

Advice for conference interpreters who are struggling in the booth: how to switch into 'degraded mode' to ensure 'basic minimum' performance.



The definition of 'degraded mode' (also termed 'fail-safe mode')

The expression 'degraded mode' refers to situations where all or part of a specific entity has to or should function without its usual human or material resources...

In order to react in the best way possible and return to normal, those playing vital roles are generally asked to **prepare to go into 'degraded mode'**.

Going into 'degraded mode' means attempting to provide **a service which is deemed indispensable, notwithstanding the unavailability of the full and customary range of reliable and appropriate resources...**

....**This requires the kind of preparation** which characterises the fields of learning and crisis management.

'Fail-Safe' mode is an automatic process to be found in the field of technology. In situations where a system breaks down, the Fail-Safe mode kicks in and is tasked with preventing any disastrous consequences... which may stem from single or repeated breakdowns. This does not mean that the system will no longer function - rather it simply means that the breakdowns or malfunctions will not worsen, thanks to this mechanism. It is, therefore, a safety mechanism. If a system within which a Fail-Safe mechanism has been triggered suffers failure, its state will not worsen beyond that which existed when the initial failure occurred and the Fail-Safe mechanism was triggered. (*translation of Wikipedia's article in French: 'Mode dégradé'*)

Dear new and prospective colleagues, I have decided to sit down at my computer once again to try and suggest a few techniques which will help you to survive when you're struggling, in the booth, to enable you to follow and do justice to the speaker...

In the first few years of your career, to a greater or lesser extent, you will not always be able to avoid some measure of failure. However, what is expected of you is that you will never fail to provide the 'basic minimum'. If you do not ensure this, you will not be honouring your contract (in both the literal and figurative sense of the word), and your continuity in the profession will actually be jeopardized.

Here my aim is to provide you with the skills and knowledge necessary so that, in the worst case scenario, you will not simply allow yourself to be carried away or overcome by the situation, but will rather make strategic and sensible choices. The aim is to help you to persevere and salvage the most from these difficult situations.

I was inspired by the term 'degraded mode', which means that cars (which I am pretty passionate about, as those who know me are well aware!), computers and engines of any kind can continue functioning to a lesser extent rather than completely breaking down.

To begin, I would like to look at three specific cases in simultaneous interpreting:

1)

The less experienced interpreter: perhaps you're struggling to follow everything the speaker is saying, because your professional, cognitive and intellectual background (including technique, languages, experience or resilience) is such that you cannot -yet - constantly guarantee the 'basic minimum' performance. Essentially your overall performance level is not yet up to scratch when faced with the multiplicity of speakers and topics day in, day out...

2)

Imperfect working conditions: when the stars align perfectly and when there are ideal conditions (including just the right sound, equipment, speed, density, level of technical difficulty, stress, language quality, etc), your professional development is such that as a conference interpreter you have everything that is needed to ensure you do a good job. However, on a particular day (or part thereof) some of these variables may not be present at a reasonable level, and you might have to make strategic decisions in real time.

3)

A particularly dense and complex speech/speaker: perhaps you are faced with a speaker who is reading, or whose speech is very fast, dense, technical, literary or full of cultural and linguistic nuances....in short, a speech which is very difficult to interpret at an appropriate

level. In this scenario, however, the interpreter IS capable of rendering the entire message precisely, skillfully and quickly. Nevertheless, for the average client the resulting interpretation would simply sound like an avalanche or tsunami of random words and ideas which would be well-nigh impossible to digest.

This happens more frequently when working from a concise language with a flexible structure (English, for example), into a language which features less flexible syntax and grammar, and whose speakers are more rigid in their modes of expression (an obvious example being my second language, French).

To take a simple mathematical example, we could count the number of words which need to be uttered by the interpreter to render the same ideas as in the original speech. You could, for example, have to move from a speed of 180 words a minute to 240 words a minute, simply to convey the same message.

This means that, even if the interpreter is actually technically and intellectually capable of working at such a speed, what was already a difficult speech to follow becomes impossible to digest for the clients. A conscientious interpreter who is committed to communicating well must here make the sensible and conscious decision to apply the 'degraded mode' technique, and the decision must be made rapidly.

In the above three scenarios, interpreters in the booth are forced to make a difficult choice between (1) immediately finding a survival strategy, and (2) giving up, failing, and seriously jeopardizing their freshly-embarked-upon careers, as well as undermining the speaker's message. Therefore, interpreters need to enable 'degraded mode', having of course learned it thoroughly and tested it extensively in advance.

Before going any further, I would like to add that, to a certain extent, all simultaneous interpretation is somewhere on the 'degraded mode' spectrum. Logically, apart from the occasional moment where there is nothing to improve on or add to the interpreted version, interpreters are always, at least partially, in 'degraded mode'. But the more competent and experienced you become, the more you are able to remain in control, the better prepared you are, the better you understand the topic in question, and the more often things go according to plan (psychologically, physically and technically speaking), and therefore the less you have to resort to 'degraded mode'.

In addition, as your skills grow, switching into 'degraded mode' will increasingly be the result of a careful and professional decision based on clear thought processes, as opposed to a knee-jerk course of action that you are forced to use in the heat of the moment.

Disclaimer : nowhere in this text do I wish to give the impression that it is acceptable, technically or ethically, to interpret badly or to only do half a job. The goal must always be to render ALL of the substance and ALL of the form of the speaker's argument. I would like

to reiterate the fact that here I am talking about cases where, for a whole host of reasons, it is temporarily impossible or inadvisable to ensure the quality interpretation expected from the profession and where a rational and conscious strategy is needed to avoid total breakdown, which is NEVER acceptable.

Managing, training and developing your brain to be an ‘interpreting machine’

In an ideal world, every interpreter would always be able to interpret every last idea and every last nuance in every speech, without forgetting to: respect the substance and form of the original, dodge the numerous traps, and deal dexterously with all the intricacies of the languages in question. Here I am reminded of the famous biblical quote ‘**one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law**’... In any case, humour, irony, technical terms, reasoning, emphasis, abbreviations, quotes, ambiguities and the like would all be expertly conveyed and you would leave the booth satisfied and with your head held high.

However, this will not always be the case, even for the best interpreters in the world. The younger you are and the more of a beginner you are in your career, the more often you will find it impossible to deliver a hundred percent on the legitimate demands of the delegates. This is when you will have to apply some of the techniques that I will now attempt to describe.

“[Practice and exercises] are a preparation, both physical and for your whole self, which will enable you to respond instinctively to any situation. It is only if...you are in a state of total readiness that you are free to be part of the action, which is new every moment. In other words, you do not have to come out of the situation to reflect and think ‘How can I do this?’: you do it at the moment the action arises, because your voice and brain are so free. Exercises should not make you more technical, but more free.” (Cicely Berry – ‘Voice and the Actor’ – John Wiley and Sons Inc, 1991)

I would like you to start thinking of your brain and the partnership between your brain and your body (mens sana in corpore sano!) as if it were a sophisticated and impressive sportscar, or a thoroughbred racehorse. Both demand careful pre-emptive and routine maintenance in order to prevent breakdown or injury, and to continuously guarantee that they realise their performance potential – which is far higher than that of a humdrum diesel family saloon or of a plodding drayhorse.

Then, if there is a defect (wherever the fault may lie) and the engine or the muscles begin to lose power, it is essential to go into ‘degraded mode’ in order to reach the nearest garage or veterinary clinic (which symbolizes the end of the day in the booth!).

To continue the automotive analogy (rather than flogging a dead horse!), the engine management system (i.e. your brain) will detect a temporary mechanical defect or sensor error affecting one part of the vehicle (for interpreters this may be the brain, the body or the psyche), and, in order to preserve the vehicle, the ‘backup mode’ will be switched on. A

few of the car's features will be shut down (depending on the nature of the failure), but the car will continue moving at the same or similar pace, and all should be well as long as too much is not demanded of it...

Taking this idea further, I would encourage you to start putting in place a plan and adopting habits and techniques that will allow you to manage your brain and your body, and that will also take into account how intense and unique are the efforts that you are asking of your brain and voice. In your everyday life and practices, put in place a systematic plan which trains, feeds, and indeed maintains your neurological, cognitive and vocal skills. You must understand that this cannot be improvised on the fly, and that your performance and your continuity in the profession depend upon it..

Think of your 'inner interpreting machine' as being capable of an overall performance level of X. In most cases, so long as you keep calm, you have the choice of dividing your cognitive efforts in the booth among several factors or variables. To illustrate this, I am going to liken your brain to the tyre on a rally car (yes, I know!). When you are behind the wheel of your rally car, you can ask this tyre to brake, accelerate or turn. You can also ask it to combine two or even all three of these things, depending on your ability and on the circumstances. However, regardless of what you do to share out the tasks demanded of the tyre, you cannot exceed the overall sum (fixed at X) of braking, accelerating and turning that the inflation pressure, rubber compound, width, aspect ratio, carcass, composition, age and temperature allow at a given time in specific circumstances.

In fact, it's actually even more complicated than this. If your skills and experience behind the wheel allow, you can go slightly beyond the performance level which we have termed X. You can reach, say, (X + 10%) by managing and controlling the slip angles engendered by going beyond the tyre's current limits. But if you ask your tyre to reach, say, (X + 30%), either the tyre will be left damaged, or you will end up going off the road and your rally (and perhaps your life as well!) will be over. Additionally, if your tyre has worn down or overheated (or if the rubber is not resistant enough for the conditions), it will also lose grip and begin to slide.

An able driver will take this into account, pace himself/herself, lower his/her expectations, and change trajectory so that the rubber holds out until the end of the event. The idea is to go at a speed which is slightly below the ideal speed...

This is exactly the same with your brain. You can ask it to listen, speak, understand a line of reasoning/an idea/a word, analyse ideas, render them and handle the console (these days, whether real or virtual), but you must always bear in mind the limits imposed upon you by your current stage of development as an interpreter, as well as the size and capacity of your cognitive 'muscle'.

Depending on the nature of the speech (the content, form, level of factual density, speed of delivery, accent, errors of syntax or grammar), you will fluidly mete out the tasks and cognitive demands according to the situation. The same applies whether you're working into your A or your B language, and also when you're working from a C language, depending on your level of mastery of all the language categories being employed for that particular interpretation event.

But, just as in the example of the rally car tyre, you cannot and must not go beyond the set psychological and cognitive performance level (the famous level X) you require of your brain. The only main difference between a tyre and a brain (and here is some good news for young and growing interpreters) is that the brain adapts, develops, and learns to raise the bar when it comes to the set performance level. This is what happens with other muscles in the body when you follow a rigorous and reasoned training programme put together by a recognised expert coach or trainer. Evolving the brain and voice, creating appropriate neuronal pathways, synapses, muscle memories and reflexes is indeed the goal of all training sessions for conference interpreters. But you will not learn to adapt if a professional and experienced coach/trainer/mentor (which might even have to be yourself in a worst case scenario!) is not there to help you to create a gradual, logical and sensible programme: one which takes into account all the factors linked to cognitive development...

“Desire without discipline dies... but desire with discipline deepens into passion... a discipline is an activity, within our power, that enables us to achieve indirectly what we cannot otherwise achieve by direct immediate effort. This is the difference between training and trying.” (Atul Gawande, surgeon and author)

In fact, you can (and must!) develop your brain so as to ensure that it performs better cognitively speaking. It might be a question of increasing your cognitive ‘bandwidth’ and being able to process more information in a given time, of increasing your mental resilience and concentration, of performing at the same level for longer, or of reaching a greater level of consistency. Your ‘default’ level will improve with practise and experience, and you will therefore become a better and happier interpreter. But be careful, because if you ask too much of your brain throughout your practise sessions and work assignments, it will start to wane, you will end up destroying your brain cells, and you will go backwards.

Continuing interpreting straight after something very demanding is another example of a situation where you will perhaps have to temporarily go into ‘degraded mode’ while you wait for your cognitive skills to get back on track. Here just a reminder: you won’t be able to stop interpreting simply because your brain is hurting!

So, let’s say that, after all the effort you have put in to learn more things and increase your mental ‘bandwidth’, your brain is able to work at performance level X. Your brain is excellent at adapting and evolving, but you need to treat it like a ‘standard muscle’, and ask it to work a little harder each day so that your abilities will grow consistently. This means that you will be able to improve on your standard performance level (level X), so, rather than just being level X, it will be X + Y%....

Thus, as you progress you can ask your brain to interpret at X + 5%, then a little later at X + 10%, then at X + 15%, which will mean that the standard level (X) will evolve over time. But if you ask your brain to immediately work at X + 50% in the booth, not only will it be unable to do so (just as if it was a horse refusing to attempt to jump a specific obstacle), but you will also be damaging it measurably and destroying neurones, to such an extent that it will then actually perform less well and your achievable level will for a while fall to a maximum of X – 5% or X – 10%.

What is even worse is that if you demand so much of your brain as an interpreter (in terms of duration or intensity of effort), the damage to the neurones might last for several hours or even several days. However, the nature of our work is such that while your struggling grey matter is attempting to build back up its stock of neurones to the level preceding this traumatic (and here I'm talking about density, speed, fatigue, level of technicality, accent, sound quality etc), experience you are still expected to continue interpreting and ensure the 'strict minimum'!

To come back to the analogy of the tyre, once the tyre's grip has been overcome by speed, the angle of a specific bend, and/or the acceleration or braking required, the car will start to slide. However, crashing is not inevitable, especially if the driver is highly skilled and can manage the skid so as to stay on the road and reach the end of the stage.

Going into 'degraded mode' will very often be a life-saver, and this is all the more likely to be the case at the start of your career, because inexperienced interpreters who are on a learning curve will logically struggle more often in the booth than their more experienced colleagues.

Switching to 'degraded mode'- how to save your energy and cognitive and mental resources

Before going any further into the nuts and bolts and introducing you to these tools, I would like to add that the actions that follow will be much easier to implement if you have in front of you the text of the speech you are interpreting, provided, of course, that you can handle the technique of 'simultaneous with text' (something which can really not be taken for granted at the start of your career).

If you haven't yet added this string to your bow, I would strongly advise you to do so. This essential technical exercise is quite complex when carried out at a high level, and can be and more of an obstacle than an asset if it has not been practised at length, fine-tuned and embedded as a cognitive reflex (which is of course the case for so many of the conference interpreter's skills).

Is your brain struggling to cope with events? Just like a computer which is slowed because the installed processor cannot cope with a high bit rate, you might be suffering from a case of cognitive 'buffering'. What, then, can you do to provide the service expected by your contract, your employer, your listeners and your colleagues (not to mention yourself!)? How can you both preserve your brain and save your career?

1) Anticipation

First of all, it is important to move into 'degraded mode' before you are actually forced to do so - if not, it will already be too late for your brain! Imagine only topping up your engine with oil when the 'low pressure' warning light comes on. In this case, your engine will already be (possibly irretrievably) damaged by a lack of maintenance and forethought. The same applies when you're thirsty - you feel thirsty when your body is already dehydrated, and even if you drink a litre of water, it will take some time to metabolise and rehydrate your neurones and muscles. Clearly when you are engaged in intense physical or mental activity, you need to drink beforehand, pre-emptively as it were... All this means that an important part of practising the use of 'degraded mode' is anticipation. Here are just some examples of this anticipation in practice:

- You might know in advance that a certain speaker is difficult to interpret
- You discover that sound is poor and cannot be improved for the remainder of the event – this is especially likely in a 'bidule' or RSI setting
- You discover that many delegates, who were slated to attend in person, will be joining by videoconference
- You might find out that your booth partner will arrive later or need to leave earlier than expected
- The agenda has unexpectedly been rejigged, and you will be called upon to interpret a topic or speaker that the team had agreed your colleague would prepare
- The meeting may go on longer than expected, and your team leader agrees to work an extra hour
- You are perhaps tired, ill, or feeling a bit low
- You have, or develop, a headache
- A topic arises that you personally find difficult or unpleasant
- On arrival, you realise that the physical working conditions are far from ideal, and will remain so
- The team had been promised certain equipment (such as a 'bidule' with an incoming sound channel for interpreters) which does not materialise

These are all reasons for listening to your cognitive and psychological alarm bell, and making the decision to go into 'degraded mode' before your brain actually begins to shut down in an uncontrolled fashion!

NB: The above in no way means that you or your team should not do all in your power to improve sub-optimal environments, team arrangements or sound equipment – to do so is a professional obligation – but on very many occasions much will unfortunately remain beyond the interpreters' control.

2) Practical actions and techniques

More concretely, what are the techniques and tools that you can resort to in order to activate this 'degraded mode'? Here is a non-exhaustive list of ideas, techniques and tips (more or less in order of usefulness):

a) Lower the volume of your input, and therefore of your output

This is the most useful strategy when it comes to economising physical and mental effort. Start by lowering the volume of the input, so you will be forced to lower your own volume (and, by extension, your timbre of voice). This is a virtuous cycle which relieves some of the strain and stress at 'both ends', thereby leading to a calmer and more convincing rendition, which as a bonus will sound more professional and more controlled.

Stress almost inevitably makes the voice louder and higher-pitched, and so you will need to fight hard to apply this method. Do persist with it, though, because it's your default tool! Do not forget that, just as a stressed driver has to continually loosen up his/her shoulders and hands, you have to do the same with the volume of your voice, because the volume and pitch will inevitably rise again under the effect of stress!

A little reminder: speaking more quietly means that you have to make sure you don't sacrifice the different emotions, intonation, emphasis, etc that you are expected to use to convey the nuances in each speech. When we speak more quietly, we tend to limit the extent to which we use these vocal faculties, which in turn harms the quality and value of our interpretation. Practice reconciling vocal expression with lower volume. You should by the way already be doing this on a regular basis, to improve the quality of your whispered interpreting, for very similar reasons!

b) Use short words as much as possible

This will probably seem obvious, but experience has taught me that often young interpreters don't tend automatically to use shorter words in the booth – you must develop this reflex, to be employed when necessary – which will be often in today's meetings! It is, however, a technique which will help you to save a great deal of energy, and you can use it at any point in the booth. Here are just a few of many thousands of possible examples:

- 'talks' instead of 'negotiations'
- 'aim' instead of 'objective'
- 'joy' instead of 'happiness'

- 'body' instead of 'organisation'
- 'project' instead of 'initiative'
- 'asset' instead of 'advantage'
- 'challenge' instead of 'difficulty'
- 'show' instead of 'demonstrate'
- 'goal' instead of 'objective'
- 'tool' instead of 'instrument'

As is the case for so many aspects of simultaneous interpreting, making this technique automatic is what truly counts – until this is the case, like most learned techniques it simply creates an added cognitive burden!

Systematically gaining a few extra syllables here and there will have an amazingly significant effect on your brain's ability to resist, recover, relax and function. I guarantee that you will be astonished at how much of a difference a bit of added time makes to your struggling neurones once you start using this technique systematically!

c) Use your tone rather than words to convey nuance and emphasis

This technique is essential, because you can use your voice and vocal resources to add emphasis, emotion (sarcasm, irony, anger, doubt, disappointment, authority, sadness, euphoria, etc.) or intensity. You can use this technique in lieu of adding additional words – which are often employed, after all, to clarify a point, support an argument, inject emphasis, convince or show/solicit empathy etc.

This technique is even more useful when you are working into a B language, as you will not always find, or even know, the right word. We often tend to use more words in an effort to convey the full meaning of the original, but this technique will help avoid this trap. You can, and should, use this method even when you're not in 'degraded mode' to compensate for gaps in your second active language.

d) Use acronyms and abbreviations

Depending on your awareness of your listeners' knowledge of the field (especially if all listeners are present from the beginning of the meeting), it can be very helpful to use abbreviations and acronyms - once you have, of course, first spelt out their full meaning, usually the first time they arise. To be clear: on the first occasion someone mentions the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, you would say 'the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, or OSCE'. Thereafter, you would simply use the acronym

'OSCE'. Saying a few letters will consume far less time and energy than saying a whole title!

As an aside, if you are working into a language that features genders, do not forget that you need to know whether the abbreviation takes the masculine or the feminine, the singular or the plural. One must also take into account the fact that while most acronyms and abbreviations can change between languages (for example 'NATO' becomes 'OTAN' in French and Spanish) some do not, and still others (like 'ETA' or 'IRA') retain the same letters but may be expressed as an acronym (pronounced as a word) in one language and an abbreviation (pronounced as single separate letters) in the other – quite a minefield!

e) Use 'bullet point interpretation'

This is the most extreme version of degraded mode.

This technique will take some of the pressure off your brain, because it will enable you to find shortcuts when faced with heavy syntactical and grammatical structures. You will also be able to directly catch the attention of your listeners.

Imagine, then, that the delegate's speech is being shown on a PowerPoint slide, complete with bullet points, using simplified grammar and syntax. All you now need to do is interpret these bullet points as they would appear on a screen, which will save you words, effort and time. This will, in turn, allow your brain to take more micro-breaks and your body to breathe – your interpreting performance will improve and both your own brain and those of your listeners will thank you for it!

See the 'Bullet point' versions of the speech extracts below.

f) Cut through the verbosity and repetitions - prune and prioritise
(see written examples below)

*“...use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do,
for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking.”*
(Matthew 6:6, KJV)

This is one of the most efficient and useful strategies, but is also the most difficult both to describe and develop. This is what you need to do:

- First, choose the minimum number of words (this obviously entails knowing a great many words – then you can choose wisely and well!)

- Leave out little quips, quotes, ironic sayings, asides, formulaic expressions of politeness and linguistic flourishes, on the understanding that if these were to disappear it would not harm the rendition of the main ideas
- Then, depending on the conditions and your own skills (both in general and at that specific moment), prioritise ideas and concepts on the fly (under pressure) and overlook ideas that are of secondary importance or that are repeated

A word of warning: I am aware that in reality you will perhaps be forced to pare back a given speech because you're not able to capture and understand each nuance, reference or instance of humour and/or sarcasm. But there is a world of difference between this situation and a situation where you understand these aspects of the speech, but strategically choose not to render them to enhance communication and aid your clients.

As is the case with any technique, you must practise as much as possible so that it becomes automatic. This tool must be wielded in such a way that it does not damage your concentration or the cognitive abilities that you need to perform the actual 'core task' for which you have been hired: i.e. conveying the nuances and complexities of a speech delivered by a demanding and intelligent speaker.

To make sure this technique becomes truly ingrained, you could even try combining 'business and pleasure'! Practise this in a group setting. Each person could give a pruned version of an original text, getting rid of the superfluous elements and keeping the main message. Then you could compare versions, and the person who has preserved the meaning while using the fewest words wins (the prize being up to you!)...

I would like to reiterate the fact that these techniques are much easier to apply correctly when performing **simultaneous interpretation with text**. Once you have learnt to make use of texts, you can much more easily anticipate, prioritise and prune speeches in a logical and reasoned way, since you should be able to see what is coming.

I must again point out that, for a conference interpreter, it is essential to learn this technique thoroughly and be able to employ it instinctively – until this stage of professional familiarity is achieved, having the speech text in the booth is in fact more of a hindrance than a help, as it loads yet one more task onto your tired brain! But, be persistent, work and practice lots, and this skill will begin to become second nature....

Here is yet another word of warning: the aim is not to be satisfied with doing an incomplete job. It goes without saying that our contract (whether implicit or explicit) means that we should be able to convey every detail, every nuance, every quote and every repetition that the speaker chooses to put in his/her

speech. Here we are talking more about doing your best in a difficult situation by switching into 'degraded mode'.

We **choose** to use this mode – and it must be a conscious choice, not the fruit of panic – in conditions where the alternative would be either a complete breakdown or a random, hesitant and patchy output. In the latter case, the main and essential ideas could get lost just as easily as the superfluous and secondary ideas, because the brain is no longer at the helm!

g) Use clichés, images and figures of speech as much as you can

Generally speaking, idiomatic expressions, clichés, aphorisms, figures of speech, sayings, images, quotes and other set expressions are VERY useful in interpreting, because they will help you to render complex ideas relatively easily. They will also add an element of ease and facility to what you are saying, and this will reassure both yourself and your listeners. When you're in 'degraded mode', doing this will enable you to momentarily relax your concentration (because you know these expressions by heart and will render them automatically, and your clients will register them equally automatically).

But be careful - when you use such expressions in your B language, make very sure that you learn them perfectly and properly, and that you understand their meaning and know when to use them appropriately. You must also ensure that your register is consistent, and a cliché or image rendered with even 95% linguistic and grammatical accuracy serves only to draw attention to your weaknesses and to make you appear pretentious!

h) Keep hydrated and ventilate your booth

I sincerely hope that, in normal circumstances, you drink regularly and pre-emptively while interpreting. Well, when you go into 'degraded mode', you should drink even more! Take frequent sips to hydrate your brain (which is already struggling due to the circumstances that have made going into 'degraded mode' necessary), and lubricate your vocal folds/cords and your throat.

It is impossible to overestimate the importance of hydration to the interpreter's brain – like a conscientious and intelligent sportsperson, you should be taking on, say, at least a couple of litres of water per full day in the booth, and more still if your booth is hot and stuffy.

The stagnant and overheated air, which is unfortunately the rule rather than the exception, which you will find in most booths (especially mobile ones), is another problem to contend with. Do everything you can to create a flow of fresh air

through your booth, even if this means talking more quietly (in itself not an evil – see a) above!) to avoid disturbing your delegates or colleagues, if your booth is in the meeting room itself or adjacent to another, and if you decide to keep the door open or ajar – which is always advantageous but not always possible...

i) Learn (how) to breathe!

As an interpreter, your voice is a massively important tool, both for expression and for stress-relief. It is essential to consult experts and learn the techniques that enable your body to produce sound convincingly, effortlessly and consistently over a lengthy period. There are many techniques to improve voice and sound production – I can help with tips and tools for this, so by all means contact me if required.

Other techniques enable you to learn to breathe in ways that either calm or energise, depending upon what is needed at the relevant moment!

j) Avoid overheating by changing posture and by modifying your clothing

For the same reasons, do everything you can to put yourself at ease physically, so that you can interpret for longer. Of course you should follow this recommendation only when and where it is possible to do so, particularly with regards to protocol, visibility, set-up in the booth, the status of your partner etc. If so, loosen your tie or even take it off, take your shoes off, get rid of your jacket, adjust the angle of the backrest, etc.

If you can use a headset that has a microphone attached, this will help you to feel more comfortable, because the microphone will follow your mouth. It will allow you to speak more quietly and to sit in a much more relaxed way, which will in turn make your flow more relaxed and fluid and put less pressure on your muscles. This a win-win situation whether you are in 'degraded mode' or not!

INTERPRETATION EXAMPLES

1)

FRENCH > ENGLISH

- Normal mode
- Degraded mode
- 'Bullet-point' mode

Transcript of a speech by the French president at the Ambassadors' Conference, the 27th of August 2018.

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=drAvQp4H-Fo>)

Extract (1) from the original speech

Je suis très heureux de vous retrouver aujourd'hui pour ouvrir cette conférence des Ambassadeurs et des Ambassadrices. Heureux parce que c'est toujours l'occasion unique de partager quelques convictions et une lecture du monde tel qu'il va, dans lequel chaque jour la France agit, est attendue, porte sa voix. Dans quelques jours, vous rejoindrez vos équipes sur le terrain et vous porterez avec exigence, détermination, une très grande responsabilité.

Version in normal mode

I am delighted to be here today to open this ambassadors' conference, as for me this is always an unparalleled opportunity to share my convictions, and my reading of the way in which France can

act, speak out and meet expectations in today's changing world. In a few days' time, you will be joining your respective teams on the ground, and I am confident that you will carry what is a heavy responsibility with rigour and resolve.

(116 syllables)

Version in 'medium degraded' mode

I am delighted to open this ambassadors' conference, as it is a chance to share my thoughts on the way in which France should act and speak today as a major world player. You will soon join your various teams, and I know you will act with rigour and resolve. (65 syllables)

Version in 'maximum degraded' (bullet-point) mode

- I am happy to be here*
 - We will discuss France's major role worldwide*
 - Out on the ground, I know you act as true professionals*
- (33 syllables)*

Extract (2) from the original speech

Votre première responsabilité, ce sera de représenter notre pays, notre histoire, nos idéaux républicains, nos géographies de métropole et d'outre-mer, nos intérêts. Et en représentant la France vous représentez l'histoire, la force, le rôle de notre peuple dans le concert des nations et avez à y conduire une diplomatie que je veux fiable et innovante. Votre deuxième responsabilité, avec votre équipe, avec l'appui de tous les relais dont vous disposez sur place, sera de mettre en œuvre une politique ambitieuse pour notre pays. Cette ambition, soyez assurés qu'elle se traduira par un rythme de réformes en France qui ne changera pas d'allure, bien au contraire. Le Premier ministre vous en précisera les orientations. Plusieurs ministres auront aussi à

s'exprimer sur ce point. Sous la conduite de votre Ministre Jean-Yves Le DRIAN, que je tiens à remercier pour son implication constante, vous nous aiderez à soutenir ces réformes à l'international.

Version in normal mode

Your prime responsibility will be to represent our country, with her interests, her history and republican ideals and the geographical diversity of her various territories. In so doing, you will stand for France's historical strength, and the role of the French people in the concert of nations – I am asking you to conduct our nation's diplomacy in a reliable and innovative fashion. Your second responsibility, hand-in-hand with your teams and contact points on the ground, will consist of implementing an ambitious policy for France. Rest assured that such ambitions will continue to be backed up by an increasing pace of reform on the domestic front. The Prime Minister will provide you with further details, and a number of ministers will be addressing this matter. Under the guiding hand of your minister Jean-Yves Le DRIAN, whom I wish to thank for his unstinting commitment, you will assist us in supporting these reforms on the international stage. (262 syllables)

Version in 'medium degraded' mode

You must first represent France in all her historical, geographical and moral diversity. You will help our people play their role on the world stage, and I ask you to work reliably and innovatively. Next, with all other stakeholders, you are called to implement an ambitious national policy, which I will back up by intense reform at home. The Prime Minister and his colleagues will provide further details here. Allow me to thank Minister Le DRIAN, under whom you will help France support these reforms the world over. (136 syllables)

Version in 'maximum degraded' (bullet-point) mode

- You represent France, in all her diversity, to the outside world
- I ask you to be both reliable and innovative

- *With others, you are called to be true ambassadors for our ambitious reforms*
- *I thank Minister Le DRIAN and his colleagues, who will lead you and provide all relevant details (76 syllables)*

Extract (3) from the original speech

En effet, vous êtes à mes yeux parties prenantes de la stratégie que j'ai demandé au gouvernement de mettre en œuvre pour le pays. D'abord, en associant pleinement nos communautés françaises à l'étranger. Elles sont une richesse, une force. Nos réformes doivent leur être expliquées et elles doivent aussi être portées par elles. Les Françaises et les Français de l'étranger sont un atout pour notre pays. Ils doivent participer pleinement de ce nouveau rayonnement de la France. C'est pour cela que j'ai souhaité une réflexion en profondeur sur l'enseignement français à l'étranger qui, sur la base du rapport que j'ai demandé au gouvernement, donnera lieu à l'annonce d'une réforme cet automne. C'est aussi pour cela que je veux aller au bout des simplifications attendues par nos concitoyens, en termes de démarches administratives et de vote en ligne.

Version in normal mode

You are indeed an active and integral part of the national strategy that I have requested the government to put in place. The first step is fully to involve our French communities abroad, as they are our wealth and our strength. Our reforms need to be explained to them to secure their buy-in. French men and women overseas are a huge asset, and they have an essential part to play in projecting our country's soft power. It is for this reason that I commissioned an in-depth review of French education overseas – on the basis of the report which the government will submit to me, a reform will be announced this Autumn. For the self-same reason, I am determined to

complete the streamlining of our administrative and on-line voting procedures. (194 syllables)

Version in 'medium degraded' mode

You have a role to play in France's new national strategy. We need to explain this to the French diaspora, who need to be brought fully on board. Our citizens abroad are also our ambassadors. The government will report back to me in the Autumn on our overseas education, and we will continue to streamline administrative procedures generally. (96 syllables)

Version in 'maximum degraded' (bullet-point) mode

- *Our nation's strategy needs your help*
- *France's diaspora must be brought onboard*
- *This Autumn will see a report on French education abroad*
- *Administrative procedures are being streamlined (48 syllables)*

Extract (4) from the original speech

Ensuite, vous contribuez à la compétitivité de la France. Vous devez expliquer aux gouvernements, aux acteurs économiques dans les pays où vous êtes en poste, la cohérence et l'ampleur de notre agenda de transformation. Notre attractivité s'améliore, mais il nous faut nous mobiliser bien davantage pour nos exportations. Votre mobilisation en faveur d'une diplomatie économique est un élément important de cette stratégie. Nous devons notamment axer notre action collective sur une stratégie export pour les entreprises de taille intermédiaire comme les petites et moyennes entreprises qui seule réduira notre déficit commercial. Mais j'attends de vous encore davantage. De Ouagadougou à Xi'an, de Sydney à New York ou la Sorbonne, j'ai durant l'année qui s'achève pu, à travers plusieurs discours, renouveler nos approches géographiques ou stratégiques. Il faut que

celles-ci soient désormais déclinées avec précision. Cela suppose de choisir des objectifs clairs et donc limités, et de prendre de nouvelles mesures afin d'en assurer le suivi. Nous avons encore trop tendance à considérer que tout est prioritaire et ne pas suffisamment avoir une culture du résultat. Même en diplomatie, le succès se mesure – certes pas en un jour et même sans doute jamais en un jour – à la capacité néanmoins d'infléchir des attitudes, de construire des amitiés et des alliances, de remporter des marchés. En un mot, de faire avancer les intérêts de la France et des Français et de faire partager un peu de notre vision et conception du monde.

Version in normal mode

*You also contribute to our nation's competitiveness. It will be up to you, in your various postings, to explain the logic and the extent of our transformation agenda. France is becoming increasingly attractive, but we must work proactively to promote our exports. Your efforts to further economic diplomacy will be key building blocks in this strategy. Priority must be given to working together on reducing our trade deficit by forging an export strategy for both small and medium-sized enterprises. But I expect still more of you! From Ouagadougou to Xi'an, from Sydney to New York and the Sorbonne, in the course of several speeches over the last year I have outlined our new geographical and strategic approaches. It is now important to put flesh on the bones of these initiatives, which entails choosing clear and realistic goals, and to put in place new measures to ensure an appropriate follow-up. We still tend to consider that everything is a priority, and we are not sufficiently results-oriented. Even in diplomacy, success can be measured – certainly not overnight and in fact definitely never overnight – by the ability to change hearts and minds, to build friendships and alliances, and to win contracts. In a nutshell, our task is to further the interests of France and the French people, and to share a little of our vision and reading of the world.
(413 syllables)*

Version in 'medium degraded' mode

We trust you to promote and explain France's economic growth and new agenda, through economic diplomacy. You must work on promoting exports for our SMEs, so reducing our trade deficits. I have spoken widely of our new approach, and now you must help by providing details to your interlocutors and ensuring follow-up. We must all assign clear priorities and be results-oriented, working on mindsets and winning contracts. It is our job to work for the good of France, and share our vision with the world. (141 syllables)

Version in 'maximum degraded' (bullet-point) mode

- *Speak on behalf of France's new economic agenda*
 - *Help our SMEs by aiding exports and cutting trade deficits*
 - *You must now give details on the agenda I have presented*
 - *We need clear priorities and aims to win contracts*
 - *You are France's ambassadors, sharing our vision worldwide*
- (76 syllables)*

2)

ENGLISH > FRENCH

Here are two links to recordings of my own simultaneous interpretation of a speech by the American Defence Secretary Robert Gates, who was speaking at the 'American Enterprise Institute' in 2017. First, here are the links to the transcript and the video:

<https://archive.defense.gov/Speeches/Speech.aspx?SpeechID=1570>)

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/pyf1xbs5d0bbrnp/Video%20-%20Robert%20Gates%20-%20America%20in%20the%20World%20%2802.30-%29%20%28T%29.mp4?dl=0>)

The first example below is of a full interpretation in 'normal mode', while the second is an example of 'degraded mode':

'Normal mode':

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/6twn5i6z2oab47u/Gates%20-%20all.mp3?dl=0>

'Degraded mode':

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/vtn7iyj70v8shr8/Gates%20-%20%28A9%29%20max.mp3?dl=0>

Chris Guichot de Fortis

19th June 2020