Chapter 17
Numbers

Figures given by speakers are generally offered either as an order of magnitude or as a technical measurement. It is important to distinguish these because an interpreter has considerable leeway in rendering the former and very little leeway with the latter. For example, if the figure 52.3% is offered as an order of magnitude, an interpreter having trouble with speed can simply say "roughly half". However, if the figure "873.5 milligrams" were given in a statement to an audience of pharmacologists, the interpreter does not have that option: giving the wrong measurement may be a more serious mistake than giving no figure at all. At the very least, the interpreter should strive to accurately render the quantitative or quantitative *concept* correctly, i.e. to use the right unit of measurement or make clear whether the speaker is talking about an increase or a decrease, for example.

Exercises

1 In the following reports, consider whether the numbers given are technical measurements or orders of magnitude:

> To date, about 45,000 people have been vaccinated with SPf66. On average, the results in Latin America show that the vaccine is 30% to 65% effective among adults. It seems to be much more effective among children under age five. The side-effects are apparently minor. Out of 35,000 people vaccinated in Colombia, there were at most 5.6% who showed adverse reactions, and these were in any case minimal and required no medication.
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> A scientist in Australia reports that he has found evidence that the speed of light is slowing. . . . The measurements taken showed that a 12 billion-year-old stream of light had properties which appeared to

violate accepted laws of physics. He said the only possible explanation for the unusual data was that the speed of light had been faster 6 to 10 billion years ago than its current speed of around 300,000 kilometers per second.

2 (a) Make a recording of the following list of numbers, reading them out at moderate speed in French, Spanish, or your other working languages. Then, play back the recording and try to interpret what you hear into English without falling behind. Record your performance and check it against the list.

20 80 90 60 70 62 72 82 92 7 17 77 50 55 65 75 85 67 68 78 160 170 110 280 290 260 270 277 298 278 297 777 666 555 24 80 80,000 80,880 90,000 90,880 99,824 97,670 678 678,424 678,480 4,888,677 80,777,167 88,675,177 98,675,110 167,767 67,177 76,771 188.2 276.7 359.98 458.22 329.99 787.87 484.84 988.8 98.9% 99.8% 48.8%

(b) Once you are able to interpret the complete list without mistakes or omissions, make a new recording at progressively faster speeds, and repeat the exercise. Repeat the exercise working from English into your other languages.

(c) Write down the numbers on index cards. Shuffle the deck. Then use the newly randomized numbers to repeat exercises (a) and (b) above.

(d) Reshuffle the deck, begin drawing cards from the top, and try to simply call the numbers out in each of your languages as fast as possible.

(e) Play your recording of numbers again, and try to simply jot them down as fast as possible. As you do this, work out a simple symbol of your own that can be used to represent two zeros and another to represent three zeros. (See Chapter 18.)

3 The extra effort required to interpret figures accurately sometimes distracts the interpreter's attention from the numerical concept, the unit of measurement, or the item to which the figure refers. For example, an interpreter hearing the phrase "15 kilos par mètre carré" (a technical measurement of the density of manganese nodules on the sea floor) in a high-speed speech mistranslated it as "15 kilos per square kilometer", i.e. she got the number right but the interpretation was wrong because the unit of measurement was wrong. A correct number is of little use to the audience if its referent is wrong. To help overcome this problem, it is helpful to practice interpreting numbers in conjunction with their referents.