Letter from the Editor: A broad view of conference interpreting

There is no need to make minute distinction between working in a booth inside a conference hall or television studio, or doing consecutive for a negotiation, a dinner speech or an individual in whatever setting. It's all interpreting.

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Being a conference interpreter does not mean that I interpret only for conferences. Under the influence of wise teachers, I have always understood simultaneous and consecutive to be commensurable techniques for the practice of interpreting in general. After all interpreting is the key word, and whether I find myself in a booth inside a conference hall or television studio, or doing consecutive for a negotiation, a dinner speech or an individual, I think of myself simply as an interpreter – the same interpreter in all cases.

Much of what the International Association of Conference Interpreters has accomplished over the years is certainly relevant to interpreting in the broadest sense. Ethics is a perfect example and the founders of our association were wise in placing professional secrecy at the heart of our rules. I once had the opportunity to experience first hand the significance of this – and it wasn’t for a conference. I was approached by a law firm about a consecutive assignment, and after we agreed on the provisions of my contract, I was asked if I had any problem in signing a confidentiality agreement. “None at all,” I responded. “In fact, my professional association has a clause on secrecy in its code of ethics.” I could virtually hear the lawyer’s ears prick up as he asked me to fax him a copy. It wasn’t long before he called back to say that, having read the AIIC Code of Ethics, he did not consider it necessary for me to sign a confidentiality agreement.

Internal regulation, with ethical tenets at the core, is a major component of professionalization in any field. Any erosion of essential ethical principles is thus a move toward deprofessionalization. We must maintain our fundamental precepts and AIIC does well to emphasize that anyone applying for membership makes a commitment to abide by them just by signing the application form.

When I talk to students and others interested in becoming interpreters, I often hear that the desire to help others communicate is one of their principal motives. When I talk to colleagues, I commonly hear that among their most vivid memories are assignments in which they felt that the dream of being cultural intermediaries came true. I know that such memories take pride of place in my memory scrapbook.

Re-reading our code of ethics I find many elements that implicitly aim at assuring communication. Confidentiality fosters trust, so necessary to good communication. The integrity (and yes, even transparency) underlying the commitment not to accept work for which one is not qualified or more than one assignment for overlapping periods of time also engenders trust. Elements on collegiality
help to weave the fabric of team work which is essential to our trade and has helped make interpreting a very egalitarian profession in a world where hierarchy usually reigns.

Good communication is also dependent on the qualifications of the interpreter (thus the importance of professionalization). And it will be contingent upon the conditions in which competent interpreters work (thus the inclusion of a clause on working conditions in our code).

Good communication, I believe, must be equal communication. As an interpreter for conferences, I am usually contracted by an entity organising a meeting with the precise purpose of bringing together people to talk, and those people are usually already on an equal footing. But that may not be the case in many situations for which an interpreter is needed. A recent immigrant needing to consult a doctor, having to deal with immigration authorities, or being questioned by the police will hardly be on an equal footing.

This also raises the question of whom an interpreter works for. When I was a novice, I heard someone proudly state that he worked for whoever was paying him, implying that allegiance was due to that party and none other. This blinkered view disintegrates under the gaze of the most elemental examination. The insinuation that allegiance to the paying party is so obvious as to be unquestionable may too easily be taken to mean that requests to pass on information, distort what was said (e.g. for public consumption) by omission or commission, or even contribute to the manipulation of a disadvantaged party are acceptable. They are not.

I believe that interpreters must work with the aim of assuring inclusive communication and that most of our employers ask us to do exactly that. As intermediaries, we stand between people to connect, not to separate, them. I would like to think that we work in situations in which communication leading to greater understanding is possible, if in no other way than by the transmission of accurate, complete and un-coerced information.

At times we can broaden understanding by tossing aside qualifiers. Interpreting and interpreter are still the essential words, no matter what adjective may precede them, and I hope that they will always evoke an image of communication and communicator in those who hear them.

This issue

With our first article we broaden our perspective by taking a look at endangered languages. Nancy Rivenburgh, who teaches in the Department of Communication of the University of Washington (USA), studies “How the media ‘frame’ issues related to culture and science and how those media frames link to public understanding and policy making in those realms.” Her talk entitled "Do we really understand the issue? Media coverage of endangered languages" was first presented earlier this year at the Universal Forum of Cultures in Barcelona, and has been slightly expanded for Communicate.

But not all languages are endangered; some are on a roll. With Turkey poised to start accession talks with the EU and affirming its role as a regional power, the business outlook is good for colleagues with Turkish in their combination. More of them should join AIIC, says Nur Deriş Ottoman in her overview of the profession in Turkey.

The same week that Nancy Rivenburgh's lecture was being heard in Barcelona (and interpreted by AIIC colleagues), AIIC member Maria Rosaria Buri was in Stockholm for the 4th Critical Link Conference. She has been kind enough to send us her reflections on this dynamic network of professionals in the burgeoning field of community interpreting.

Next we hear from teachers and students of signed language interpreting. Carol J. Patrie, former Director of the Master of Arts in Interpretation at Gallaudet University in Washington, DC, contributes to a more comprehensive view of interpreting with her article on signed and spoken
There are more similarities than differences,” she affirms. Find out why.

Aurélie Guillet, Cornelia Heimgartner and Katherina Tschopp are on the other side of the teacher/student equation, having recently completed Benoit Kremer’s course “Introduction to Interpretation” at University of Geneva’s ETI. They have carried out an impressive bit of research on the current state of affairs of signed language interpreter training in Switzerland. “La formation d’interprète en langue des signes” includes interviews with teachers and students, making for interesting reading.

And following in the tracks of these articles, Interpreting in the News has gone in search of related information on community interpreting and endangered languages. Along the way we also found some photos on the life of an EU interpreter and some reasons why we might all have a very lucid old age.

We trust that this short issue with a broader take on the field of interpreting will interest you, our readers. And we hope that it will help Communicate! live up to its name.

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