

*Effective communication is of paramount importance in a meeting which involves participants speaking different languages/dialects. Interpreters are indispensable as they serve to bridge the linguistic and even cultural gap between one participant and another. To many of us, simultaneous interpretation is an arduous task, and only those of the highest calibre can live up to the standard required. Let's see how the experts tell their own stories.*

## The Invisible Link



It was well past dinner time. The spirit of the people's representatives might have wandered off to the simmering seafood hot pot momentarily, but their flesh persevered, undaunted by fatigue or hunger. The discussion remained animated, even explosive at times.

One after the other, the voices of the people rapped the officials, who were accompanied by their learned consultants flown in from half way round the globe, for one alleged blunder or another. The consultants, despite being spoken to in a completely alien language, could be seen twitching their faces or fidgeting in their seats, as the brickbats were hurled at them at gale-force.

Donning earpieces, the consultants scribbled fervently on their note pads, jotting down all that was being said as they framed their own response. When it was finally their turn to give their side of the story, they dropped their earpieces while the others in the room scrambled to put on theirs.

Somehow, the two parties, speaking languages as diverse as Chinese and English, were able to communicate without a hitch. It had something to do with the earpieces they were wearing. It was the Voice coming through the earpiece that made sure the consultants felt the full heat of the chiding. That same Voice also made sure the consultants' impassioned defence was conveyed to a tee to the chosen representatives.

That Voice coming through the earpiece is the invisible link that bridges the communication gap in a bilingual or even trilingual society as is Hong Kong.

### The Invisible Link-Who are they?

The Voice, in civil service terms, is the Simultaneous Interpretation Section under the Official Languages Agency with an establishment of 3 Chief Interpreters (Simultaneous Interpretation) (CI(SI)) and 14 Interpreters (Simultaneous Interpretation) (I(SI)). The present strength is 3 CI(SI)s and 13 I(SI)s. At the Section's command as well is a pool of Part-time Interpreters. The part-timers go through the same recruitment test as the full-timers, which is rigorous by any standard. They choose to hold down another full-time job while doing interpretation on the side. Part-timers will be offered assignments when workload spills over from the full-timers' capacity.

Interpreters work in teams of at least two, sometimes three or more at particularly long or intensive meetings. Among the 16 CI(SI)s and I(SI)s and the three or four active part-timers out of a pool of 16, they work for 1 700 meetings a year for the two tiers of representative government, numerous other government advisory bodies and statutory bodies plus the financially autonomous bodies.

What do interpreters actually do, what makes them tick? Find out more in the next issue of *Word Power*.