Letter from the Editor: The profession of conference interpretation

Standards and principles underlie all professions. Translation and interpreting are not exceptions.

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As conference interpreters we all understand what we mean when we refer to interpreting as a “profession”: a field of work that requires specialized knowledge and training on the one hand, and the body of qualified practitioners on the other. But do most people who come into contact with interpreting comprehend that? And do we all — interpreters, students, clients, potential clients, society at large — use common points of reference when it comes to discussing “professionalism” and “professionalization?”

In today’s world any use of a word beginning with “professional” risks being seen as referring only to money or quality. The omnipresence of sport has something to do with the former as the distinction between amateur and professional. The overuse of “professional” to actually mean “good” is responsible for the latter. “He did a very professional job painting my house,” most likely means that he did a decent enough job, at least better than my 12 year old son would have.

So when I look up “professionalize” in Webster’s Dictionary and find the rather simplistic definition of “to give a professional character to,” I wonder what people take this to mean. Do we still remember the root meaning of “profess” as avowing belief? Do people still understand “professional” as referring to a “profession”?

The American Heritage helps with its definition of “professional” as “Conforming to the standards of a profession.” With this we can begin to understand that “to professionalize” means to bring practice into line with certain defined principles. Indeed, the creation of a body of standards (including a code of ethics) is an essential step in the evolution of an occupation towards a profession. Add a strong dose of internal regulation on how the profession is practiced, sufficient internal enforcement, and ongoing development of the body of knowledge required to practice it, and we get a better grasp on the process. And professionalization is indeed a never ending process since other societal trends can retard it or even reverse it at least in part.

The confusion I see in regard to “professionalism” is similar. I find that many understand the word in its narrowest sense, restricting it to the performance of a discrete task. But it is actually much broader and embraces complete knowledge of and adherence to ethics and standards of practice. And since professionalism is related to how we participate in a career field over a lifetime, it also implies keeping up to date with the latest developments and technologies, and the state of the world in general. It demands preparation and ongoing learning. Needless to say, it also requires collegiality, the will and willingness to get along with colleagues. In other words, it goes far beyond the necessary skill to transmit a message from one language to another,
I would posit that professions are also defined by the fact that they contribute to the common good. Medicine and law are the two examples that most readily come to mind when one thinks of the liberal professions. Medicine is supposed to safeguard human health; law to uphold justice. Such societal contributions, be they absolute or not, are one of the main characteristics setting professions apart from other occupations. In a shrinking world defined and/or dominated by communications, Interpreters, whose ideal is to help people communicate, also make such a contribution.

**Human communication**, the sharing of knowledge and views, **must not be reduced to a commodity** as so many other things are in today’s market-oriented version of the globalized village. We know all too well that substandard communication cannot be compared to a cheap shirt. The latter may not last as long or give one the same prestige in the eyes of others as an expensive one, but it does serve its primary purpose of protecting one from the elements. Substandard communication, however, serves no purpose at all and may even be at cross purposes with true understanding.

Interpretation as communication does not come pre-packaged in different sizes, yet some people would seem to think it does. How else to explain a comment like, “We want someone to say everything, well mostly anyway, while it’s happening, but we don’t need a professional interpreter. We just need a general idea.” Of course, and you want the same model when *you* speak? And by the way, can I sell you the “general idea” of a shirt while I’m at it?

One of the aspects I appreciate about AIIC is that it is an association of individual professionals, each of whom commits to upholding the core principles set out in our [Code of Ethics](#) and [Standard of Professional Practice](#). We do not see these principles as placing limitations on us; rather we see them as a guide to good practice.

Professionals tend to identify with their chosen profession. It is even in the nature of a profession that practitioners come to see themselves as being duty-bound in a number of ways. I would add, however, that it is a duty that liberates and opens a door to true satisfaction. Professionalism has its own rewards and further professionalization of interpreting will be in the best interests of all.

**This issue**

In our **lead article** Danielle Grée gives us a comprehensive view of what goes into organizing interpretation services for a major international event. The Universal Forum of Cultures held in Barcelona over a span of five months in 2004 was a “collective tour de force (which) engendered some 4,700 interpreter days, done by 124 interpreters.” As you will soon discover, it was actually much more than the numbers imply. Some of you may remember Danielle from [An Ordinary Weekend in the Life of a Consultant Interpreter](#). We could easily add “a professional” consultant interpreter to the title, with all that the adjective implies.

Holly Mikkelson has made numerous contributions to the field of court and community interpreting, and with [The Professionalization of Community Interpreting](#) she helps us follow up on some of the themes of our last issue. My thanks go to her not only for giving us permission to reprint this article, but also for contributing to my ruminations.

“The idea of sketching in the booth may seem unprofessional at first, but I find it to be a creative outlet on days when I am repeating what others say,” says Benoît Cliquet (aka Clic!) . We are indeed fortunate that Benoît takes out his drawing pad from time to time. There is nothing unprofessional about seeing ourselves in a humorous light, as Clic’s [Interpreters](#) shows. Moreover, he gives us another generous example of how we can contribute to our profession.

It’s been a while since we have had Phil Smith in the house… but it is the season to be merry and
who better to spur a bit of holiday cheer? He’ll help you choose an appropriate way to show your appreciation for your favorite interpreter friends with some great Gift Ideas.

This issue’s Interpreting in the News tracks the story behind the Barcelona Forum, leads you to some photos of interpreters in action, and follows up on some topics from the past. Be true to that very professional concern of keeping up to date by learning about Globish, finding out what Nushu is, discovering what will be coming to your television screen in 2005, and more… it’s all here at the click of a mouse.

Happy holidays to all. We’ll be back in January.

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