Interpreting for Afghanistan or the blessings of AIIC’s working conditions

The conference begins in two weeks. We need an estimate within two hours for a team to interpret German, English, French, Dari and Pashto. “Oh, is that all,” I muttered to myself.

Gisela SIEBOURG.
Published: May 24, 2004 Last updated: December 2, 2015

It all began one November morning of 2001 in my office at the Foreign Office Language Service in Berlin. Hurry, hurry! Protocol needs an estimate within two hours for a team to interpret German, English, French, Dari and Pashto – the conference begins in two weeks. “Oh, is that all,” I muttered quietly to myself.

German and French were soon cancelled, but where was I going to find Dari and Pashto? What conference in the world had ever provided simultaneous interpreting for those languages? I telephoned colleagues in all corners of the Earth, the heads of three UN interpretation services – they might have an idea... “Good luck,” was the friendly reply. Or what about Deutsche Welle? Or perhaps... or maybe... Plenty of names occurred to me – of people who knew the business; plenty of tips and advice were offered – but no interpreters!

Some time before I had phoned around endlessly trying to locate a young Afghan lady I had heard interpreting on television – I had been very impressed. But, she had told me, she was not an interpreter and, yes, she had agreed to do it once, but she did not wish to interpret any more, but rather to carry on doing her job in a private company. Much later I discovered that she had only appeared to be interpreting. What she was actually saying into the microphone was what the manager concerned wanted to hear rather than what the speaker had said. The things people think of! But no help to me.

Quite a few applications had been piling up in my office over the previous few weeks. Afghans living in Germany were offering their services for the Afghanistan Conference announced in the press. But I needed English as a working language, not German. Nevertheless, there were some contacts here who were at least working as translators. Upshot: nothing!

The light flickered on my answering machine at home. The Afghanistan unit at the UN in New York enquired: “Please let us know the names of the interpreters you have so that we can check whether they are the right ones.” – Hm – in fact..., but tomorrow..., tomorrow somebody will give me names. What did “the right ones” mean? Never mind – I had now obtained the name and phone number of the BBC World Afghanistan Service. Considering how many people do interpreting... professors, language teachers, philologists – sometimes journalists prove the best suited among them, their profession being perhaps closest to ours in the sense that they analyse, correctly transpose and render what others have said. But apart from anything else, the conference is barely eight days away and I no longer have any other choice. Here, at last, is the end of a thread that I can grasp at. A
few telephone conversations and – sure enough – I had four names. The names of four people, two of whom spoke Pashto and two Dari as their native tongue, and evidently they were considered capable of interpreting. Not that any of them were journalists.

The conference was postponed a few days several times over. By now I was corresponding by e-mail with these four “colleagues”. In the end I insisted that we be allowed to arrive a day in advance – thanks to yet another postponement. We ought at least, I thought to myself, to put aside one day for some training in interpreting. No sooner said than done – a little introduction to the profession, the techniques, and off to the booths. A miracle – it worked – in one booth, anyway, not in the other ... Would the penny still drop? To be quite frank, nothing much came out of the second booth at any point in the proceedings. But the delegates did not seem bothered. Nobody mentioned it to me. The conference was a great success!

The applications from Afghans that had arrived in my office were still there, carefully preserved in my filing cabinet. The time had come to haul them out. Next time round I wanted to be better prepared. About 20 people were invited to the German Foreign Office to take a test. The full programme: translations into and out of their native tongue. The candidates with the best scores were invited for an oral, including a test of interpreting skills. Eight made it to the final list and were invited to attend a course in Bonn in October 2002.

A brief word of explanation: for staff translators at German Embassies throughout the world, which also need interpreters, the Foreign Office provides courses at regular intervals with an introduction to consecutive note-taking techniques; after five weeks the course ends with a test involving a five-minute exercise in each direction. About two years later some of the participants will continue their training with a four-week course, ending with texts of ten minutes’ duration. Finally, after another two years or so, there is a course in simultaneous interpreting. This procedure was devised in the days of Ostpolitik by the CDU Foreign Minister at the time, whose name was also Gerhard Schröder; it was retained and has been applied with renewed intensity since the disappearance of the Iron Curtain and the revival of national languages in the former Soviet Republics. On the whole this procedure has proved very efficient. It is only logical that individual performance varies considerably. Some show clear signs of a dormant talent for interpreting. Others are and will remain more noticeable for their qualities as translators.

We were now able to offer a course of this kind to eight Afghans; they had been living in Germany for 10 to 35 years and had also studied here. During their years in Germany, the participants had devoted surprisingly little attention to a correct and nuanced use of German, and most had been equally remiss about fostering their native language and its educated form, nor had they remained in touch with classical and modern literature in their own idiom. This is only too understandable in the light of Afghan destinies and those of their country. But it is a handicap today if one wishes to work with language. It meant that a field such as terminology, for example, had to be cultivated for them from scratch. On the other hand, they were all extremely interested in news of all kinds, displaying the general curiosity that is so crucial to our profession. Not surprisingly, however, there were huge differences in their final accomplishments. In fact, it has since turned out that less than half the participants on that course can be recruited for conferences. I am already including the simultaneous interpreting which the more skilful among them had been initiated into by taking the plunge at minor assignments shortly after the course. This group certainly includes the young colleague from London who produced a tour de force at the first Petersberg Conference but unfortunately could not take part in our course because he has no German. His very good colleague at the time has now taken a high-level post in Kabul.

Today we draw on these 3, perhaps 4 or 5 people whenever we need a Dari booth or Dari consecutive at any conference organised by Germany – with and without partners – on the subject of Afghanistan and with Dari as one of the official languages. No doubt the world does not need 30
interpreters for Dari, or even 20 – but 10 would certainly be an appropriate number! The workload borne by a bi-directional booth calls for three interpreters – but if there are only two for the combination required, then they simply have to be a little overtaxed, and the client will be tempted to assume that this is the standard measure. A risky business, especially for newcomers to the profession. How easily their reputation can be tarnished rather than consolidated!

I still harbour this notion that the Afghan government in Kabul ought to set up a language service rather like the one at our Foreign Office. It needs one to deal with all the political visits and the start-up phase for countless co-operation projects. To begin with, in my view, the working languages provided by this service should be English, German and French along with Dari and Pashto. The initial staff would form a “core language service” and then take care of a suitable expansion. Of course, not only are the financial resources still lacking, but there is also little interest in a project of this nature. Martin Luther was so right when he wrote that “interpreting is not everyone’s calling” and yet philologists, language teachers and professors think it is precisely their calling, and people organising conferences are all too happy to believe them. Anyone who can martyr another language or place it in its historical context is surely predestined to interpret into it at, let us say, negotiations on combating the drugs trade. The heads of development projects believe their technical field workers are born to interpret. But one only has to probe beneath the surface to learn that meetings are held in Kabul where the Europeans present fail to understand anything at all – usually when Dari is “interpreted” into English.

Perhaps this is the right moment to comment on the languages themselves in an unscientific footnote, although one that has been approved by specialists. There may well be people who would feel tempted to recruit Iranians for the Dari booth. However, Dari is to Persian more or less as Schweizerdeutsch is to German. That means that Iranians will only understand about 70% of a conversation between Afghans. We do expect Swiss participants at conferences to speak “Standard German”. But “Standard Persian” is not what Afghans learn when they learn Dari, nor is it what educated Afghans usually speak. They do not have to make much effort to speak in a manner that Iranians can understand; and they themselves are fairly certain to understand Persian, whether the Tehran variety or another. However, Afghan Dari, and especially administrative jargon, has absorbed a great many words from Pashto (the other “major” Afghan language, which is also Indo-European but totally different) and Iranians do not understand these. Persian, meanwhile, has imported many Arab expressions, particularly since the revolution. Within the religious network of Islam, an Afghan is quite likely to understand these, even if Dari has not assimilated them (even under the Taliban). The only point to add: Tajik has a great affinity with Dari.

But back to practice at our conferences with Dari interpreting. As a conference interpreter with about 40 years professional experience “in tow”, one is flabbergasted by the “rudimentary” mistakes that can occur when colleagues have not had an opportunity to learn our professional conduct and professional ethics. There is so much that we conference interpreters do fairly automatically and with self-evident routine that we are quite taken aback when confronted with a failure to apply the professional rules: something goes awry, at once the tranquil flow of understanding falters and threatens to break down, at the very least confidence in the standard of interpreting will crumble and aspersions will be cast on the team as a whole. The vicious circle of mediocre performance – distrust – disdain and more mediocre performance affects all the team.

It is about silly little questions like these:

- When should the interpreter come to sit in the booth? Definitely not after finishing a chat with a friendly delegate or delegate friend!
- Why does the interpreter not rush out of the booth if somebody wants a text translated? Because he is needed in the booth to cover a certain language combination and his contribution would be missed.
Why does the interpreter not grab the microphone in the booth? Because he should agree in advance with his colleague about who will work when and whose microphone will be switched on.

Why does he not simply pass the buck to a colleague if the language being spoken in the hall is not one he commands? Here again, the colleagues in the booth reach agreement by gestures. Listeners should not be disconcerted by breaks in the flow of interpreting. They should not notice booth procedures which are irrelevant to them and would confuse them. The “clients” should be able to follow the conference proceedings in a relaxed manner as if they comprehended everything in the original language. Interpreters must establish the listeners’ confidence in the spoken word. And finally, there is also such a thing as human courtesy between colleagues: I would always indicate to whoever else it was: “Your turn, please take over.”

Why do we not talk amongst ourselves when the microphone is on? That is pretty obvious! Our conversations do not form part of the conference proceedings! But at times colleagues seem to like making comments with their mike on which are apparently intended for the ear of the listener to excuse erratic and erroneous interpreting. In fact the listener’s response will be different: suspicion towards the voice and ultimately the team as a whole.

We should all take the opportunity some time to hear interpreting through a delegate’s earphones.

One more thing: Clients seem to like popping in to issue quick instructions of their own about which interpreters should be dispatched into working groups or on other errands such as a dinner, a press conference or a fringe interview. However, this should be left to the consultant interpreter to co-ordinate, both to prevent confusion and to ensure that judgements about the performance of individual team members do not disrupt the overall service and working atmosphere.

In the 50 years since AIIC was founded, it has moulded, built and set its stamp on the profession. Without these foundations, we would be a long way from asserting our presence in an enlarged EU and in the other large international organisations. By the same token, international understanding in these organisations would be obliged to dispense with the unquestioning commitment and contribution of conference interpreters. There may still be niches within the market which are inadequately familiar with professional rules, but that need not concern us if we all personally shoulder our responsibility for upholding and continually implementing the good practice of well devised partnership.

May our code of conduct and the natural ease with which we apply our established professional norms soon find the same acceptance among a larger number of trained colleagues with Dari as a working language. Our little group of Afghan colleagues already senses this professional responsibility and shares our affinity with the activity in which we are engaged.

---

English translation by Katherine Vanovitch

Recommended citation format: