand in hand with lower quality interpretation. It is true to say that 'Fools rush in where angels fear to tread', and that conscientious professionals know their limits, even if their clients do not!

As an aside, no account will be taken here of the 'retour dépannage' as still taught by some interpreting schools, since working into a 'C' language at conference level is, quite rightly, not something our profession encourages, as it tends to devalue both the practitioner and his/her craft. In clear terms, our options are to provide high-quality professional communication or remain silent...

So, a 'B' language as practised at the highest level of international conferences (eg. OECD, World Bank, Council of Europe, NATO, various national ministries etc.) is a second language, the mastery of which can be assessed at a level slightly below that

of a conference interpreter's mother tongue (say between 5% and 15%, although of course it is invidious to attempt to quantify such matters using figures - see Annex 2 below). This mother tongue should itself be exceptionally rich and flexible, clearly surpassing the quality offered by an average, even university-educated, mother-tongue speaker.

A slight foreign accent is acceptable in the 'B' language, so long as it in no way hampers comprehension. Indeed, recent surveys among users of interpretation indicate that accuracy, consistency and voice quality are more prized than the lack of accent. Furthermore, a very small number of errors (such as genders in Latin languages or tonic accents in English) can be tolerated, depending upon context, as it is of course accepted that a 'B' language is not a mother tongue, even if it may be extremely close thereto.

It is even true to say that the BBC tends increasingly to prefer **short** actor voice-overs or interpretation into English featuring a slight foreign accent. The feeling here is apparently that source-language accent increases authenticity and listener confidence...

This being said, it is essential to remember that, for the client, listening at length to virtually any 'B' language interpretation is tiring, as the vast majority of 'B's require that the client compensate (to a greater or lesser extent) for lower linguistic quality.

It is of course impossible to establish a figure to indicate what proportion of 'C' languages can realistically be converted into a 'B', but it is important to understand what may appear obvious: unlike an 'A' language, a 'B' can be created, albeit at the cost of much time and effort. In my 18 years of experience as a teacher of conference interpretation, somewhere between 15% and 20% of trainee interpreters could at some stage, if well advised and guided, aspire to adding a second active language to their combination. The idea of adding a 'B' is, then, a perfectly

acceptable professional ambition, even if it remains unrealistic for those interpreters who do not already possess a very strong 'C' which they wish to enhance.

## **Why seek to acquire a second active language ?**

Now that we know more or less what a 'B' language is, let us look at the ways in which it can be used, and its general value to a conference interpreter.

- It is well known that, in basic terms, interpreters can be divided into two main categories :

- \* the 'classic' profile, where the interpreter possesses one active mother tongue, and a variable number of passive 'C' languages

- \* what is termed a 'biactive' profile, whereby the practitioner possesses two active languages, and possibly one or several 'C' languages

In today's world, where trade and globalization reign supreme, and their main vector is an impoverished and bastardized version of the English language, time is money, so where interpretation can be dispensed with, that is often the option chosen. However, for reasons linked either to the technical nature of conferences or of politics and prestige, conference interpretation remains a prized skill which will always bring value added in the many situations where subtle and complex communication is truly necessary, and is recognized as such. In addition, many conference delegates are able to follow debates in 'English' for a short time or when the level of language remains simple. However, they will soon feel the need to tune in to the interpretation, and will remain glued to their headsets so long as (and this is of course a big 'if!') this interpretation is good.

The international market serviced by conference interpreters splits more or less into two sectors : the private and that of the International Organizations or state structures.

In the case of some International Organizations, working practices still require interpreters with several (at least two and more usually three) passive languages. The main Organizations concerned here are the EU and the UN. This being said, these employers increasingly require that interpreters with an 'exotic' or 'new European' mother tongue, offer a biactive 'aller-retour' combination (almost always including English), the 'retour' being used on relay as the basis for all other booths to work into their respective 'A' languages. In this scenario, it is of supreme importance that the 'B' language used be of an extremely high quality, for obvious reasons.

For most other areas where meetings are held and decisions taken, the need for communication goes hand in hand with those of cost-effectiveness, speed and reliability, all of which increase the demand for biactive interpreters.

For the reasons quoted, it is likely that the latter model will continue to grow at the expense of the former. This trend is particularly evident in the private and industry markets : in Paris, Brussels and Geneva, and also in the Netherlands, for example, there continues to be a strong demand for competent (this being the operative word!) professional interpreters offering the French-English biactive combination.

In other large markets, such as the USA, it is actually quite rare for any combination other than A/A or A/B to be employed. The unfortunate side effect of such a market configuration is that many so-called 'B' languages offered are of poor quality, as the pressure on interpreters to offer a second active language is very high. A similar phenomenon applies to those English 'B' languages that are added to interpreters' combinations in response to market pressure, where 'B' languages other than English are not sought-after.

In Europe, Sub-Saharan Africa and Canada, to name but some examples, State employers such as the various Ministries and International Organizations are actively in search of competent conference interpreters who offer the language of the country and, usually, active English in addition.

So, for those interpreters with two languages at a high working level, the biactive option is attractive. It may well be that the interpreter possesses other, passive languages, and of course there is no reason why the two interpreting modes (C>A/B, B>A/A>B) cannot be combined or alternated, in order to serve a maximum number of clients and meeting configurations. This being said, maintaining the linguistic level of two active and at least one passive languages simultaneously, is an exceptionally demanding task !

However, for the interpreter offering only one 'classic' active and two equally 'classic' passive languages, it is increasingly difficult to earn a living solely from conference interpretation. There remains the option of learning a so-called 'exotic' 'C' language, but how to ensure that the chosen tongue is and will remain in demand by more than one customer, and how to learn this tongue to a sufficient professional level while practising the profession ?

The very phrase 'adding a language' (a recent concept which springs from the exigencies of certain interpreting markets and the growth of various International Organizations) seems necessarily to imply a dilution of quality, and to encourage the concept of language as a mere assembly of linguistic constructions or working tool – it is far far more!

In conclusion, within the fluctuating political and commercial circles of today's world, and despite the matching vicissitudes of our profession, top quality biactive interpretation remains a highly-prized product and continues to offer a satisfactory livelihood to its practitioners.

However, given today's omnipresent budgetary pressures and the fact that interpreting schools continue to provide the profession with new blood which more than compensates for retirements, quality is increasingly becoming a sine qua non, to the benefit of most parties concerned! This is yet another reason to acquire, after lengthy reflection and in full knowledge of all pitfalls and requirements, a truly solid 'B' language which will garner the respect of both clients and colleagues.

Before turning to my next section, I thought it would be instructive and amusing to illustrate my reasoning with a small and random sample (with no scientific basis) of the AIIC handbook, concerning the percentage of conference interpreters offering a 'B' language.

The details of this sample may be found in Annex 2 at the end of this document.

### **What are the basic conditions for learning to acquire, or improve, a second active language ?**

- the 'A' language is beyond all reproach
  - the first passive language, of which it is hoped to make a 'B' language, is already uncommonly strong and rich
  - in this language, any non-native accent is either non-existent or extremely slight
  - the interpreter in question has lived, or is prepared to live for **at least one year** in a country where the target language has mother-tongue status
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- the interpreter is ready to work assiduously, both in and outside the booth, to establish the neuronal pathways required by the desired linguistic combination. This is a matter of repeating in some part the interpreter training undergone initially,

which of course requires many tens of hours of booth practice specifically with the new combination.

## **What are the steps to be undertaken, and the traps to avoid, for the addition or improvement of a second active language ?**

This is a matter of strengthening the language, and the social and cultural baggage that goes with it, to a level where a cultured meeting delegate will find in the interpreter's thought and expression a reflection of his/her own. The delegate will feel common ground at every level with the surrogate voice, given the certainty of a shared cultural and psychological experience. Once this level of symbiosis is reached, the delegate will willingly entrust his/her thought and argument to the interpreter's skills, and happily follow the subsequent interpretation, and the profession will have made a further step forward.

### **a) Here are a few useful exercises :**

1)

Spend many hours in the booth shadowing an able and fluent speaker of the target language. Using MP3 files, audio cassettes or CDs, choose speakers with an excellent mastery of their mother tongue, without strong regional accents, and with a gift of oratory which allows full expression of the native cadences of the language. Shadowing initially involves repeating the words of the speaker without modification. This allows the interpreter's brain and speech organs to reproduce the sounds and rhythms of the 'B' language without conscious mental effort, and begins to create the 'physiological memory' acquired by children speaking their own tongue. This will require many tens of hours of actual speech production.

This is an excellent exercise at many levels, as (this being a consensus among recent neuro-linguistic and neurological expert studies) shadowing involves some 80% of the neuro-linguistic operations involved in simultaneous interpretation, the only factor missing being that of language transfer. While shadowing, it is useful to experiment with differing levels of time lag, introducing a certain elasticity to reflect the fluctuating demands imposed by the speaker. At the same time, gradually introduce expressions of your own, allowing for varying semantic distance from the speaker. All this being said, the prime goal of the exercise is to accustom both brain and mouth to the flawless and (eventually) effortless production of the sounds and cadences of what is a foreign language.

The goal here is to establish a new network of neuronal pathways, this being an essential stage in the interpreter's acquisition of each new language combination. It should not be thought that all lessons learned in the successful mastery of one combination can simply be transposed to another – many hours of actual practice are required for each language pair, and there are no shortcuts!

In order to approach, in the 'B' language, the facility which characterises an experienced interpreter's work into his/her mother tongue, it is also important to train both voice and brain to ensure acceptable linguistic production while mental processing efforts are required elsewhere. To this end, it is useful while shadowing to practice (for example) writing numerical sequences involving fixed gradations, which can then be self-checked after the exercise, along with the recorded interpretation. Using increasingly complex sequences is doubly fruitful, and the goal, evidently, is to guarantee an acceptable level of linguistic production even while mental processing efforts are devoted to other, more noble, tasks such as actually understanding and transposing concepts and ideas

These exercises are also very useful while practising interpretation into an 'A' language.

2)

Shadowing can do much to help a 'B' language accent, but some trace of accent will almost always remain with a language which is learned in adulthood; this is not in itself something to be avoided (see above). In all languages there are a handful of sounds (depending upon the language concerned, and upon the native tongue of the practitioner) which a non-native speaker finds it physically difficult to reproduce: the 'th' or the '..aw', and tonic accents in English (please beware of the word 'development!'); in French such sounds as '..ouille', 'u', 'en', 'in', 'an' and 'on'; in Spanish the 'jota' or double 'r' etc. etc.

As in all things, it is important here to know oneself and one's own weaknesses, and then to practice until the difficult sounds can be reproduced faithfully and with a measure of automaticity.

Most such difficulties are physiological in nature and require gradual adaptation of the speech organs, while others are more psychological, an example being the English word 'law' (and the related family of sounds) as pronounced by most francophones, who unconsciously and usually unsuccessfully endeavour to speak the word as it is written, even though a similar sound exists in French.

3)

While measuring his/her growing abilities in the new 'B' language, it is worth the interpreter checking for the moment when sufficient proficiency has been acquired for linguistic production to be of an acceptable level (syntax, accent, grammar) even while the mouth is on 'automatic pilot', as the brain is engaged in processing at another level. As is so often the case in interpretation, this is in effect a virtuous circle, as once this certainty is present, confidence and therefore interpretation quality will make a quantum leap forward, and the interpreter can actually begin to analyse and transpose ideas, free of any concern that the language vector is of insufficient quality to convey the ideas desired and understood.

A word of warning here: only begin any C>B learning process once the A>B

combination is solidly acquired.

4)

As the mother tongue identity and vocabulary are largely instilled and defined during secondary schooling, it is essential that this process be replicated for a second active language. The canon of general and basic specialised knowledge in this language will be lacking in all but those raised bilingually and bi-culturally.

Time should be spent acquiring this vocabulary in such areas as geography, history, chemistry, maths, physics, history of art, literature etc. etc. To this end it may be useful to acquire secondary school textbooks in the relevant language. Such works not only contain the required information at an appropriate linguistic level, but will also be familiar to delegates with this mother tongue, whose confidence when listening to a 'B' language interpreter will in this way be greatly enhanced.

Experience consistently shows that the most striking gaps in 'B' language vocabulary are in the fields of geographical terms, and the history of art and culture ; it is essential that some time be spent making good these knowledge gaps in the chosen language. In these areas, guesswork does not pay off, and again there are no shortcuts!

5)

Once the basic linguistic knowledge is acquired, it is important to remain abreast of social, cultural and sporting trends and their expression in one of those countries where the chosen 'B' is lingua franca. Films, television and sporting publications can be useful allies here.

6)

Another golden rule : spend time regularly and for as long as possible, in those countries where the 'B' language is spoken, and visit museums, exhibitions, and

sporting and cultural events. It is often possible to arrange to work for a year in such a country, an advantageous scenario being to offer one's services, as a qualified conference interpreter, as reader or assistant in an interpretation school in the chosen country. This allows the 'B' language to be studied at university level, surrounded by interpreters and the appropriate teaching resources. In addition, it is sometimes possible to agree a type of barter system, whereby lessons are provided in exchange for access to the school's booths and databases, or even to some classes.

7)

Carry a small notebook (or dictaphone) at all times, in which can be noted any and all expressions, metaphors, images, quotations, neologisms, clichés and elegant phrases which will serve to enhance the nascent 'B' language. The idea here is to raise the general level of expression and wealth of vocabulary available in the acquired language. All such finds should be learned by heart and must become second nature so that, little by little, it will become possible systematically to reject the first word that comes to mind in the booth, and opt for the second or even third, always aiming for a higher register and a better match between thought and word. This is how a workaday second language becomes an exceptional (and therefore a true) 'B'.

8)

Choose an outstanding speech in the target language (in the case of English, opt for either the American or the British version, and remain consistent once this choice is made) and memorise a sentence a day, writing it down and repeating it aloud as many times as is necessary, until it can be reproduced without conscious intellectual effort. Stop only once the entire speech has been internalised. In this way, it is again possible to appropriate some small part of the cadence and genius of the new active language.

9)

Spend time on flexibility exercises ('formulations multiples'), involving rapid on-sight

multiple reformulations of complex target language texts, digging deep into your reserves of knowledge of grammar, syntax and vocabulary...

Throughout this training and practising process, it is important to remember the '70:30 – 30:70' language rule, whereby differing proportions of the interpreter's intellectual capacity are devoted to understanding and speaking, as a function of the language combination being exercised. As a rough rule of thumb, an A>B interpretation sees some 30% of the available brain power devoted to understanding, and 70% to reformulating in the target language, while the reverse is true for a B>A interpretation. This is very obviously a simplification, as we are really speaking here about a linguistic and neurological continuum, with as many scenarios as there are speaker/language/interpreter combinations.

**b) Most languages contain, as potential 'B's, certain specific difficulties which lie in wait to trap the unwitting 'young' interpreter:**

Pay great attention to the question of register, as it is well-nigh impossible to judge this with native or instinctive accuracy in a second active language. The best solution here is always to opt for a slightly less familiar expression, or one of apparently slightly higher register, than the original. Such considerations apply particularly to eulogies, to humour, to slang and to insulting language, and it is essential to exercise great care when interpreting into a 'B' language. Appreciation of register will come with increasing immersion in a society where the 'B' language is spoken and is also a useful fruit of extensive shadowing, but will remain less reliable than in the interpreter's mother tongue.

It is best to exercise a preference for simple and clear phrases and expressions, without

giving in to the beginner's temptation of sprinkling the 'B' language interpretation with pretentious, old-fashioned, familiar or otherwise unusual usages. The higher (s)he tries to reach in a second language, a fortiori with metaphors, similes and images, the more likely it is that even a competent interpreter will fail to pull off the desired linguistic coups, with resulting egg on face !

Please do not labour under the misapprehension that a handful of high-flown phrases, learned conscientiously by heart and injected more or less appositely into your interpretation, will pull the wool over the eyes of either customers or colleagues. On the contrary, even if correctly couched in themselves (and this is far from a given), such expressions will simply serve to annoy the listener by imposing constant changes of register, and highlight the poverty of the remaining and natural 'B' language expressions.

Remember that, when working from your mother tongue into a 'B' language, you no doubt effortlessly comprehend the original, but this does not guarantee that your second active language is sufficiently strong to enable you to convey all this meaning with equal facility!

The golden rule, then, is : « Keep it simple, stupid ! » Use your second working language with sobriety, clarity and intelligence, knowing and respecting your own limits. Remember that, in the words of the Swan of Avon: « Striving to better, oft we mar what's well » \*. In this way you will come to swell the ranks of competent and professional conference interpreters, you will be respected and fulfilled in the exercise of your profession, you will be able to fulfill the moral and professional contract with your customer and you will add your individual stone to the edifice of a world where communication serves the onward march of all mankind....

Chris Guichot de Fortis

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(July 2007, updated January 2014)

## ANNEX ONE – B LANGUAGES IN AIIC

In 2013, from a total sample of 1793 AIIC interpreters, the overall proportion of those offering:

- one or two 'B' languages: 67% (75% in 2011, 68% in 2008)
- two 'A' languages: 11%.

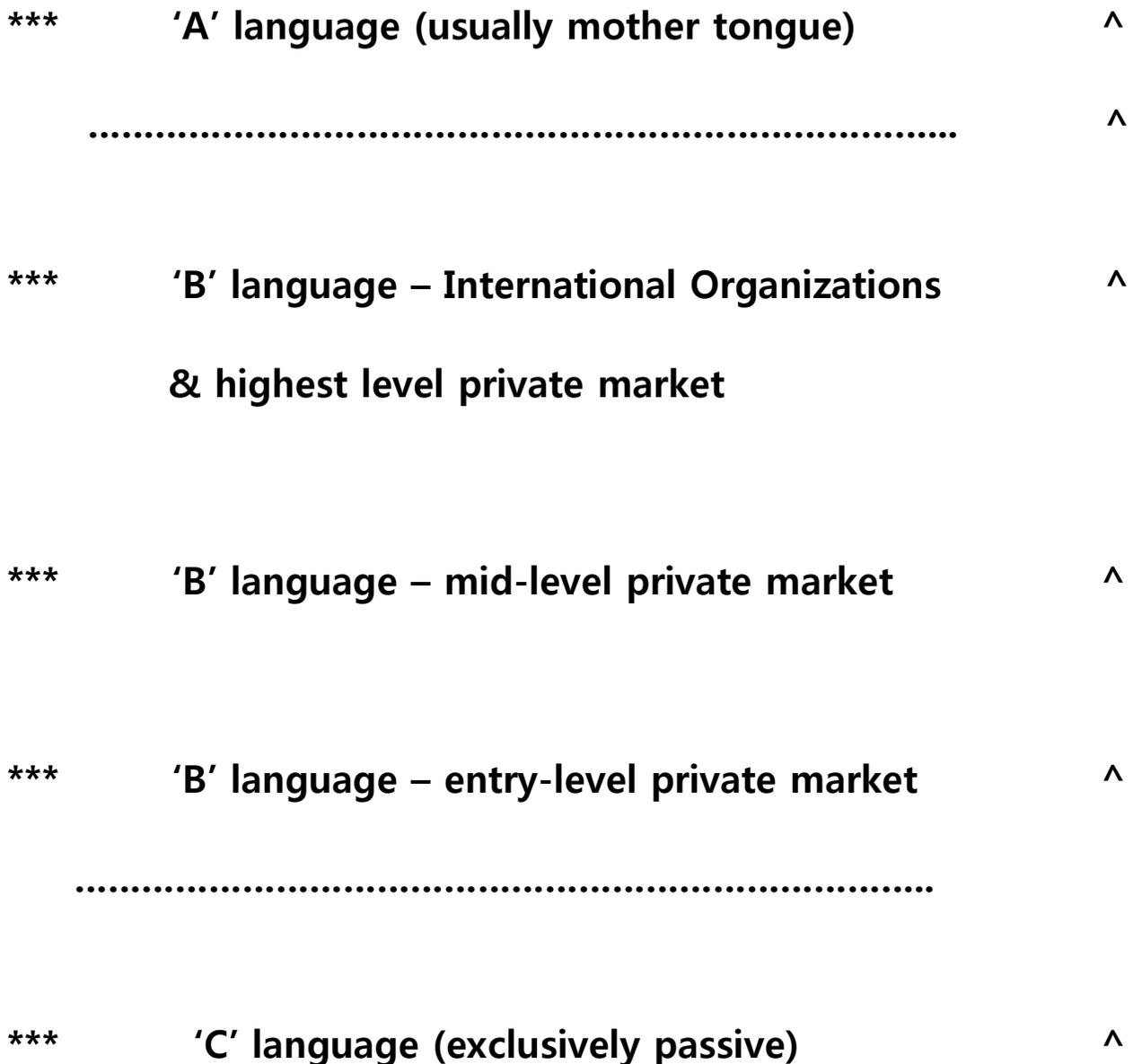
Average total percentage of biactives for sampled cities and countries: 78%

The breakdown, by country or city, is as follows (in brackets – number of AIIC interpreters in each location) :

	<u>2013</u>	<u>2011</u>	<u>2008</u>		<u>2013</u>	<u>2011</u>	<u>2010</u>	<u>Overall</u>
<b>Austria (75)</b>	<b>64%</b>	<b>72%</b>	<b>65%</b>	<b>AA:</b>	<b>11%</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>75%</b>
<b>Berlin (76)</b>	<b>78%</b>	<b>80%</b>	<b>63%</b>	<b>AA:</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>85%</b>
<b>Brussels (355)</b>	<b>49%</b>	<b>49%</b>	<b>40%</b>	<b>AA:</b>	<b>6%</b>	<b>5%</b>	<b>5%</b>	<b>55%</b>
<b>Canada (134)</b>	<b>77%</b>	<b>82%</b>	<b>72%</b>	<b>AA:</b>	<b>7%</b>	<b>5%</b>	<b>4%</b>	<b>84%</b>
<b>Geneva (210)</b>	<b>62%</b>	<b>73%</b>	<b>54%</b>	<b>AA:</b>	<b>12%</b>	<b>12%</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>74%</b>
<b>London (110)</b>	<b>66%</b>	<b>73%</b>	<b>62%</b>	<b>AA:</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>6%</b>	<b>6%</b>	<b>74%</b>
<b>Madrid (44)</b>	<b>52%</b>	<b>64%</b>	<b>63%</b>	<b>AA:</b>	<b>16%</b>	<b>18%</b>		<b>68%</b>
<b>Milan (30)</b>	<b>73%</b>	<b>82%</b>	<b>90%</b>	<b>AA:</b>	<b><u>20%</u></b>	<b>19%</b>		<b><u>93%</u></b>
<b>Munich (45)</b>	<b><u>84%</u></b>	<b>90%</b>	<b>89%</b>	<b>AA:</b>	<b>9%</b>	<b>4%</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b><u>93%</u></b>
<b>Paris (326)</b>	<b><u>83%</u></b>	<b>88%</b>	<b>82%</b>	<b>AA:</b>	<b>9%</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b>8%</b>	<b><u>92%</u></b>
<b>Rome (111)</b>	<b>60%</b>	<b>82%</b>	<b>75%</b>	<b>AA:</b>	<b><u>17%</u></b>	<b>22%</b>		<b>77%</b>
<b>Strasbourg (56)</b>	<b>75%</b>			<b>AA:</b>	<b>12%</b>			<b>87%</b>
<b>The Hague (31)</b>	<b>58%</b>	<b>70%</b>	<b>72%</b>	<b>AA:</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>7%</b>		<b>68%</b>
<b>USA (190)</b>	<b>59%</b>	<b>68%</b>	<b>60%</b>	<b>AA:</b>	<b>15%</b>	<b>12%</b>	<b>10%</b>	<b>74%</b>

## ANNEX TWO

**Below, the “active language continuum”, showing approximate levels of linguistic ability:**



**Below is a further way of attempting to classify the various levels of 'B' language:**

'Cabine pleine':  $A > B$ ,  $B > A$ ,  $C > A$  and  $C > B$  in both consecutive and simultaneous

.....

$A > B$ ,  $B > A$ ,  $C > A$  in both simultaneous and consecutive;  
 $C > B$  in consecutive only

.....

$A > B$ ,  $B > A$ ,  $C > A$  in both simultaneous and consecutive

.....

$B > A$ ,  $C > A$  in both simultaneous and consecutive;  
 $A > B$  in consecutive only

.....