The tribulations of a chief interpreter

In the midst of the greatest crisis the interpreting profession has ever known, we must go beyond mere academic speculation and act to advance professionalization.

Sergio VIAGGIO.
Published: December 15, 2003 Last updated: June 29, 2016

Introduction

The profession and the market have changed. There are more interpreters and less money for meetings. Within that framework, the criteria a Chief Interpreter follows when recruiting freelancers are explored, advice is offered to young interpreters and the importance of AIIC is analyzed. Lastly, the need to establish and scientifically define and describe simultaneous interpretation is stressed, in particular with respect to the importance of achieving a better understanding of the profession by users and practitioners alike. [1]

Interpretation is one of the oldest activities known to man; it has existed ever since two mutually unintelligible languages met. Translation, for its part, is probably not much younger than writing itself. But simultaneous interpretation is a creature of the century, and even if it was tried at one of the Komintern congresses back in the thirties, its real birth was at the Nuremberg trials. A young activity, then, and an even younger profession. Those Nuremberg pioneers were not professional simultaneous interpreters: there was no such thing at the time. But they proved that the activity was viable and efficient. They are to present-day conference interpretation what the Wright brothers were to aviation and Galen to medicine. I am prone to bring up these parallels because we tend to lose sight of a crucial fact: no matter how good we are and how satisfied our clients may be with our work, we have just begun exploring our possibilities. As with any other activity-turned-profession, initially practitioners could not be but self-made. Yet it took only a couple of generations for the discipline governing the activity to start sprouting; schools were created where interpretation was taught, and that of necessity led to the discipline begetting its own didactics. Although much remains to be done, in fifty years we have gone a long way towards accomplishing what took medicine, for instance, some 25 centuries to achieve: turning into a recognised profession based on a recognised discipline taught at recognised academic institutions. It is not that we are more intelligent, industrious or cunning than physicians. Simply, we were born in the age of mass communication and have a profession whose time had come even before its first practitioners had ever tried their tongue at it.

Let us remind ourselves, nonetheless, that even now, there are few if any professional conference interpreters into and from most languages. I am not talking about Aymara or Hausa, but of languages no more exotic than Finnish or Greek. The International Tribunal to Judge Crimes in the Former Yugoslavia has had to go practically through the same motions as the Nuremberg trials, except that now it has a core of veteran professionals to rely upon for organising and training its interpreters.
Still, what will happen if the Hutu and Tutsi victims of the genocide in Rwanda ever get their chance to testify before such a court as well? [2]

For all practical purposes, we have established ourselves firmly only in Europe and North America, and then only for the more international languages, those that were spread by missionaries sailing in battle fleets back then or by sheer economic weight now. It matters little that more people speak Swahili than Japanese, or that more countries speak Portuguese than German. In this "patent age of new inventions for killing bodies and for saving souls, all propagated with the best intentions", as Byron saw it at the onset of the industrial revolution that made us, professional interpreters, possible, the international, i.e. economic and therefore political weight of a language stems not so much from the numbers who speak it or the poetry they have written in it, but what they can sell or buy.

Back in the 70's if you knew internationally weighty languages and had nothing more profitable to do, you could always try and become an interpreter. And if you chanced to have a language combination that was more in demand than in supply, you could more or less count on recruiters tending to overlook some details of performance that otherwise would have caused the door to be slammed in your face. Of those legendary pioneers of the profession, only the best, the ones whose names survive in our collective professional memory truly had the extra-linguistic qualifications that present-day interpretation schools demand as a matter of course from every candidate. Back then you just bumped into the profession. Now, if you know international languages, as every other regular professional, you choose it and - perhaps even more importantly - through an ever increasing number of ever more proficient schools and the mere existence of such a professional organisation as AIIC -it chooses you.

My personal case is illustrative of the points made above. When I graduated with an MA in Philology from Moscow's Peoples' Friendship University back in 1971, I cherished but one dream: to teach Russian literature. Not for a moment did I suspect that I would eventually thrive at a profession I had never heard of. You see, I happen to come from the South, the Third World, the Under-developing Countries - if from one with a most promising future behind her, such as Argentina. Ever tried to make a living by teaching and translating poetry in any of the 150 odd countries belonging to the group of 77? Luckily enough, my parents had sent me to an English school and the ex-USSR bestowed upon me a most generous scholarship, which allowed me to imbibe two cultures and learn their languages. So with my dreams somewhat shattered but my languages blossoming, I rushed into accepting a position as a Spanish translator with the UN, where I met a host of colleagues more or less similarly salvaged from sundry professional wrecks. No sooner had I arrived than the Spanish interpreters got wind of the new guy in the Translation Section, “the one who knows Russian”. They cajoled me into joining their ilk, which after a most unsuccessful attempt and a half I managed to do. So did I become a simultaneous conference interpreter by sheer dint of negative serendipity: a scholarship sought just to get out of Buenos Aires, an underdeveloped country that had no use for my qualifications, a language not weighty enough to have enough people capable of translating into it from Russian, an Organisation that needed passive Russian so badly that it would make believe I passed the exam the second time around if I would only promise to try and learn to interpret.

My original intention was to stay for some two years and then return to my native landscape, but I stayed on, blabbering away for some twenty years, until life played upon me another of her friendly mischievous tricks. Little did I suspect that I was to step across the great divide that even in the gilded North keeps labour in its proper place, and become one of the administrative “them”. But it came to pass and here I am upwards of four waltzing years with the crown and sceptre of Chief Interpreter at the United Nations Office at Vienna. Once an interpreter, of course, forever an interpreter, so I now have managed to earn the distrust of les uns et les autres as either a son-of-a-bitch of an administrator or a pain-in-the-neck of an interpreter. It is in such a dual capacity
that I talk to you about the stormy expanse of interpretation as seen from the murky heights of management.

**The recruiter**

You all know more or less what it is to be an interpreter: it is roughly like being a translator, except that you are more visible, travel more often and can be more lax with your subjunctives. So I am going to tell you what it is like to be a recruiter. When you are a recruiter, it becomes immediately apparent that interpretation is an overpriced, unreliable and not really all that necessary service provided somewhat grudgingly by notoriously testy specimens who count minutes the way Scrooge counted gold coins. What is more vexing, though, is how much it costs you to bring in from far away someone who is going to give you nothing but trouble, and how much an irritatingly minute binding agreement, the likes of which no other group of temporary hands in your Organisation has, ties your hands and sets you at odds with those who pay you and demand more service for less money. You cannot understand why interpreters insist on living elsewhere and how come everybody else seems to be vying to recruit them at the same time, even though you know that they are as arrogant as they are incompetent. Yes, incompetent, otherwise they would not be complaining every time they do not have a document, or about a speaker going too fast or the slides being projected on the wrong wall; nor would delegates complain so often about not hearing in translation the cognates they expect. These people travel all over the world, make more money than you, work 25 hours a week at most, and all because they were simply smart enough to put to profitable use those languages you know every bit as well, if not better, except that you actually chose to work for a living.

As any caricature, my appraisal above contains more than a grain of truth. Most people who listen to and administer interpreters are notoriously ignorant of what it takes to be one. It is not their fault: they cannot be blamed for believing what most of us believed before interpretation school or life taught us otherwise, to wit, that all it takes is indeed to know a couple of foreign languages. And that knowing foreign languages is a relatively easy thing: it is enough to have studied them somewhere. As to the interpreter's mother tongue... well, who must actually study his own mother tongue! If our clients and administrators are so uneducated, we have no one to blame but ourselves, since such education must, of necessity, be theoretical, in the sense that it should be a coherent, systematic and faithful verbalization of experience, an explanation of practice, or, as Marx put it when defining science, praxis made awareness. Only interpreters can understand what it really takes to be one, but not that many can also convincingly explain it to the layman in the Administration. And that is why it helps so much to have such an interpreter - someone who knows when to stand unconditionally behind his staff and who can equally tell when an interpreter is just, well... "ox-manuring" - recruit and deal directly with interpreters. And now for more matter with less art.

**The recruiter as administrator**

I shall speak as a professional interpreter now in charge of administering an Interpretation Section at the UN. How much of my experience can be adequately extrapolated to other recruiters, within and without the United Nations system and the whole realm of international organisations, I do not know, but I suspect there is more convergence than there are divergences.

From a strictly administrative view point, my job is to provide the most service for the least money. My bottom-line financial figure is the **unit cost**: the average amount my Organisation has to pay in order to have a body in the booth for a day. Unless there is a huge pool of locally available freelancers with the right language combinations (which, in the case of the UN languages, is true only in Geneva and Paris), or a large body of staff interpreters (which is not the case in Vienna), an interpreter can cost more than he actually gets. The unit cost will be lower if, besides avoiding
non-local recruitment, I can plan my resources in such a way as to obtain maximum productivity. This, in turn depends on organisers being able to state their needs accurately, which is not always the case.

**The recruiter as interpreter**

For administrative, financial and statistical purposes, my interpreters are but figures in the budget and names on the assignment sheets. But we all know that not all interpreters are equal. Now my permanent interpreters I am saddled with; it is my freelancers I can choose. Let me tell you, then, on what basis.

The three main criteria are **quality**, **versatility** and **overall professionalism**.

**Quality** is more than a merely linguistic concept. Let me start with the most obvious. Many an interpreter knows his languages inside and out, misses nothing, makes no serious mistakes, and yet does not quite succeed in interpreting altogether satisfactorily. The main problem is too much of an obsession with words and not enough attention to sense. I can always tell when an interpreter is too much in thrall to words: he is the one talking too much, too fast, and more monotonously; the one whose speech reeks so much of *translationese* that I can guess in no time what language he is interpreting from. I prefer professionals who are prone to talk less and say what really counts, idiomatically, with elegance, precision, natural intonation and poise. I find it difficult to put up with practitioners who sound bored and boring, or have a halting delivery, or scarcely pause to take breath and then at the wrong places. In that, I am irritated by the same things that irk any listener in any speaker. I want my interpreters to be top-notch communicators.

**Versatility** is also important. I try to avoid relay at all costs. Other things being equal, the first interpreters to get the offers are those with more relevant passive languages. He who has both passive Spanish and Russian in the English or French booth, the few Spanish *russifiants*, the few Russian *hispanisants*, Arabic and Chinese interpreters with both English and French, and, whenever possible, Spanish. Colleagues equally at ease in two booths come next.

The third crucial consideration is **professionalism**. This in turn involves several series of factors, having to do respectively with the interpreter's attitude towards his audience, his colleagues, and me.

I shall start with the interpreter's professional attitude towards his audience. A decisive factor is, of course, **thorough preparation** for a meeting. Then, I seek **honesty**: if the interpreter has not understood something or is not sure about anything he deems essential, I want him to say so over the microphone and let his audience decide whether they want to stop the speaker and ask him to repeat. Next I treasure a **user-friendly** professional; someone who is constantly mindful of his audience's specific needs, who will strive to find out what they are and then tailor his approach accordingly. A professional who will ascertain, for instance, whether his clients want the amendments translated, *verbatim*, or both; require help from the booth with their own amendments, or can use a gloss.

As to the interpreter's **booth manners**, let me stress **punctuality**, **constant presence in the booth**, and **helpfulness towards his colleagues**, especially when working with a beginner or someone with no previous experience with a specific meeting. More decisive than most outsiders make it is **personal hygiene**. Lastly, I look for a sociable **personality**. Ours is a small team and people work better and more happily when they like and trust each other: *emmerdeurs* are low on my priority list.

Some interpreters have added responsibilities. The English booth, in particular, which is normally in direct contact with both Chairman and Secretary of a meeting, must be mindful of any problems their colleagues in other booths may encounter. It should constantly monitor the proceedings and
take prompt action whenever necessary, for instance, asking the chairman to slow down a runaway speaker or to provide a missing document. But the main pillars of a team are *pivots* - in particular Arabic and Chinese interpreters. Besides his inherent responsibility toward his audience, the *pivot* has a special responsibility *vis-à-vis* his colleagues, who are, after all, his most vulnerable users. I seek natural, idiomatic, rhetorically and communicatively competent *retour*. Regardless of the difficulties he may have with the original, it is the *pivot's* responsibility to ensure that his colleagues will be spared a halting, incoherent speech. A *pivot* who does not interpret with those who must relay from him primarily in mind is wanting both as an interpreter and as a colleague.

Lastly, I want my people to be good to **me**. Crucially, I seek interpreters who will be ready to make an extra effort and help me out when I am up a tree, even - or rather especially - if it is through my own fault.

All this, of course, must be weighed against costs. Will I hire a local who is not as good as a non-local just to save money? If the difference in quality is less than the difference in money, yes.

**The recruiter as defender of the faith**

What do I and those of my counterparts I know offer in return for quality, professionalism and solidarity? The most uncompromising upholding of the AIIC/CCAQ Agreement governing the working conditions of freelancers and a fierce defence of any legitimate right or demand on their part, be it *vis-à-vis* the Administration, committee secretaries or the delegates themselves. In Vienna, for one, interpreters are not only allowed but encouraged to stop a meeting if the relevant documentation is not available in the booths, as well as to proceed to trim or, if the worst comes to the worst, even stop interpreting altogether if an interpretation of truly professional quality becomes impossible. This, I submit, is essential: A physician would refuse to operate if some basic conditions are not met; *mutatis mutandis*, the same applies to any professional, and there is absolutely no reason for interpreters to be an exception.

**The interpretation market**

The UN system has probably ceased to be the biggest recruiter of interpreters; that honour falls now to the EU and the European Parliament with their demential language requirements. The UN system market is, alas, shrinking. There are three main reasons for this: one is political, another financial, and a third one academic. After the first crisis in 1988, recruitment of freelance interpreters by the United Nations Office at Geneva, for instance, plummeted from some 8,500 days a year to below 5,000, and it has never picked up since. Another financial earthquake occurred in September 1993, but this time around, and contrary to popular belief, the root causes were entirely political: With the collapse of the USSR our world has become unipolar. Once one of the poles holding the rope of multilateralism we were all walking is all but gone, the rope cannot but slacken. The US has withdrawn its support from the UN, and with it most of its money - the money with which interpreters are paid. Does it mean that interpretation - or, for that matter, translation - are no longer needed, that people no longer need to understand each other despite their different languages and cultures? Not at all. But those who really need us are, for all practical purposes, in no position to call the shots - let alone pay. This, of course, is not the place, nor am I the person, to criticize the way Member States of the United Nations view and pursue their interests, but one would be blind not to see the consequences of the present situation for the interpretation market, and with it for the profession. It is no secret that the UN regular budget is owed $645 million in unpaid assessed contributions, 64% of it from the US alone. Administrators have been instructed to make an overall $154 million savings. [3] Although it is still not clear how this is going to be achieved in each area, it is obvious that a good chunk is going to come from cutting temporary assistance for meetings, and
especially interpretation.

But even without this basic and deplorable situation, there is, to my mind, a third factor contributing to the saturation of the interpretation market, especially for some booths and/or language combinations: the proliferation of interpretation schools, some excellent, producing many outstanding young professionals with the same combinations: English/French/Spanish, and Arabic/French/English with *retour* into French. Many of these youngsters are incomparably better prepared and motivated than many self-made old-timers such as myself, who see their traditional slice of the market disappear from beneath their feet. For their part, many novices find it increasingly difficult to find a place in an overcrowded market. It is not an indulgent place for those who have nothing to sell but their ability to work, our new market. But that's the way the unipolar cookie crumbles.

Witness the ferocious drive towards liberalization and economic efficiency at the cost of human needs, as if the economy should have as its goal anything other than ministering, precisely, to human needs. Now AIIC is being sued by the FTC for “monopolistic practices”, not financial, mind you, but strictly professional. Fie on the interpreter who demands to have a booth-mate or adequate working conditions! Let he who is ready to work alone in a cubicle in a corridor outside the conference room for any length of time survive, while the profession goes down the drain, and professional dignity, pride and quality with it. [4]

**AIIC'S role**

This brings me to AIIC, its role and its crisis. The importance of AIIC as the only international organisation of conference interpreters cannot be overestimated. Ideally, all good interpreters should be members and all bad interpreters excluded. Alas, it is not quite so. Many - perhaps most- good young professionals remain indifferent, and, recruiter that I am, I can vouch for the fact that a few of its members are not of the required calibre. The latter fact will resolve itself, I hope, with time and natural turnover. But AIIC's inability to recruit so many promising youngsters is extremely worrisome. The phenomenon is mainly due, I submit, to the inevitable individual atomization of our profession: Most interpreters are convivial and gregarious - as indeed were pirates - but loath to organise and discipline themselves. I truly believe it is part of their psychological profile: it is not that interpreters are intrinsically difficult people, but that easy people do not make it easily into the profession.

Many criticisms can be levelled against any professional organisation and AIIC is no exception, but mankind has still to see any group of workers or professionals uphold and improve their lot without a union - a strong union - whatever its shortcomings. And, that I know of, history boasts no precedents where any kind of union, even a weak and squabbling one, has been worse than none at all. One thing must be brought home to all our colleagues who for whatever reason are reluctant to join their only professional association: The profession as we know it and as we wish it to develop is in danger. In the face of this unprecedented crisis, an interpreter cannot but be either part of the solution or part of the problem. And it is my deep conviction that being outside AIIC, whatever the grounds, is being part of the problem. I work for the “other side” - I know whereof I speak.

**Advice to young interpreters**

In the light of all of the above, what would my advice to my young freelance colleagues be? First and foremost: without relinquishing quality, which should at all times be the one non-negotiable asset of a professional, try and be as versatile, as polyvalent as you can. A top-notch colleague was complaining to me recently that he had less and less work. “A few years ago,” he sighed, “it was
enough to be a competent interpreter from Spanish and French into English to have all the work I could handle. But nobody seems to need that any more.” As I pointed out at the beginning, it is not that nobody needs that any more, but that almost every other interpreter in the English booth has that very language combination, and there are many more now than then, including some excellent youngsters. Unfortunately, I cannot tell you what languages to acquire (it all depends what market you are aiming at) or how. For the UN, a combination of passive Russian and Spanish will currently get a French, and especially an English interpreter all the work he may desire. If you are an Arabic interpreter with the usual retour into French, try and develop retour into English as well: it is at a premium. Also, work on your B language, make it idiomatic. The same applies, and more forcefully, if you are in the Chinese booth and have learned English in laboratory conditions, without real exposure to the relevant cultures: try and develop truly idiomatic English, work on your fluency and learn French. Again, if your retour is into French, try and acquire active English as well. Also, work on your delivery. Self-monitoring in the booth won't do: tape yourself every now and then. See whether you are not hesitating or self-editing more than you yourself would tolerate in any speaker or interlocutor. Make sure you do not shout or whisper. Make sure you speak naturally. And, very important, never stop translating: It is extremely difficult to develop your overall translatorial skills or your active language in the booth. Remember: before you can do it fast and almost without thinking, you must be able to do it right. And in order to do it right, first you must do it slow while thinking a lot.

Next, make yourself known to your colleagues and to recruiters. Nobody will knock at your door to ask whether an interpreter lives there. Write to everybody. Be concise, and provide all the relevant information and none that is not: Frankly, I do not give a hoot about your hobbies or your children's age. References are crucial. Attach a passport-size picture. Make a phone call to introduce yourself in person. Do not hesitate to drop by if you happen to be in the neighbourhood. And join AIIC. Even if you do not care about professional issues, be in the yearbook: sometimes it is the only reference the recruiter has.

Client/user/administrator Education

By way of a coda, I would like to come back to the professionalization of our profession, and dwell on what to me is an essential task to be collectively accomplished by all of us interpreters: that of educating our clients - administrators, recruiters, speakers and audience - about what it is and what it therefore takes to be a conference interpreter, and what is thus needed for us to perform at our best. We cannot hope to do this individually. We need a professional association capable of pooling, systematizing and disseminating our individual experience and reflections. We are a new profession: our founding fathers are mostly still with us, a few even go on interpreting. Our intuitive, haphazard, improvised beginnings are not that far behind. It is not surprising, then, that the professionalization of the profession is only in its initial stages. We have not even succeeded in establishing our own academic and professional title. In those corners of the market where AIIC has failed to establish itself, anybody who claims to be an interpreter is considered to be one until repeatedly proven wrong. Anybody's claims to such or such an active or, especially, a passive language are more or less taken at face value. Indeed, within AIIC's own ranks a few C, B and even A languages are dubious, although much is being done to do away with what we call parrainage de complaisance.

But before we set out to campaign in enemy territory, we have many things to learn and understand about ourselves. Is interpreting as stressful as we claim? Is there a medical basis for manning strength or workload? How many hours at a time, per day or per week is too much? Is teleconferencing more stressful than normal interpreting? Is there any neurophysiological basis behind our ability to interpret into a given language as opposed to out of it? And in that light, what is
a B language, an A minus or a C plus? Is there any neurophysiological basis for such definitions? What is more effective, to interpret from your mother tongue, which presumably has no secrets for you, into a foreign language you do not know so well or the other way round? We claim that we need to see both speaker and audience; but why? Can we prove it? Can we explain why we have more trouble with written speeches than with spontaneous ones? And if so, can we prove that we can do a better job with a written speech if given the text? Are interpreters born or made? And if they are indeed born, have they not still to be made, like most other performers? If so, what is the best and most effective way of making an interpreter?

I am sure we all have our own answers to all or many of these questions. I am also sure that in many cases they will differ. The problem lies in the intuitive nature of such answers, as well as in the inevitably limited individual experience of each of us. In order to be proved, they must be tested, both experimentally and in practice, and not just in our individual practice, but in all possible conditions: International political conferences, local private-business gatherings, specialised seminars, the courts, TV and radio; one-way and two-way; cultivated and uncultivated speakers and audiences; all manner of accents and speech problems; all manner of physical conditions, with and without visibility, with and without texts, with and without ventilation; formal interventions and improvised dialogue; the poised questions of the Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General and the broken answers of a child refugee; between the international languages of ambassadors or between the different dialects of victims of a civil war. The answer to these questions will have, in the long run, financial consequences for every practitioner, since it will determine workload standards for different types of meetings and working conditions, and therefore manning strength, and therefore both job opportunities and remuneration.

In this decisive struggle for the establishment and scientific definition and description of our profession, academic institutions have, of course, a decisive role to play. It is up to them to come up with the relevant insights and data. After all, who among us has relevant experience in all the above-mentioned areas? Who among us is ready to stop working for a few years in order just to collect his thoughts and write down his observations? Who among us has the qualifications to carry out and interpret observations and experiments, plus the statistical knowledge necessary to generalize the conclusions? But practitioners must lend their full support, and above all, ensure that research and experimentation are carried out by people fully conversant with our profession and are based squarely on relevant interpretational practice. In this respect, as I was saying, AIIC's contribution cannot but prove equally decisive.

We are in the middle of the greatest crisis this profession has ever known, and most of us have more pressing problems than academic speculation. But there is a future and it is nigh. We can ill afford to let ourselves be caught up in it unawares, and it is professional organisations such as AIIC and FIT, and gatherings such as this one, that will help us prepare to survive, grow and develop.

On behalf of the many of us who practice, good luck to the few of us who also ponder.

[1] This article is based on a speech given at the 1996 FIT conference. Communicate! has chosen to republish it with but a few updates because the information it contains clearly remains relevant and thought-provoking. We also believe that our readers will welcome the chance to hear the views of a chief interpreter. An earlier version was published in XIV World Congress of the Fédération Internationale des Traducteurs (FIT), Proceedings, Volume 2, Melbourne 1996, pp. 591-601.

[2] Editor’s note: The International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda has instituted proceedings since this article was prepared. See http://www.ictr.org/. It is certainly not the only example that could be given. A South African participant in the same FIT conference dwelt on the problems the Truth and Reconciliation Commission had in finding interpreters from and into many of the twenty-odd
languages spoken in her country.

[3] Editor’s note: although the exact numbers may have changed since this article was written, the general situation described here continues to exist.

[4] Editor’s note: The final decision of the case (1997) confirmed AIIC’s right to establish ethical practices and professional standards binding on all members and to negotiate with employers on behalf of interpreters.

Recommended citation format: