Interpretation at the universal forum of cultures, Barcelona 2004

Cities are like bicycles. When you stop pedaling, you fall off. Barcelona has put this adage into practice over the course of five months of cultural events under the name of Forum 2004, including 50

Danielle GREE.
Published: October 25, 2004 Last updated: December 18, 2015

Catalonia was propelled into the spotlight in 1992 when it hosted the Olympic Games and, amidst all the commotion, finally got the ring road it had needed for ages, a state-of-the-art communications tower, and sports complexes worthy of a major capital.

Several years later, Catalonia has staged another event, this time from scratch: a Universal Forum of Cultures for which it undertook a formidable urban planning operation and mixed it with a multicoloured cultural event. What was an empty shell with everything yet to be invented became a 30 hectare park disguising a water treatment plant and home to gatherings focusing on cultural diversity, sustainable development and conditions for peace. The public was invited to participate in a host of exhibits, workshops, performances and games, manifestations of fair trade, a Peace Camp for 1,300 children from 28 cities around the world, and fifty conferences, called “Dialogues”, all with simultaneous interpretation. In other words, 4,700 interpreter days from May to September 2004: the largest ever private market operation. Even the Lockerbie trials, with 14 languages and huge contingents of interpreters on stand-by, came to a total of only 960 actual interpreter days.

Preparations

My first contact with the Forum organisers dates back to 1999, and I was to brief four successive communications directors over three years! I was asked to prepare a report describing interpretation as a profession and the European interpretation market (human resources, recruiting, terms and conditions of contracts, etc.). I was asked, as were others, to recruit interpreters for several minor events, then participated in a number of internal meetings and, at last, in the autumn of 2002, was hired as a consultant through a competitive bidding process for the position of chief interpreter.
After the experience of the ’92 Olympic Games and other eventful conferences such as the International Union of Architects in 1996 (70 interpreters in 25 different meeting rooms over 10 days), I naively thought that 50 conferences prepared 18 months in advance should not pose any major problems. Oh, how mistaken I was!

It would have been relatively simple to recruit colleagues for 50 successive conferences had I known the dates, languages and number of parallel meetings in advance. The programme, however, actually turned out to be the fruit of ongoing and sometimes arduous negotiation between the technical secretariat for each Dialogue and the Forum Organisers, so nothing was finalised. One example can be cited: the official language status. The Forum first decreed only Catalan, English and Spanish as official languages; other languages could be added at the request of the organisers of each Dialogue. Slowly but surely, whether the critics of the French-speaking world liked it or not, French came to stand on an equal footing with the other working languages, as it was eventually requested in practically all of the meetings. Other languages, such as Chinese, Russian or Arabic (as the UN would have it), were added, taken off, reinstated… in part. When the recruiting process was almost concluded, the new Regional Government decreed, just a few weeks before the opening, that everyone should, at the very least, be able to ask questions in Spanish and Catalan. Therefore, Catalan had to be added to the rare Conferences where it had not yet been included. I meekly ventured that the 32nd Computational Linguistic conference, held in English and in six parallel rooms, might not need human resources on that scale. But to no avail. The Forum’s verdict was: “que es posi”. Here you see the imperative force of the present subjunctive. There was no escaping.

Another determining factor, as you will no doubt agree, is the date and, of course, the timetables. Once again, the programme had many surprises in store according to the various speakers and moderators engaged, and the Dialogue Department working veritable miracles to fit together all the pieces of the puzzle. On several occasions, the dates of a Dialogue would be changed although a number of options had already been given to interpreters. Enforcing the six to seven-hour interpreting day required hard bargaining. Luckily, the typical Dialogue consisted of a plenary in the auditorium followed by several concurrent workshops, so the different teams of interpreters could rotate and share the workload.

Another complexity multiplier was the overlapping of Dialogues. Because each conference was negotiated separately, at the beginning it was not unusual to find three different Dialogues overlapping during a two-to-three day period. This implied great expense, as several teams would have needed to be brought in for a 24-hour overlap in 17 different concurrent meetings! Gradually, decisions were made to optimise the programme and rationalise recruiting by cancelling interpretation in certain rooms to eliminate many of the overlaps.

As the horizon came into focus, I started sending out options to interpreters, asking them to reserve certain dates for the Forum. In parallel, arduous negotiations began with the Forum’s legal office regarding individual contracts to be signed by each interpreter directly with the organising body. The lawyers used the standard AIIC contract as a starting point, but ended up with something significantly different, spiced up with various unusual clauses due to the specific nature of the event. Fortunately, and equally logically, the contract stipulated that, unless specifically stated otherwise, the “general working conditions” set out by AIIC would apply.

The Forum accepted the usual clause on compensation in the event of cancellation, but required in exchange that the interpreter be held liable for compensation should he not turn up for work or notify the chief interpreter. Naturally, replacements could be made due to force majeure, but a no-show would be severely penalised. The interpreters displayed their usual professionalism and not once did this clause need to be invoked (despite three pregnancies, one broken arm, one broken finger and even the unfortunate loss of two close relatives over five months).
Another thorny issue was intellectual property. The Forum, whose aim was to ensure the best possible dissemination of the events’ cultural and scientific content, accepted payment of copyright to the interpreters, as stipulated both in the Bern Convention and in Spanish legislation. However, it took considerable imagination to describe, more than a year prior to the event, the various forms broadcasting could take and to envisage the appropriate disclaimers! In the end, the interpreters were broadcast live for 141 days on the Forum channel known as Canal Diálogos; broadcast over the Internet for certain languages; broadcast on television during certain (brilliant) consecutives; and systematically taped by numerous journalists during the press conferences. No doubt countless pirate copies were made unbeknownst to all. Copyright fees were paid for a substantial proportion of interpreter days, thereby boosting the booth manners of all of the teams in terms of, let’s say, refinement.

As if my bouts with legal services were not enough, a daunting new task was at hand: ‘Operation Options’. I began to take a close look at the wonders of new hi-tech computer programmes. For the Barcelona ‘92 Olympic Games, I was lucky enough to use the European Commission’s marvelous PEARL Assignment Software and knew that an expert system would prove to be necessary. Therefore, as of November 2002, I recommended that the Forum purchase a software package called Ipso Facto, developed by Ebullio in Brussels and used by several interpreter groups. Ipso Facto is a relational database application providing recruiting interpreters with an integrated tool used to create meetings with a given language combination, to select interpreters using a variety of criteria, to assign them individually, and to monitor their status (i.e. contacted, under option, confirmed, cancelled, and so forth). For more details on the software, see the unabridged version of this article, which may be of interest particularly to recruiting interpreters.

Because the Forum had its own database called Deister, computer services advised against the purchase of an independent tool and decided that it would be simpler to emulate Ipso Facto and create a database that would be integrated into Deister. All the meetings, with room assignments, languages, interpreters, number of booths and so forth, could be included in the same database. The only problem was that information was needed on the dates, times, room numbers, and languages for all of the meetings in order to proceed to give options and send contracts! Furthermore, all of the implicit recruiting rules, such as assuring double pivot, the difference between active and passive languages and so forth, would have had to be included. The in-house computer experts came up with some quite extraordinary suggestions. At first, they proposed that I assign a team for each speaker! Twenty speakers would mean twenty teams per day and so, twenty options multiplied by eight interpreters. And then, this homespun programme would not allow me to assign any colleague who did not have all of the working languages in the meeting (How’s that for defending AIIC standards?). Finally, you needed no fewer than twelve clicks to select an interpreter and include him/her on the team. And I thought computers were supposed to simplify our lives! In short, out of desperation and mindful that it was going to be a long haul - aside from the fact that my pencil and eraser-prepared options began to weave themselves into a hopeless tangle - at the end of 2003 I decided to purchase Ipso Facto myself and double-check my homespun work.

In a week’s time, I had plugged my fifty conferences and multi-fold teams into Ipso Facto and checked up on the provisional assignments. Several double assignments came out and, as interpreters are not ubiquitous, I had to make certain changes on the dates. The whole department was daunted when I produced, in the blink of an eye and in alphabetical and chronological order, team sheets and status lists, i.e. all of the interpreters and their options, cancellations or confirmations along with their meetings! The options could therefore gradually be confirmed and the contracts generated at the beginning of the year.

And it was high time! In fact, an event of this breadth and scope rivals many institutions bold enough to continue recruiting interpreters as if it were always business as usual. Everyone knew that
the European Commission would do its long term recruiting for the first half of 2004 in October 2003. The same can be said for the European Parliament, which plans its sessions several months in advance. All of this without mentioning Euro 2004 in June, the Athens Olympic Games in August, and the invariable major annual conferences such as that of the interpreter-intensive International Labour Organisation. But the Forum had luck on its side. Uncertainties due to enlargement pushed the Commission to exercise great caution in its recruiting and in the end it was much ado about nothing. Interpreters in Spain who usually received offers for several weeks of work in Brussels over a six-month period did not receive a single day. And the Parliament, with elections in full swing, had the good taste not to organise more than three short three- to four-day sessions in Strasbourg between May and September 2004. Also, half a dozen interpreters, enticed by the prospects of work that the Forum created, decided to transfer their professional domiciles to Barcelona for at least six months. This was to the advantage of the Forum that benefited from a greater number of locals with attractive language combinations.

Now that we had all these interpreters, **what about booths?** We had known several years ahead of time that Barcelona was at last going to have its own modern, spacious convention centre, at which the Forum would be held. Back in 1999, I slipped the **ISO 4043 and 2603 standards for interpreting booths** into my reports. Martha Hobart, representative of the AIIC Technical and Health Committee here in Spain, was in fact the first to discover that the architects were planning to squeeze into their magnificent 3,200 seat auditorium a total of seven booths instead of the five that the standard would allow. Vigorous intervention and several subsequent meetings contained the damage. Five booths were finally built in the auditorium, two of which were for three interpreters, and all of the convention centre rooms were equipped with portable Audipack booths in full compliance with the standard.

It is not surprising that an event as large as the Forum would spark the interest of a large number of people who do not always have the training, experience, or language combinations required to be included in the interpreting teams, hence the importance of **selection**. From the outset, the Forum had adopted certain recruiting standards, along the lines of those applied in most international organisations:

- Relevant language combination (with English spoken roughly 80% of the time in the Forum like elsewhere, an interpreter who does not understand English would clearly not be at the top of the recruitment list).
- Background and experience (particularly in high level conferences, both on the private market and at international organisations such as UNESCO, one of the Forum’s official sponsors).
- Geographical proximity (with otherwise equal skills, priority was given first to local interpreters, then to the rest of Spain, and finally to the rest of Europe).
- AIIC membership (the only worldwide organisation to guarantee the interpreters’ languages as well as their ethics), or else having passed a test at one of the European institutions or the United Nations.

As could only be expected for an event lasting more than five months and where fifty interpreters would constantly be rubbing shoulders, team spirit and collegiality were additional criteria.

So the selection process was done on this basis, with priority given to interpreters with the most passive languages (this was later to prove quite useful). Several young interpreters based in Catalonia contacted me, and I took the trouble of getting references; some had already done a few test flights, so to speak, in the European Commission’s insertion programme. I organised a test to listen to them and judge them on their skills. This is how the Forum gave a start to a dozen young graduates supported by a team of more experienced colleagues. These newcomers to the profession, who have all become AIIC candidates or pre-candidates, were also among the most industrious and enthusiastic of the team.
I must say, to my great satisfaction, that, several times over the course of the Forum, external organisers from UNESCO, the Council of Europe or UN-Habitat breathed a sigh of relief when they learned that the interpreters were AIIC members and thus entrusted me with the recruitment of certain additional teams with the strong conviction that they themselves would have hired the same interpreters.

I will spare you all of the other logistics and financial details that needed to be planned for the event (choice of hotel and establishment of room lists, reservations - and changes! - of tickets, accreditation lists, documentation, planning of the staff and equipment needed during the event, drawing up of a budget and procedure for authorising and processing invoices, etc). All of this brings us huffing and puffing up to the 3rd of May, 2004.

**Operational Phase**

A general briefing was scheduled at the end of April, along with an expedition to the remarkably well-hidden booths in the Convention Centre Auditorium, to go over the organisation of the Forum and the provisions made for interpretation.

Office 127, which was to serve as the coordination centre and interpreters’ room, and endowed with a magnificent terrace that was to prove very handy at Happy Hours, was turned over to us in all of its sparseness, with just three tables and one single electrical outlet by way of equipment. In fact, the building should have been checked and received a month and a half earlier, and the first fifteen days of the Forum were hectic! To anyone taking the hallway with its canary yellow carpeting (rest assured, it didn’t stay that colour for long) to our office, the reigning feverishness there must have seemed strange. One would just as easily bump into Marcel (my assistant) transporting chairs, desks and PCs atop his full six foot height, as find a devoted colleague draped over a table to do some splicing work, or surprise me demanding in no uncertain terms that the computer technician open a door in the local network firewall so that I could send out the Ipso Facto e-mails! In short, it took 15 days of frenetic comings-and-goings for the office to finally be equipped with three dozen multiple power outlets, a telephone, Internet, four computers (including one for the interpreters), printers, a photocopying machine, and even a fridge, a microwave and a coffee machine. Just as comfy as the SCIC ;-) The Forum then got up to cruising speed, but with some surprises all the same. On several occasions, the meeting language regime would be changed. Often, Portuguese or Brazilian VIPs, including President Mario Soares or the Brazilian Minister Olivio Dutra, preferred to speak Portuguese, the up-and-coming language par excellence. Others asked to do their bit in Italian or German on the spot with no forewarning. Every time that the team had two pivots, the interpreters graciously accepted to work from the speakers’ native languages.

Other languages that had been planned for well in advance for certain Dialogues (such as Russian, Chinese or Arabic) were added on with very little advance notice on other occasions. This also happened for Farsi (specifically for the visit of the Nobel Peace Laureate Shirin Ebadi), Slovakian or Hungarian (for the writer Peter Esterhazy). In all, thanks to the prowess of the Operations
Department, 13 languages could be spoken over the course of the Dialogues and in the press conferences: English, Spanish, Catalan, French, Arabic, Russian, Portuguese, Italian, Farsi, Chinese, German, Hungarian and Slovakian.

Last-minute variations in the **number of concurrent meetings** constituted the Forum’s other, rather more unpleasant surprise. This is how the plenary of the last day of the Women’s Conference was suddenly transformed into six multilingual workshops (and for which 20 interpreters had to be recruited for the following day and 48 redeployed!). Yet other events were an all-time first. The International Youth Festival, for which five teams with four to five languages had been recruited, informed me on the day of the event that all the youth organisations were to meet on a rotating basis in seven or eight rooms and would change language regime in each room every 2 hours! The effort was extenuating, no doubt, as several young people were seen stretched out for a well-deserved nap on our very own canary yellow carpet.

But there was yet another surprise in store for the interpreters. The Forum had decided to provide access for the disabled and hearing-impaired. **Sign language interpreters** were present in most of the rooms, conscientiously tuned into the Spanish channel. But this wasn’t all. The text of this Spanish version (be it the original or interpreted) also appeared (thanks to a computer-assisted stenotype system which went through Burgos or Santiago de Chile), first on a big screen and then, after vigorous protests from the Spanish booth, saying it made them lose their concentration entirely, in subtitles on a small screen generally relegated to the corner of the conference room. Given the speed of the spoken word, needless to say the transcription could not be perfect and slip-ups were made at times on figures and place-names. The interpreters were then able to get the organisers to make an announcement on the screen that the system for the hearing-impaired was separate and was not provided by the simultaneous interpreters. But there is somewhat of a fear that if this system becomes widespread, more than one conference attendee might prefer the illusion of reading to the true comprehension afforded by a full, accurate and pleasant-to-listen-to interpretation.

Having gathered together an incredible number of renowned intellectuals over the five months that the Forum lasted, it was only natural for the organisation to want to get the best possible mileage out of their presence. This is how the **141 Questions** came to light. This original idea consisted of having one of the Dialogue’s VIPs at a small open-air theatre every evening before an increasingly large public to comment on a major ethical question posed by the organisation so that it could be debated with the public. One night, the debate hinged around whether “minority languages have less to say than others”. John Hume, Nobel Peace Laureate from Northern Ireland, sparked a passionate debate over the choice between “A Europe of States or a Europe of Peoples?”. Shirin Ebadi tackled the question of whether women’s submission in Islamic countries was imposed by God or by man. This took place in an open-air theatre and the number of participants was unforeseeable, so the distribution of infrared receivers among the public was not possible. The solution chosen was, therefore, when the languages were Catalan and Spanish, to transcribe what the interpreters **dictated** in simultaneous using transcribers sitting in an adjacent booth. Naturally, even if the typists had been unparalleled professionals, it would have been a perilous exercise at the speed of the spoken word. One remembers a speaker vociferating “el capitalismo es canibal porque...”, transcribed as “captalñismo cambal poñque” [sic]. It’s a shame that the keyboard didn’t have a skull to make the message even more forceful. Or that same speaker mentioning the FARC from Colombia, who found themselves referred to on the screen as “DRAG” (a blow for their image!). In short, little by little, the interpreters got used to condensing the message and dictating what is humanly possible to transcribe at the speed of the spoken word. However, when the speaker was foreign, an interpreter did a full-fledged consecutive on the set, and a whispering interpretation of the questions from the public.

Now, some of you will be wondering about **documentation**, that *sine qua non* for good interpreting.
Imagining in advance the inflow of hundreds of papers for the five or six concurrent meetings for most Dialogues, I opted for a system that we had tested during the 2002 AIDS Summit in Barcelona. I opened fifty virtual hard disks on the Internet, one per Dialogue, which each interpreter, duly equipped with his or her password, could access from any computer. With this system, all I needed was to get the papers from every technical secretariat and post them on the briefcase, along with the programme and the interpreters’ team sheet so that everyone could prepare from home. This system, in addition to being practical, enabled everyone to quickly get their computer skills up to speed, and office 127 was soon buzzing with private lessons that the most computer literate colleagues gave to the others! I would add that I had very uneven success rates with the organisers (some sent me dozens of presentations in the most timely fashion while others didn’t make even a blip on the radar screen). Team leaders played a crucial role in obtaining and photocopying oral presentations made available only at the last minute. Not only was there a healthy emulation among team leaders, all of whom did absolutely remarkable work, but, due to a certain degree of built-in rotation, several young colleagues were able to overcome their fear of approaching the keynote speakers to cajole them into releasing from their grip that precious paper they were about to read, naturally at supersonic speed. Bravo for all of the marvellous teamwork and seamless collegiality!

And for those of you who love numbers, note that, when all was said and done, the Forum had received more than three million tourists at the performances and exhibits organised in town, and exactly 3,323,120 visits to the Forum grounds. The Dialogues welcomed 2,411 conference speakers and nearly 70,000 participants from over 170 countries! You can imagine the final colour of the canary yellow carpeting! This collective tour de force engendered some 4,700 interpreter days, done by 124 interpreters, 60 of whom were domiciled in Barcelona, 23 in Spain (outside Catalonia) and 41 in the rest of Europe (It wasn’t necessary to recruit outside Europe). What’s remarkable in an operation of this nature is for the 60 local interpreters to have carried 91.41% of the total volume of work by themselves, an extremely high proportion, which was only doable thanks to ample advance notice and to the European institutions’ low recruiting over that period.

Barcelona has now passed the torch on to Monterrey, Mexico, which is to host the next edition of the Forum on Knowledge in 2007. Now it’s up to you to carry the flame. Good luck!

---

*English version by Beth Gelb*

---

**Recommended citation format:**