When to quit, how to quit: Should AIIC do something about it?

The question we all need to ask, individually and collectively, is when should interpreters stop interpreting and what should they do afterwards?

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Published: May 24, 2005 Last updated: December 25, 2015

In her “Letter from the President” published in the AIIC Bulletin (March 2005), Jennifer Mackintosh refers to a Council brainstorming session on retirement. In it she talks of life after the booth, about a possible role for AIIC in this regard, and she raises the idea of a compulsory pension fund.

The problem is not new, but I agree with Jenny that awareness of the issue is needed at a time when what used to be a sellers’ market for many years has definitely, and probably definitively, turned into a buyers’ market, our employers in all sectors being the buyers.

The problem has always been twofold, individual and professional, even in what some senior colleagues now call “the good old times”. Let me begin with the personal problem of individual interpreters. Immediately after the foundation of AIIC we were faced with the fact that some of the great conference interpreters of the pre-AIIC area were simply unable to cope, particularly in simultaneous interpretation which was coming into widespread use. Some quit while others kept going, either because they could not accept that their moment of glory was over, or because they needed the money having failed to make provision for their old age, or in the worst case both. Giving up was all the more painful for them as some of their older colleagues kept on working brilliantly year after year. The most shining example was of course Jean Herbert whose career as a conference interpreter started in 1919.

And there we were, watching the drama unfold. Should we as good friends tell them to stop? Should we offer them easy meetings or help them financially? Some of us did, but it always was a most delicate and painful matter and never more than a stopgap solution. Later, when this situation was compounded by some terrible cases of illness or accidental death, we organised fund raising actions for the victims or their families. In some cases the beneficiaries recovered and repaid the aid received, but things were always handled on an ad hoc basis.

The AIIC Solidarity fund was the first attempt to address the problem of individual hardship. Soon after AIIC was founded, Zoran Seleskovitch strove to convince members to accept the idea of collective agreements including an important element of compulsory social security. In the 1960s, in spite of considerable difficulties, negotiations were started with the three main families of intergovernmental organisations (UN, Coordinated Organisations, and the European institutions), which led to the conclusion in 1969 of three five-year agreements. Of these, two included a compulsory system of employers’ and interpreters’ contributions into a future “provident fund”.
The AIIC-UN agreement lacked the compulsory employer contribution element, a first shortcoming for the overall system. The second shortcoming was the fact that AIIC did not succeed in creating a single joint AIIC-AITC (International Association of Conference Translators) body for collecting and managing these funds, as had been suggested at the 1965 Assembly. Heated and long-winded debates – the 1968 Bad Godesberg Assembly leaving the worst memories – and last-minute attempts in Paris and Geneva in December 1969 and January 1970, led to the creation, outside of AIIC, of two different pension funds, one (CPIT) based on the principle of capital accumulation (pension fund) and the other (CPIC) on a defined benefit (welfare fund).

In July 1970 the AIIC Council decided to recognise the two bodies and to treat them on an equal footing in the three Agreements with intergovernmental organisations. The compulsory illness, accident and loss-of-earnings element was added a few years later (Stewart-Wrightson), and at the 1978 New York AIIC Assembly the system was extended to provide all freelance interpreters worldwide with a level of insurance cover very similar to the compulsory system introduced into the agreements. All this undoubtedly created greater security for freelance conference interpreters and could have provided a good basis for a complementary pension scheme. But was it? In many cases yes, but the painful debate on the acceptability of retired staff interpreters working as freelancers for their former employers and the questions raised by our President in her article show that there is a real problem. I will come back to this later.

Returning to the problem of retirement, the question we need to ask is when should interpreters stop interpreting and what should they do afterwards? I am not speaking here of retirement at a compulsory age limit imposed by an institution which, as we all know, does not in any way imply that an interpreter will stop working altogether. The lessons of modern geriatrics, accepted even by governmental and intergovernmental institutions, and most recently by the G-7/8 Summit on Okinawa in July 2000, teach us that for ageing persons continued activity, including professional activity, is highly beneficial and should be encouraged and facilitated. The argument that interpreters should stop working at a given age to make way for the younger generation is not relevant here.

Nevertheless, the question as to when an interpreter should quit interpreting is justified. It is impossible to lay down hard and fast rules as the circumstances of each interpreter differ. Allow me therefore to take my own example and to share my philosophy which is intended as a contribution to the forthcoming debate.

That philosophy started to take shape back in the autumn of 1968 when, in a small café in Paris after a Council session where I had stood in for the Benelux Council member, Jean Herbert, then President of AIIC, successfully convinced me to stand as a candidate for his succession. At some moment the conversation turned to the “old days” and we began to speak of the drama retirement had posed for some of our great colleagues. I asked Jean: “What do you think about it?” He answered:

I think that it may not be easy to say exactly when one should quit. At any rate, I will not be influenced in my decision by what my dear colleagues may think or say. For me, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. Those judging the pudding are my employers. As long as they want me, I continue, provided working is still fun for me. The day they tell me I should quit, or the day when several of them stop employing me - one is not enough, he might have a freak reason – I quit. Mind you, I shall stop interpreting, which does not mean that there are not many other things, such as writing, I shall still be able, I hope, to continue doing to my full satisfaction.”

I took Jean Herbert’s words to heart. As a point of interest, Jean Herbert never had to decide when to quit. He died from an embolism at his home at the age of 83 in full command of his mental and
physical faculties. I had worked with him a few weeks before at a very difficult meeting. He was as brilliant as ever.

So, quite logically, you are going to ask me: “And what about you?” Having raised this controversial issue in the first place, I think I owe you an answer. I decided to quit in stages. When I first started to work as an interpreter at the end of the 1940s, consecutive was the predominant mode of interpreting. I remember working alone from and into two or three languages for several days on the trot. I loved consecutive because of the central position of the interpreter in the meeting, the ability to set my own pace and the opportunity to diplomatically correct speakers’ errors; you could ask questions when in doubt and gracefully accept having your own mistakes corrected. In short, it was gratifying, intelligent work. And yet, about ten years ago, I stopped accepting work in consecutive. Taking and reading notes had become difficult. Not being able to discreetly leave the meeting created problems common to many elderly men. Sitting for hours on end and the degree of concentration required had become too much. So I quit consecutive.

Now, past 80, two of my regular customers have stopped using my services, one without explanation, and the other with a polite hint that “it might be time for a change of generation”. Moreover, I noted that sometimes while interpreting, but also in ordinary conversation, words that sound alike but have different meanings would slip out of my mouth, the type of slip of the tongue that often goes unnoticed, but that could create misunderstandings in a meeting with simultaneous interpretation. For example: “Il a donné une réponse dermato logique” (instead of épidermique). “J’ai lu cela dans le American Express” (instead of Herald Tribune). “Je vous donne cela dans l’ordre chorégraphique” (instead of chronologique). Moreover, I noticed that top speed simultaneous interpretation on the basis of written texts became very tiring much sooner than it had some years ago.

For all these reasons I have decided to phase out working in the booth. I may still accept a meeting occasionally if it deals with a subject I know very well, but I shall refuse all the others and quit working as an interpreter altogether in the very near future. Which does not mean, of course, that I shall discontinue my activity as a consultant interpreter recruiting and managing teams of interpreters. Furthermore, there are other activities relating to the profession which I intend to pursue in order keep abreast of developments and, of course I still have my writing. As I said, this is my personal choice. It is up to every individual interpreter to make his or hers.

Now what about AIIC and retirement? In our profession there are hardly two individual cases that are totally alike. Of course there are the Agreements with the three families of intergovernmental organisations. Institutional employers have their own staff retirement rules. I think there is little hope that AIIC will ever be able to negotiate clauses which would extend the present rule of the European Union governing retired staff interpreters, i.e. to abstain from recruiting them on a freelance basis after retirement, to all the organisations covered by the other two Agreements. Moreover, AIIC cannot possibly impose an age limit on its own freelance members. Even a recommendation that members over a given age should work less as interpreters has virtually no chance of being adopted by the Assembly. And even if it were, I doubt whether it would be very effective.

The only thing AIIC could consider is a system to help members who want to stop working, but whose financial means do not permit them to do so. The aid could take the form of money, but it might also involve facilitating access to other paid activities such as translating, teaching, etc. A real pension fund would be a very ambitious undertaking, all the more as some members would not want to participate as they already have pensions to which they contributed during their working life (retirement funds for permanent staff, national social security systems, private insurance, etc.). Another possible idea – dream on, do I hear you say? – is to have a compulsory levy on membership fees, or a fund based on our Solidarity Fund, providing additional aid to members in
proven cases of distress or need.

Well, I hope to have been able to provide our members with some food for thought and I am looking forward to our future debate on this problem.

With due acknowledgement to Peter Sand for his help with my English

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