Letter from the Editor: Making sense of the senses in interpreting

This issue revolves around the senses – how we use them, how we can take care of them, even how we might go beyond them in difficult situations.

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Sense denotes message conveyed or intended. As interpreters we certainly aim to get the message across. Sometimes, of course, we find ourselves wondering what the speaker really intended to say; then we must make sense out of what we heard using our general knowledge and our knowledge of the context.

Sense can also refer to a particular sensation, an impression or an awareness. Thus, we have a sense of balance, a sense of danger and a sense of humor – not bad qualities for an interpreter to possess.

Make the noun plural and we immediately think of the five (or 6?) senses. The plural form also denotes conscious awareness or rationality, as in “my sister finally came to her senses.” We interpreters certainly use all of our senses and do our best to “keep our senses” even as the booth temperature rises and the oxygen level falls.

This issue

A sense of balance

The balance is an instrument for weighing and the symbol of justice. Judge Cunha Rodrigues has kindly given us permission to reproduce his speech on secrecy given at the AIIC Assembly in Porto. Professional secrecy has always been at the heart of AIIC’s Code of Ethics, and his comprehensive examination is a valuable contribution to our understanding of the topic.

A sense of danger

There are physical dangers about and although common sense goes a long way, greater awareness is never a bad thing. Maria Stella Vergara weighs in with an informative piece on two of the tools of our trade that cannot be bought or replaced – our voice and ears.
Some people actually search out dangers of another sort and thrive under pressure. But there are dangers we don’t have to go looking for – they find us. Don’t we all just love to hear a speaker open with “We have a saying in my country…”? Or do you prefer the after-dinner joke in consecutive? In this issue we get some insight on how to maintain our balance in the “danger zone” from Elsa Michael, who takes on the perilous topic of interpreting jokes and swear words.

A sense of humor

And what about that odd combination of words that our rational mind, searching for meaning, finds so…humorous? One of my recent favorites: “Our friend from Canada has hit the nail on the head, in terms of threading the needle.” I wasn’t actually working when I heard that one and I could permit myself a silent snigger.

Humor in Communicate! is often associated with Phil Smith. Although on an informal one-issue leave of absence (without permission), Phil did have some input into The Booth Bookshelf. I got the idea to survey interpreters’ reading habits while sharing a booth with him and he encouraged it. For transparency’s sake it should be mentioned that we were both severely jet-lagged and a bit out of our senses at the time.

A sense of fun

I recently did a Yahoo news search of the word “interpreter.” The first story on the list should bring joy to the hearts of dog-lovers everywhere. Masahito Kajita has invented an electronic interpreter for dogs – or rather for their owners, as it translates in one direction only, from canine to human. More than 300,000 units of “Bowlingual” have been sold in Japan alone (priced at approximately $120), and apparently supply has not kept up with demand. Bowlingual is comprised of a small microphone attached to the dog’s collar which transmits barks and whines to a palm-sized console (obviously held by the dog’s human partner). The console classifies the canine utterances into emotional categories (joy, frustration, etc.) and shows 200 varieties of matching human phrases. The AFP article goes on to mention that “the US-based science humor magazine Annals of Improbable Research awarded Bowlingual its 2002 Ig Nobel Peace Prize for promoting harmony between the species.”

A sense of design

If you’ve made it this far, you’ve already noticed that the AIIC website has been redesigned – in a way that we hope makes even better sense to our readers. The contents of Communicate! will always appear in the right-hand column. You can go straight to the articles, or if you prefer, you can click either “Communicate!” or “Webzine” to go to our start page with the usual blurbs and lead-ins.

Be sensible and click away. We hope you won’t think that April is the cruelest month!

Recommended citation format: