AIIC's 50th anniversary and staff interpreters: From the origins to the present

There is every reason for staff interpreters to join AIIC, thereby contributing along with their freelance colleagues to ensuring the future of our profession.

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Published: June 19, 2003 Last updated: December 2, 2015

AIIC is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year. Not many interpreters are aware nowadays that a vanguard of three staff interpreters (Constantin Andronikof of the French Foreign Affairs Ministry, André Kaminker of the Council of Europe and Hans Jacob of UNESCO) were AIIC’s founding fathers.

Belonging to a large and powerful professional association such as AIIC has obvious benefits for freelance interpreters: it confers on members a label of quality, certifies their language combinations, and provides a yearbook and a professional network which help them obtain contracts.

Nowadays, too few staff interpreters join AIIC and too many let their membership lapse after a few years, either because they no longer see its relevance to their needs or they believe that their professional status is sufficiently guaranteed, or because of the high annual membership fee, which is the same for staff and freelancers.

And yet, from its creation to the present day, AIIC has proven its worth to staff interpreters with national and international organisations:

1. By laying down the key principles of our profession, AIIC provides all staff interpreters with a framework of values and standards, within which they can defend their professional interests, negotiate or update their working conditions (manning-levels, working hours, quality of equipment, use of new technologies, etc.). This is particularly important for staff interpreters working for smaller organisations, for without it they would often find it difficult to stand up for their interests in the face of pressure from employers.

2. Even in larger organisations, in which staff interpreters naturally tend to look to their in-house representatives (e.g. professional delegations in SCIC and the European Parliament), AIIC can play a decisive role in defending key interests of the profession, a certain vision or philosophy of interpreting, and linguistic and cultural pluralism in organisations with many staff interpreters. An excellent example of this was AIIC’s swift and determined reaction to the Podesta Report on the European Parliament's preparations for EU enlargement. AIIC offers strong and steady support in times of crisis. In addition, it opens up a wider international perspective on the realities facing their counterparts in other organisations, as well as a forum for reflecting on the future development of our profession.*
3. Belonging to a major world-wide association like AIIC helps make staff interpreters aware of the interdependence of their status with that of the freelancers with whom they work side-by-side. Thus, just as the results of negotiations between staff and their administrations have been extended to cover freelancers, agreements reached between AIIC and various organisations have helped consolidate the position of staff interpreters. Among our many hard-won achievements, one which particularly stands out is AIIC's success (setting a world-wide precedent), after a protracted legal battle against the Federal Trade Commission in the 1990's, in having the American authorities recognise the legitimacy of basic working conditions, long defended on behalf of staff and freelance interpreters to safeguard their health and promote quality interpretation.

4. In the not-infrequent cases of interpreters alternating between staff and freelance status, or moving between world regions, AIIC membership can greatly facilitate the transition.

5. Though the annual membership fee may seem rather onerous, it represents only a small fraction of a staff interpreter's earnings. One should bear in mind that most of AIIC's budget goes to disseminating essential information between members and towards the outside world (AIIC directory, publications, website, etc.), to supporting activities crucial to interpreters' professional status (e.g. promoting the adoption of an international Convention on recognition of the profession) and to reimbursing, in part, the costs of those active members who voluntarily run the association and defend the interests of the profession as a whole, both staff and freelance interpreters.

Thus, now as in the past, there is every reason for staff interpreters to join AIIC, thereby contributing along with their freelance colleagues to ensuring the future of a profession for which previous generations of interpreters have worked hard to bring to where it is today.

* AIIC has a body specifically devoted to the needs of staff interpreters - the Staff Interpreters' Committee - which meets once a year at the headquarters of one of its 24 member organisations.

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