The critical link

Reflections of a conference interpreter and trainer on the 4th Critical Link Conference

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The Critical Link is a network established in 1992 at the University of Ottawa (Canada) when a group of interpreters gathered together with people providing services in legal, health and social settings to clients with whom they did not share a common language. That first group became the think tank of what was to become the first international conference on community interpreting held near Toronto in 1995. In December 2000, Critical Link was renamed Critical Link Canada: National Council for the Development of Community Interpreting / Maillon Essentiel Canada: conseil national pour le développement de l’interprétation en milieu social.

Critical Link Canada is a non-profit organisation whose primary goal is to promote cooperation in the field of interpreting for the social, legal and health care sectors. The mandate of Critical Link Canada has become a blueprint both for countries promoting standards for the practice of community interpreting, and for interpreter trainers and university institutions advocating professionalism of community interpretation services.

Yet, many countries are still lagging behind in the recognition of the profession in general, and of the accreditation, training and professionalization of community interpreters in particular. Sweden and Australia, however, are noteworthy for breakthroughs in the advancement of community interpreting due mainly to national immigration policies.

The Critical Link conferences, held every three years, have greatly contributed to efforts to define social service settings and to meet the challenges facing interpreters in the community. As an observer to the Critical Link 1 noted, “The biggest service rendered by the conference was to bring workers from scattered areas together for the first time in a live international exchange of information and prospects.”

Critical Link 2 took place in Vancouver, Canada in 1998 on the theme Standards and Ethics in Community Interpreting: Recent Developments. Critical Link 3 was held in Montreal in 2001 and focused on Interpreting in the Community: The Complexity of the Profession. Critical Link 4 was the first conference to be held outside of Canada. A fascinating though chilly Stockholm provided a wonderful venue from May 20 to May 23, 2004, gathering together 354 participants from all over the world in the stunning premises of the University of Stockholm.

More insight on community interpreting

Unlikely as it may seem, there are still users of interpretation services - and even interpreters themselves - who do not know exactly what a community interpreter does. Conference
interpreting has always played a major role in the history of interpretation and, consequently, has gained more visibility. Yet, community interpreting is the oldest kind of interpretation in the world.

The keynote speaker of the Opening Plenary Session of the Critical Link 4, Franz Pöchhacker, emphasized in his lecture, Linking up: kinship and convergence in interpreting studies, that community interpreting has an “impressive ancestry”. Pöchhacker took us back to 16th century Spain when the Spanish Crown issued fourteen laws setting provisions for interpreters in the administration of its colonies. He highlighted the Ordenanza of 1548, signed by Antonio de Mendoza, which became a code of conduct. Today, alas, many countries have not yet followed suit for the work interpreters carry out.

To remain in the New World colonies, two women became famous for the fundamental role they played as liaisons between their rulers and the conquerors. The first, Doña Marina, better known as Malinche, was one of the twenty native slaves of Hernán Cortés in Tabasco, Mexico in the early 16th century. She learned Spanish and became Cortes’ interpreter and later his lover, wife and mother of his child. Roughly a century later in the Chesapeake Bay area, the Indian princess Pocahontas became a true cultural and linguistic mediator between the members of her tribe and Captain John Smith - sparing him from a certain death!

Eye-witness accounts of the first interpreters in Australia are reported in Watkin Tench’s Complete Account of the Settlement at Port Jackson, with Arabanoo and Bennelong the protagonists of this chronicle of the daily life of the indigenous population and the settlers. (David Fox, The first interpreters in Australia, AIIC Bulletin, Vol. XXVII, n° 2, 1999, AIIC, Geneva).

In more recent times, liaison/community interpreters have become the link between their communities and newcomers who, as the decades went by, left their homelands no longer as explorers, conquerors or settlers but as individuals migrating to seek a better life and more attractive opportunities - and today increasingly as refugees and asylum seekers.

Community interpreting is the interpretation mode which is used in the public sphere “to facilitate communication between officials and lay people: at police departments, immigration departments, social welfare centres, medical and mental health offices, schools and similar institutions…..sometimes referred to as dialogue interpreting or public service interpreting.”[1]

Is the world’s mediated communication shifting its focus on the community?

The geopolitical situation has evolved in recent decades, bringing on major shifts in the dynamics of our world. As Samuel P. Huntington highlighted in his latest book Who Are We? The Challenges to American National Identity (as he had previously done in his Clash of Civilizations) “civilizations” are replacing ideologies in international relations and politics. Huntington examines the phenomenon he calls “the cultural rift” in America and underlines how other civilizations can have an impact on the values, customs and habits of a given country. This dynamic, along with related matters that Huntington broaches regarding immigration, bilingualism, multiculturalism, national and transnational identities and citizenship, is gaining momentum and is particularly interesting for interpreters working in social settings.

Critical Link 4

At Critical Link 4 in Stockholm, participants from the four corners of the world shared their knowledge and skills by delivering lectures and presenting posters on themes such as training of interpreters, court interpreting, marketing and professionalism, medical interpreting, training for legal settings, users’ perspectives, empirical research and, for the first time, interpreting for children.
The Aula Magna, built in an impressive Scandinavian style, provided a warm setting for a thriving community of participants wanting to be in all of the four conference rooms at the same time. Simultaneous interpretation into Swedish was available, as was sign language interpreting, in most of the conference rooms.

The issue of the community interpreter as advocate, adversary or adjunct, and related questions of neutrality, professional distance and invisibility were a topic of concern for the representatives of many countries.

Interesting to note is that the very term “community interpreter” seems not yet to have found an appropriate translation in the languages of many European and Middle Eastern countries.

**Working conditions of community and court interpreters seem to be a major unresolved issue.** The Hong Kong experience was very enlightening in that sense, bringing to the surface issues likes the role of court interpreters and the fatigue factor.

A broad spectrum of topics related to interpreting in social settings was presented at the conference, including body language, culture-specific terms and phrases, hearings and police interrogations of asylum seekers, saving face and politeness, turn-taking and power dynamics, language mediation strategies in hospitals, and the reflection of social power in speech during police interrogations.

An innovative contribution to the Critical Link was provided by a lecture on teaching diplomatic interpreting to British diplomats, with considerations made on the registers of diplomatic language, and confidentiality.

Interpreters and citizens of the European Union profited from the enlightening panel on court interpreting and the explanation provided in the EU Green Paper on access to interpretation and translation as one of the five basic rights of EU citizens.

For the first time poster sessions were included in a Critical Link conference, thus giving even more participants the opportunity to contribute.

One thing, however, seemed to disappoint most participants: the lack of books and dictionaries on sale at the conference venue. Interpreters – we all know - are book and dictionary addicts and most were expecting to find relevant publications.

Nevertheless, for the great majority of its 350 participants Critical Link 4 represented a welcome opportunity for fruitful debate, not only in the conference rooms but also in the hallways, over lunch or coffee, and during receptions. At this invaluable forum bringing together practising interpreters, interpreter trainers and users of interpretation services from all over the world, the premises of the University of Stockholm became a busy thoroughfare for professionals with great expectations for the future of this still under-rated and poorly understood field of work.


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**Recommended citation format:**