

## DIPLOMATIC PROTOCOL AND ETIQUETTE FOR INTERPRETERS

### PROTOCOL DIPLOMATIC ȘI ETICHETĂ PENTRU INTERPREȚI

**Corina Georgeta ABRAHAM-BARNA**

Banat's University of Agricultural Sciences and Veterinary Medicine

"The King Michael I of Romania" from Timișoara

corina.abraham.barna@gmail.com

#### **Abstract**

*It is well known that the role of the interpreter in international contexts is strongly influencing the success of the diplomatic work. Starting from the certitude that communication includes not only verbal elements, but non-verbal features as well, it becomes evident that describing the non-verbal specificities of the act of interpreting in diplomatic context is increasing the quality and the impact of the interpreter's work. The aim of this study is to precise the non-verbal features of interpreting in diplomatic settings. The research is based on a multidisciplinary literature review and on work experience in international environments as well. The diplomatic interpreter should be prepared as languages expert, but should acquire intercultural communication competencies and diplomatic competencies as well.*

#### **Rezumat**

*Este bine-cunoscut faptul că rolul interpretului în contexte internaționale influențează determinant succesul activității diplomatice. Pornind de la certitudinea că în procesul comunicării sunt incluse nu numai elemente verbale, ci și aspecte non-verbale, devine evident faptul că descrierea aspectelor specifice non-verbale din procesul interpretării în context diplomatic crește calitatea și impactul activității interpretului. Scopul acestui studiu este de a preciza trăsăturile non-verbale ale interpretării în medii diplomatice. Cercetarea s-a bazat pe analiza literaturii de specialitate multidisciplinare și pe experiența de lucru în medii internaționale. Interpretul care își desfășoară activitatea în context diplomatic ar trebui să fie pregătit ca expert în limbi străine, dar trebuie să dobândească, de asemenea, competențe de comunicare interculturală și competențe diplomatice.*

**Key words:** *diplomatic protocol, diplomatic interpretation, intercultural communication, multiculturalism*

**Cuvinte cheie:** *protocol diplomatic, interpretare în context diplomatic, comunicare interculturală, multiculturalitate*

#### **Background**

It is well known that the role of the interpreter in international contexts is determinant for the success of the activities: clear communication is definitory for international representation and negotiations. Since communication includes not only verbal elements, but non-verbal features as well, it becomes obvious that describing specificities of interpreting and translation in diplomatic context is increasing the quality and the impact of the interpreter's work.

#### **Objectives**

The aim of this study is to identify non-verbal features of interpreting in diplomatic settings.

## Material and Methods

The research is based on multidisciplinary literature review and on work experience in international environments as well.

Interpreting in diplomatic settings could be placed at a multidisciplinary crossroad, and the literature review was based on publications from the following fields:

- Diplomatic protocol and etiquette,
- Translation & interpretation studies,
- Intercultural communication.

This study stalks from personal experience in working as a French/Romanian interpreter in international & multicultural environments: 15 years of experience as freelance sworn interpreter, 8 years of work experience as International Relations Officer in a Higher Education Institution (HEI) and 9 years of experience of representing Romania at the European Commission as expert. The qualitative approach of the review was focused on the objectives of the study.

## Results and Discussion

1. Since this multidisciplinary approach of the interpretation cannot cover all the languages, cultures and diplomatic settings, we started our study with a Romanian approach of the topic. The book *Diplomatic protocol and etiquette* (RO “*Protocol și eticheta diplomatice*”) by Ioana Vârsta describes in the chapter *Rules for interpreters* (RO “*Reguli pentru interpreți*”) a diplomatic approach of the interpreters behaviour: “*The importance of the professional interpreter competence and the tact one must show are two issues widely recognized.*” (VÂRSTA, 2011, 139, transl.). According to the author, the interpreters should respect several technical recommendations (see VÂRSTA, 2011, 139-142), which we have synthesised as following:

**Table 1 Technical recommendations for interpreters in diplomatic settings**

<b>It is recommended that the interpreter:</b>	<b>Purpose</b>
✓ <b>Have met before</b> the person for whom will make the interpretation	<i>Stress reduction</i>
✓ Be aware about the <b>subject</b> of the meeting	<i>Documentation Terminology</i>
✓ Knows beforehand the <b>texts</b> of the speeches and toasts	<i>Preparation</i>
✓ Avoids <b>discussions</b> with VIPs	<i>Diplomatic Protocol &amp; Etiquette Respect</i>
✓ Respects <b>confidentiality</b>	
✓ Knows his/her <b>place</b> during the different sections of the agenda: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ Discussions (at the left, slightly behind)</li> <li>➤ Meals</li> <li>➤ Transport</li> <li>➤ Official photos</li> </ul>	

These recommendations are describing an appropriate background for a proficient interpretation in diplomatic settings. They are stipulating psychological factors, documentation process and protocolary rules.

1.1. Meeting beforehand the person for whom the interpreter will work allows the creation of a personal connection, decreasing the stress, opening the doors to communication and increasing the overall quality of the interpreting process. So, if possible, ***the interpreter will be previously introduced to the beneficiary of the interpretation***. Moreover, it is well known that a first good impression (made, in this case, by the interpreter) has a powerful psychological impact and may be a premise of credibility and trust, increasing the success chances.

1.2. It is also well known the importance of using a proper terminology for translation & interpretation, according to the field, especially in diplomatic settings, where the impact of the work could be tremendous, even on global scale. The interpreter should be aware not only about the subject of the meeting, but also about the terminology, and where available, about the perspective of the parts. In this case, ***the work of the interpreter will start with documentation and appropriation of terminology***, obviously before the event. It is recommended to ask to organisers to recommend or provide a proper source of information and documentation for the topic and for the respective event.

1.3. A special case is represented by the interpretation of speeches and toasts. When available, their ***texts will be provided by organisers to the interpreter*** a few hours before the event, for translation preparation.

1.4. The diplomatic protocol and etiquette is based on the value of ***discretion*** as well. The interpreter should avoid (personal) discussions with the VIPs. It is recommended that interpreters not encourage discussions with diplomats, even when it is initiated by a personality.

1.5. Discretion means also respecting ***confidentiality*** of the topics discussed / translated / interpreted in diplomatic settings.

1.6. One special topic of diplomatic protocol and etiquette is the ***place of the interpreter***, who should know his/her place during the different sections of the agenda. The study will detail this topic in the following section.

#### *1.6.1. Place of the interpreter during discussions*

The usual place of interpreter during discussions is at the left, slightly behind (see *Figure 1 Place of the interpreter*).

**Figure 1 Place of the interpreter**

(Photo credit: <http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20150202-the-greatest-mistranslations-ever>)



However, specific conditions apply. During official visits, when the most important personalities have each one a personal interpreter, one of them must mirror, and stay at the right, slightly behind (see *Figure 2 Place of interpreters*).

**Figure 2 Place of interpreters**

(Photo credit: <http://www.indialanguageservices.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/modi-interpreter-2.jpg>)



### 1.6.2. Positioning the interpreter at table

According to the type of the event, the point of the agenda and the type of table, the place of an interpreter at table could be different.

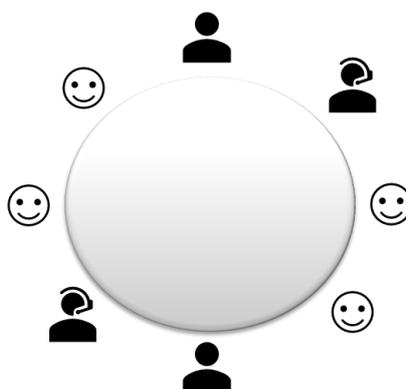
During state dinners or other type of official meals, the positioning of the interpreter could vary. One may be invited to sit at the table next to the beneficiary of the interpretation, other could have a sit behind him/her, or have another specific place at the table, according to the etiquette established for the event. In any case, the interpreter must respect all the protocol and etiquette rules related to the event, including the dress code.

The above-mentioned book published by Vârsta describes a variety of situations, as following:

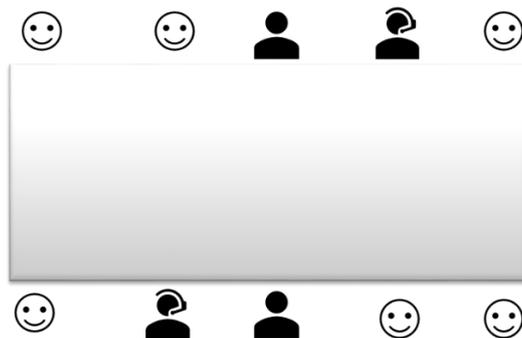
1.6.2.1. The place of the interpreter is at the left, assuring the interpretation during the meal.



**Figure 3 Interpreter's position at left at round table**

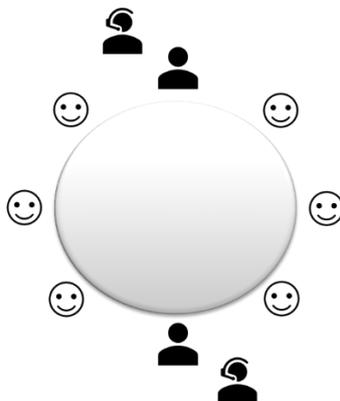


**Figure 4 Interpreter's position at left at rectangular table**

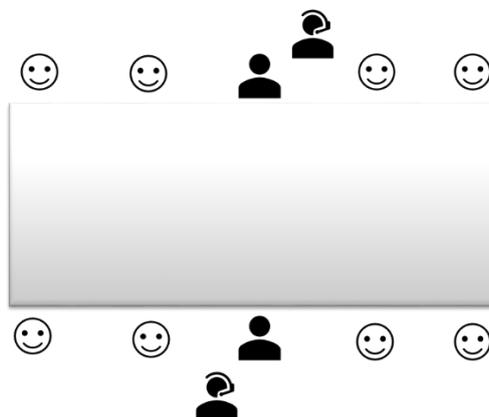


1.6.2.2. The place of the interpreter is at the left, slightly behind, assuring the interpretation during the meal, but not having assigned a place at the table. Keeping in mind that this a normal situation, it is recommended that the interpreter has the habitude to eat before the official meal, in order to dedicate his/her time to the interpreting job.

**Figure 5 Interpreter's position at left slightly behind at round table**

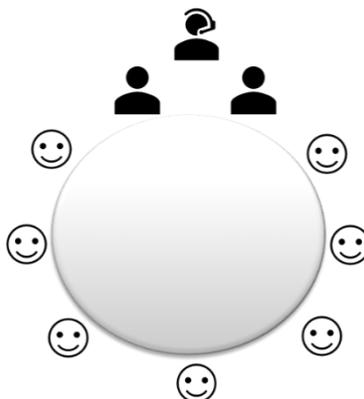


**Figure 6 Interpreter's position at left slightly behind at rectangular table**



1.6.2.3. A variation of the previous situation is when both VIPs – the most important guest and the main host - use the same interpreter during the meal. In this case, the interpreter will be, normally, placed between the VIPs, slightly behind, without having a place assigned for having the meal.

**Figure 7 Interpreter's position between 2 VIPs at round table**

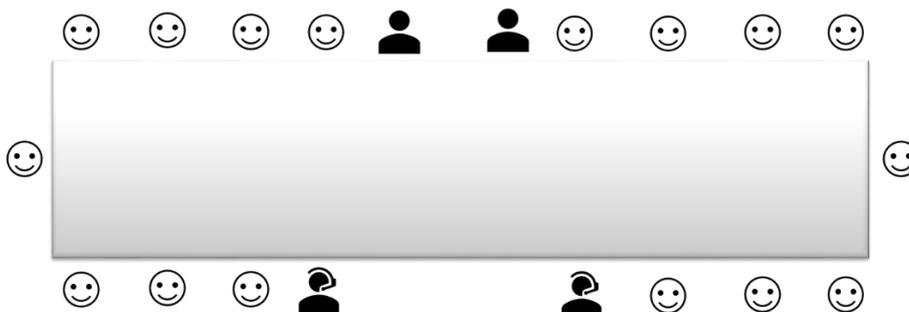


**Figure 8 Interpreter's position between 2 VIPs at rectangular table**



1.6.2.4. Another positioning of the interpreters could be their placement between the last protocolary positions, slightly in the front of the VIPs.

**Figure 9 Interpreter's position in protocolary order at rectangular table**



*1.6.3. Place of the interpreter during transportation of VIPs*

During transportation by car, the interpreter could be placed on the fold-up seat in the front of VIPs or, if the car is not equipped with fold-up seats, on the back seat between VIPs.

**Figure 20 Positioning the Interpreter in a car in the front of VIPs (Photo credit: [http://new207.free.fr/inside\\_arriere.html](http://new207.free.fr/inside_arriere.html))**



**Figure 31 Positioning the Interpreter in a car between VIPs (Photo credit: [http://new207.free.fr/inside\\_arriere.html](http://new207.free.fr/inside_arriere.html))**



The position next to the driver would not allow a proper communication or translation.

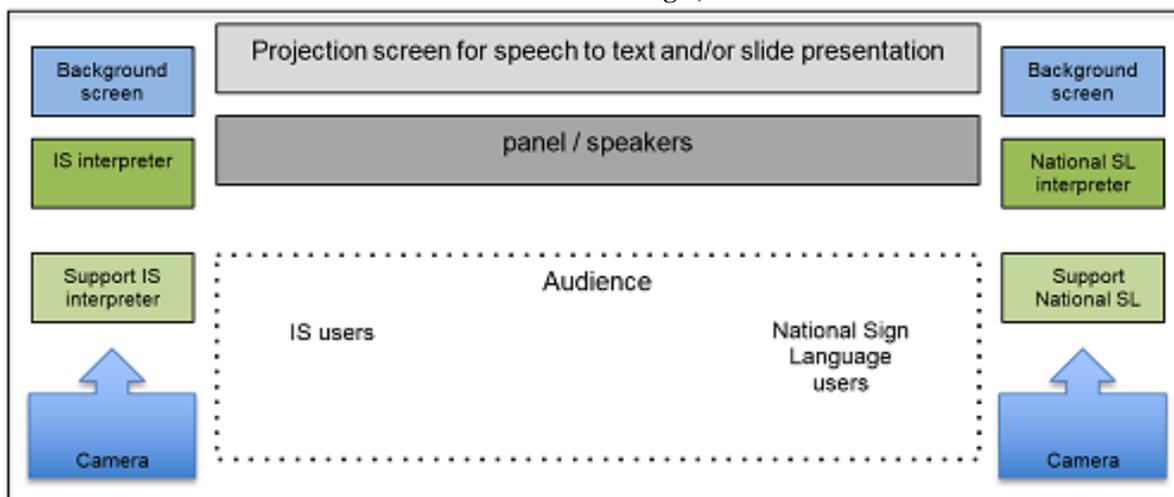
#### *1.6.4. Place of the interpreter during official photos*

The interpreters will not appear in official photos, so they must leave the official host and guests during the photo session.

#### *1.6.5. Medical issues of diplomatic interpreting*

Concerning the positioning of sign language interpreters, they are specific guidelines for their placement in conferences, including web-streaming. The International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC) has published clear recommendations of interpreters positioning in this case (see *Figure 42 Placement of sign language interpreter teams...*).

**Figure 52** Placement of sign language interpreter teams, cameras, monitors, screen and audience. Note: IS = International Sign (Source: <https://aiic.net/page/7821/guidelines-positioning-of-sign-language-interpreters-in-conferences/lang/1>)



## 2. Good practices and lessons learned

### 2.1. Principle of Sovereign Equality of States

Concerning the usage of languages in official events, the *Principle of Sovereign Equality of States* applies: every person has the right to express in his/her mother tongue. Specific conditions apply, according to the context, the institution hosting the events, the level of participants etc.

2.2. During official events, it is recommendable that every very important official has his/her own interpreter, who translates into his/her mother tongue. But even a more detailed attention is accorded to the choice of the interpreters.

**Figure 63** Formal visit of the Chinese Communist Party official Li Changchun in the UK, received by the former British Prime Minister David Cameron (Photo credit: Leon Neal / AFP - Getty Images)



An uncertain situation is described by an experienced certified conference interpreter, explaining the *Figure 73*: “It shows British Prime Minister David Cameron in formal conversation with Chinese Communist Party official Li Changchun. (...) The ladies on either side are of course the interpreters. Though they both look Chinese, the one on Cameron's side must in fact be British. We know this because it's a long-standing convention in formal diplomatic interpreting that each side brings its own interpreter, usually of its own nationality. This has advantages:

- *Confidence and confidentiality: each side feels it can trust its interpreter to work in its best interest and not divulge confidential information*
- *Each interpreter can monitor the translation of the other interpreter and warn of any discrepancies*
- *The division of work between two interpreters provides some relief if the meeting is prolonged.*” (TRANSLATOLOGY, 2012)

If both interpreters have as mother tongue Chinese, or one of them is British of Chinese origins, but her mother tongue is not Chinese, the question is how far can we go in the selection of diplomatic interpreters, in order not to discriminate them? Which is the most appropriate framework, beyond the legal one, to insure confidentiality, security and, in the same time, a proper translation? Which is the set of principles and criteria for this selection?

The interdisciplinarity for selecting diplomatic interpreters is obvious, but which is the list of fields that should be covered, for taking into account all necessary criteria?

### 3. Types of interpreting in diplomatic settings

Different types of (conference) interpretation are already known, and we are mention them as a reminder:

- Consecutive
- Simultaneous
- Relay
- Retour
- Pivot
- Cheval
- Asymmetric
- Whispering.



**Figure 84 Whispering** (Photo credit: <http://www.fluentinmandarin.com/content/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/tolmacs.jpg>)

The most important difference between the types of interpreting are time-related. They are concerning the opposition between simultaneous and consecutive. According to the abilities: good memory, concentration, fast reactions, ability to synthesise and to summarise etc., every interpreter has his/her own preferences and choices. But in diplomatic settings, function of event type, there are pre-established types of interpreting.

In a meeting room where the interpretation is realised in 6 languages by 12 interpreters for 100 countries, in most of the cases, speeches and discussions are most probably translated through simultaneous interpreting, and the pace of the interpretation must be fast and coordinated between interpreters, in order that all participants have the same reactions, the same moment. Two interpreters are alternatively working in pair for a language.

A good reflexion of conference interpreting in official meetings is published by the European Commission's interpreting service, the Directorate General for Interpretation (DG Interpretation – SCIC). On their webpage, the above-mentioned types of interpreting are explained, documentation sources are listed, like audio-visuals, various documents, terminology and bibliography, they are even offering a step-by-step guide on pursuing a career in interpreting and much more.

We will not detail this topic here, but it is important for interpreter to identify before the event the type of interpretation that will be realised, and to be prepared for this work.

#### **4. Intercultural and multicultural issues of diplomatic interpreting**

Translation & Interpretation Studies are recently more focused on intercultural issues of the field. The literature review of this interdisciplinary fields shows that interpreting across languages and cultures should focus on cultural differences and cross-cultural communication. The intercultural aspects of interpreting have a high impact in diplomatic settings. Let's make the precision that interculturality is realised through the contact of two specific cultures, by the interaction of people from different cultural backgrounds. That means that, generally, the who cultures have specific interactions, due to divers factors of the cross-cultural communication. In the process of translation, two equivalent terms from different languages may represent two different concepts, sometimes including hidden connotations. In a figurative way, the equivalent of a term could be imagined like an iceberg, having a hidden part.

According to the Iceberg Model of Culture, imagined and published in 1976 by the anthropologist Edward T. Hall, the culture of a society could be figured as an iceberg. The culture has some visible aspects, above the water, and a larger portion, hidden beneath the surface, with invisible cultural aspects. This model includes the linguistic aspects as well. So, the interpreter should be aware about the cultural differences, and must be sure that these differences will respected diplomatically.

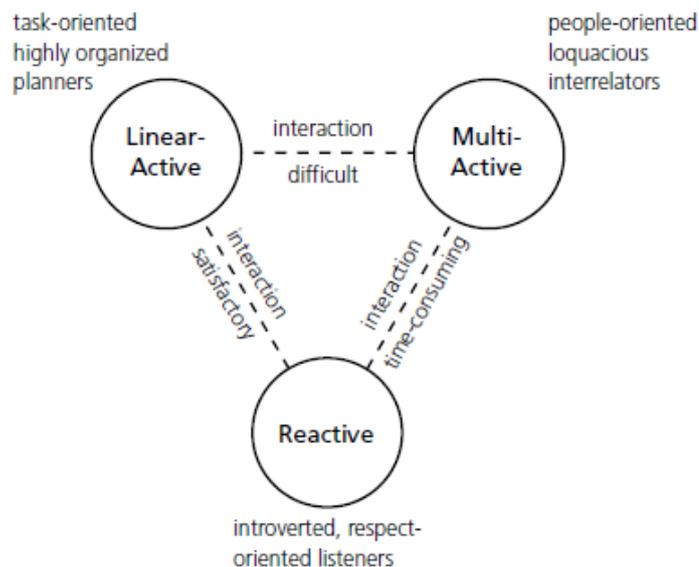
Beyond the linguistic aspects, the cultural differences could be very pregnant. Approaching multiculturalism and interculturality in a diplomatic way is a must for the diplomatic interpreter. Recommendations related to this topic, addressed to diplomates in general, are presented in the book *Diplomatic psychology*, a book published in Romanian by Cristian Dobre. The knowledge of important aspects of the other culture, including ideology, religious aspects, discriminations etc. helps to the avoidance of intercultural incidents or even diplomatic incidents. Dress code, language taboos, staring, non-verbal communication in general should be studied and considered by the interpreter.

Issues occur when the interpreters are attending multicultural conferences, and they should know how to approach different cultures, beyond the general diplomatic rules.

An interesting approach of cultures was created by Richard Lewis in his book *When Teams Collide: Managing the International Team Successfully*. He categorised cultures in 3 types: reactive (introverted), linear-active (task-oriented) and multi-active (people-oriented).

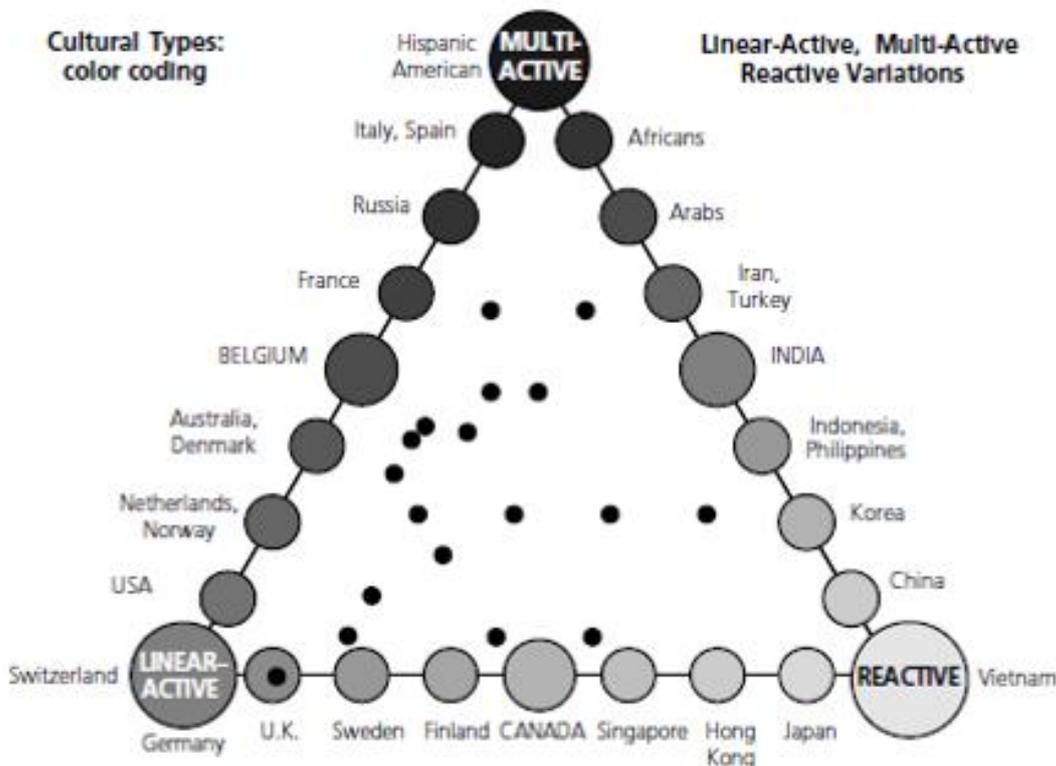
**Figure 95 Levels of Difficulty in LMR Interaction - LEWIS, Richard, When Teams Collide: Managing the International Team Successfully, 39**

CATEGORIZING CULTURES



Starting from this categorisation, Lewis designed a Cultural Types Model, viewed as a triangle, which can be used as an assessment tool for cultures. The cultural types are placed on the sides of the triangle, having gradual nuances of the three general types of culture.

**Figure 106 Cultural Types Model - LEWIS, Richard, When Teams Collide: Managing the International Team Successfully, 42**



A lecture of this book is a strong tool for dealing with the cultural differences, for establishing intercultural communication strategies and for preparing multicultural conferences.

A list of nationalities presented in the conference provided by the organiser to the interpreter before the event will help the interpreter to prepare this strategy, in order to respect the multiculturality.

Intercultural competences of interpreter are very important in diplomatic settings.

## Conclusions

The present study is based on 3 main complementary perspectives:

- Diplomatic Protocol and Etiquette
- Intercultural Communication
- Translation & Interpretation Studies

Analysing diplomatic interpretation in a multidisciplinary approach with different methodologies has lead us to the following conclusions:

- The types of conference interpretation are the same in diplomatic context, and their practice show the professional competence of the interpreter as languages communication professional.
- In diplomatic settings of interpretation, the intercultural competence is essential for intercultural communication, and it represents a foundation stone for building trust and mutual respect.
- The protocol and the etiquette in diplomacy are essential, so interpreting in diplomatic settings should take the diplomatic conventions into account as well.

***In conclusion, being an interpreter in diplomatic context transforms the interpreter into a diplomate with strong intercultural and multicultural communication competencies.***

## Bibliography

1. BURI, Maria Rosaria, *Interpreting in diplomatic settings*, International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC), October 29, 2015, (online), <http://aiic.net/p/7349>, (accessed March 29, 2017)
2. CREMONA, Vicky Ann, MALLIA, Helena, *Interpretation and Diplomacy*, (online), <https://www.diplomacy.edu/resources/general/interpretation-and-diplomacy>, in *Language and Diplomacy*, Ed by J. Kurbalija and H. Slavik, 2001, 301-305
3. CROSSCULTURE, *The Lewis Model – Dimensions of Behaviour*, 22.06.2015, (online), <http://www.crossculture.com/latest-news/the-lewis-model-dimensions-of-behaviour/>, (accessed March 31, 2017)
4. DOBRE, Cristian, *Psihologie diplomatică*, București, Editura Universității Naționale de Apărare “Carol I”, ed. a II-a, 2013
5. EUROPEAN COMMISSION, The Directorate General for Interpretation (SCIC), *What is conference interpreting?* (online), [http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/scic/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/scic/index_en.htm), (accessed July 30, 2017)
6. HALL, Edward Twitchell: *Beyond Culture*, Garden City, New York, Anchor Press, 1976
7. INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF CONFERENCE INTERPRETERS (AIIC), *Guidelines for positioning of sign language interpreters in conferences, including web-streaming*, (online), <https://aiic.net/page/7821/guidelines-positioning-of-sign-language-interpreters-in-conferences/lang/1> (accessed March 29, 2017)
8. LEWIS, Richard, *When Teams Collide: Managing the International Team Successfully*, Boston, MA, Nicholas Brealey, 2012

9. LIU, Alice, *Cultural and social issues in diplomatic translation*, (online), <https://www.slideshare.net/aliceadventure/presentation-705-alice>, (accessed March 29, 2017)
10. ROLAND, Ruth A, *Interpreters as Diplomats: A Diplomatic History of the Role of Interpreters in World Politics*, Ottawa, University of Ottawa Press, 1999, 209 p.
11. TRANSLATOLOGY, *Diplomatic Interpreters*, 22.04.2012, (online), <http://unprofessionaltranslation.blogspot.ro/2012/04/diplomatic-interpreters.html>, (accessed March 30, 2017)
12. VÂRSTA, Ioana, *Protocol și etichetă diplomatice*, București, Ed. C.H.Beck, 2011.

