

Thoughts on Multilingual Performances

By Robert Jägerhorn

If I have to combine multiple languages during the same show, then the best solution for me is to choose one main language and use the other languages to spice up the show. This is by far the best way not to lose my pacing of the show and to avoid dragging.

With this scenario the best places to add the alternative languages are at the key points of the presentation. This way those speaking the "minority languages" can also follow the main action.

The other languages can also be added at some other points to add color, fascination and humor to the presentation. This was wonderfully utilized by Paul Potassy.

Languages can also be used for misdirecting. For example, the way Juan Tamariz is asking for words in a foreign language.

My preferred way to approach one phrase that has to be said in three different languages is to think about it as one sentence only, instead of three. An example: *"Näytä kaikille! Visa så alla kan se! Show the card to everyone!"*

Here I don't pause at all between the phrases, it's more like a machine-gun-delivery. And I often place the pauses and the "interpretation" and perhaps slow down a little during the last phrase only: *"Takatakatakata. Takatakatakata. Show - the card - to everyone!"*

This gives the show a feel of intensity and avoids the feeling of dragging. For me it requires a huge amount of work to be able to deliver this "jumping from one language to another" without the slightest hesitation.

For me the best way is to construct these multilingual sentences based either on exclamations or pretty short phrases (perhaps 1-5 words). For longer phrases and more complicated sentences I don't know how to avoid the feeling of dragging.

The above examples are my preferred approaches for using multiple languages.

But sometimes it gets more complicated. Here are the challenges I've met:

- 1) If there is not one clear major language found among the audience. If I want to communicate verbally and be understood, I have to speak each language.
- 2) If I have an assistant up on stage and I have to give a lot of directions, then it can be confusing for the spectator to follow me, if I'm also translating at the same time.
- 3) If I perform new material where the pacing and timing is still in development (for me the "final basic version" is usually found by repeated audience interaction). This makes it very confusing for me as a performer to know if the weak points are because of challenges with the basic timing or if the problem arises because of the multiple languages.

4) My favorite lines might work great in one language, but when I tell the same words in two or even three languages one after the other, it simply becomes too slow.

My solutions have been:

- 1) To cut, cut and again cut out words and phrases (my favorite method).
- 2) To do visual effects that don't depend on words.
- 3) To perform material that I can do in my sleep, because I've been doing them in all kinds of different situations and conditions during the last 20 or 30 years. In other words, to avoid new material.

I often envy people working for example in the Anglo-American world. They have so much time, because they only have to develop their shows in one language! What a luxury!

Here in Finland, we have two official languages, Finnish and Swedish. On top of that many speak English; not only tourists, but also in many corporations.

This month I give a show open for the public welcoming people speaking Finnish, Swedish or English. The language used in the show depends on the language of those who are attending. So, we have the following alternatives: to perform in Swedish, Finnish or English only, to combine Finnish and Swedish, or Finnish and English, or Swedish and English, and finally the combination of Finnish, Swedish and English at the same time. This makes a total of seven different alternatives, meaning seven different shows! Each and every alternative gives a different timing and pacing, a different rhythm for the punchlines (both for the magic and the comedy) and a different way to coordinate my action to the words.

So, while I'm working on versions 2-7 of the same show, those performing in only one language can meanwhile create six other totally different shows. And that's not fair!

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