Of wine corks and high-speed trains

A personal report on the first workshop on media interpreting held by the AIIC Training Committee and ARTE.

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Alighting from the train at Strasbourg station on a busy Friday afternoon, I was still nervously reworking in my mind an attempt at formal welcome leavened with a fillip of frothy wit that I had been composing during the journey. Having been sent to do the honours as a member of the AIIC Training Committee, co-organisers of the first workshop on media interpreting held on 11th and 12th April 2003 in cooperation with ARTE, the Franco-German television channel, I was anxious to strike the right note.

The first pleasant surprise of the day was to bump into a colleague I have known for years who turned out also to be heading for the workshop. Together we negotiated the obstacles to finding our way into the television studios, eventually arriving where our group was gathering. Taking one look at the familiar colleagues and friends before me, I jettisoned my stilted little speech of introduction and kept things simple.

The workshop had been born of a conversation between Giovanna Francia and Elisabeth Krone earlier in the year. Birgit Strolz had dealt with publicising the event amongst German "A" language interpreters and processing their registrations, and I had been roped in at the last minute, firstly to represent the Training Committee, and then to produce this report.

The session took place in the actual studio where ARTE programmes are recorded and started with an introduction by Elisabeth Krone, outlining her requirements as head of interpreting at ARTE. Experience has taught that "double A" or "AB" interpreters are better able to grasp and render quickly the essence of a short soundbite than those working from a "C" language. A particularly pleasant microphone voice is required, together with natural intonation and delivery, even when working under extreme pressure. So, too, is the ability to work with minimal décalage (time lag) and to finish sentences at the same time as the speaker - to avoid unnatural pauses during televised discussions. And the ability to stand back from source material and effect a true cultural transfer is absolutely essential, e.g. French viewers expect vim and verve of their newsreaders, whereas German viewers expect a more deliberate output. There followed a brief discussion on the difference between interpreters rendering a message neutrally and their playacting, i.e. introducing an element of their own making, entertainingly illustrated by Renate, one of the two trainers, with her demonstration of four types of emphasis in speech: using melody, dynamic impetus, temporal patterns and, finally, ar-ti-cu-la-tion.

The two trainers were Lisa Kahman and Renate Schüler, both of whom have worked for many years in the field of speech training, primarily with television presenters. They have worked with ARTE and its interpreters for nearly as long, with the result that they bring a real understanding of our
profession to bear in their work. This in itself made a vital contribution to the success and usefulness of the workshop, but equally crucial was their particular brand of humour and lightness of touch combined with serious professionalism; clear analysis and candid feedback spliced with constructive support.

The workshop proper took the form of three rounds of an exercise whereby participants were recorded as they interpreted excerpts from past ARTE broadcasts followed by a discussion of their work in the group (from the point of view of speech output rather than interpreting per se). The first round was particularly nerve-wracking: not only because it was necessary to master the media booths (images cutting in and out on the in-built monitor; a remote sound-engineer suddenly addressing you via your headphones, etc) but also because of natural apprehension when about to be assessed by, and in front of, colleagues. These anxieties were soon allayed, however, partly as a result of the trainers' skills and sensitivity, but also because the group "jelled" and worked together constructively and supportively (it was striking how negative and judgmental everyone was in assessing their own performance, how positive and genuinely appreciative they were of everyone else's). The trainers gave each participant a suggestion to focus on in the subsequent rounds and encouraged them to massively exaggerate the correction. Issues which were identified included one tendency to over-articulate, one to swallow the ends of words, one to add extra syllables between words, one to dramatise, one to string words together with no vocal punctuation, forcing of the voice, a need to bring the voice forward, uneven flow - alternating between drawing out the words and hurrying along like an InterCity Express train, etc.

The Friday evening was spent testing the gastronomic delights of Strasbourg (not found wanting) and procuring a cork for one participant to clamp between her teeth while practising her forward articulation, and then it was back to business early on Saturday morning with a guided tour of the technical nerve-centre of the broadcasting studio, complete with explanations from the interpreters' point of view, including the differences between live and recorded broadcasts, and how best to work with media technicians. There followed the second and third rounds of the exercise, and it was fascinating to follow the progress made by each participant in tackling their individual challenges, letting go of long-established habits and exploring new possibilities. Helpful hints on how to sit comfortably and breathe effectively, etc were also discussed.

The workshop closed with an evaluation round during which the following points were raised:

- learning-by-doing and personal coaching in a small, intimate group is definitely the most productive, although a wish was expressed for some kind of theoretical introduction or framework
- the easy interaction between the trainers (as, too, between them and the participants, and amongst the participants) contributed to the success of the workshop, as did the trainers' long years of experience in the media and their familiarity with difficulties specifically related to interpreting
- pre-selection of video material might have saved valuable time, and working in the studio under real-life conditions was helpful
- surprise at how quickly significant improvements can be achieved
- explicit mention of the anxiety involved in holding oneself up to scrutiny, both before colleagues (including a major recruiter) and a potential client (Elisabeth, representing ARTE) and surprise at how quickly that had been overcome, even if the fundamental problem remained
- the determination to continue seeking professional help with speech training and the desire for a "top-up" workshop on a regular basis, possibly once a year.

After a final round of heartfelt thanks to one and all, especially to Elisabeth Krone for opening the workshop to the broader membership of AIIC, we went our separate ways, enriched by the
experience and enthusiastic for more.

For more information about similar workshops in future for German, French or English "A"s, keep an eye on the AIIC website, and register fast if you wish to attend - numbers are extremely limited and the workshops will surely be in high demand.

Recommended citation format: