The future of conference interpreting: round table discussion

The University of Westminster thought it would be a good idea to invite a number of chief interpreters to an open and interactive discussion on visions of tomorrow during the Future of Conference Interpreting conference. It was my pleasure to chair the session.

Philip H. D. SMITH.
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In my early days as an interpreter January was my month for sitting by the phone and worrying because my diary looked ominously empty and there was as yet no sign of much work coming in. My sympathetic wife told me to get a grip and generally things worked out, but I'm not sure I've fully shaken off residual turn-of-the-year edginess.

Most of us are freelances who accept a certain amount of job insecurity, but we clearly want to get some idea of what the future might bring so we can plan accordingly. Can we make ourselves attractive to potential employers by learning a new passive language, and if so which? Would it make more sense to deepen our knowledge of the languages already in our combination or develop a B in one of them? Interpreters of my vintage were able to work themselves in and allow their languages to bed down before feeling the need to learn more, but now professional life is more pressured.

A major difficulty is that the big users' requirements change. One year they may want lots of people with Greek, and then the following year an offer to learn Greek is met with a blank look from someone reading "Teach Yourself Estonian". The interpreting departments we work for must do the bidding of their political masters, so sometimes struggle to plan for the years ahead.

In the light of all this the University of Westminster thought it would be a good idea to gather chief interpreters from the main interpreter recruiters for an open and interactive discussion on the future. The session brought together the following speakers: Olga Cosmidou (EP), Patricia Arizu (US State Department), Tanya Chauvet (UN Geneva), Brian Fox (SCIC) and Krizstina Eustace-Werkner (freelance and consultant interpreter).

The discussions ranged over many issues and the speakers set out their view of the future very candidly. Here is a digest of the points raised.

EU

The European Masters in Conference Interpretation (EMCI) can be considered a success. Many graduates with a European masters have entered the profession and are now working with the big institutions.
In language terms globalisation has been marked by convergence and divergence. People now readily use English as a lingua franca, yet at the same time demand for more languages is growing. Irish will be an official language at the European Parliament as of January 2007 and Catalan and Galician are now used at the committee of the regions.

Everyone has noticed a tendency at the European Commission for delegates to speak English even when their own language is provided; the results range from impressive fluency to numbing opacity. All speakers agreed that a major difficulty with international English is that it is self-certified, in other words people can say that they are able to operate in English and are simply taken at their word.

Despite the cuts in interpreting made by the Council in 2004, demand for interpreters within the Commission has grown such as to bring figures back to pre-2004 levels.

It can be argued that the big institutions have skewed the interpreting market. In the past supply and demand in terms of languages and number were in broad balance. The European institutions arrived and artificially boosted demand for languages that had previously occupied niche sectors. This boom attracted an unrealistic number of interpreters who were completely dependent on the institutional market. The paradox is that the EU is now seeking to make cuts in a market of their own making. A good example is Swedish where interpreters worked hard to learn the language (at their own trouble and expense) only to have the Council decide to cut back provision of Swedish interpreting.

UN

The UN is currently much taken with the notion of outsourcing and offshoring, which could mean an increased reliance on freelances supporting a small core staff. There is already a shortage of English booth interpreters and particularly those who work from Russian.

State Department

The US State Dept has 1500 interpreters on its lists and 20 staff members. It has traditionally supplied a limited number of languages and is currently struggling to meet the demand for other languages. The department sees interpreters as first and foremost communicators. We interpreters must give serious thought to our performance and the service we provide. In any team of interpreters there has to be room for the virtuosos, who bring up all round performance. Working conditions must be attractive to those at the high end of the market.

Freelance market

We need to take a broader view of the communication market and get away from calling ourselves "interpreters", because clients want effective communication, not interpreting - clearly interpreting may have a role to play but that is not how many of our customers see it. In fact they may actively resist the idea of providing interpreters, but they can understand and accept the need to hire people to help with effective communication. The discussion showed that not everyone liked the "communicator" label, but generally accepted the need to adopt an innovative approach to how we create an awareness of need for our services. Travel agents are a good example of a group that has reinvented itself, as they have now become event managers and are doing very nicely. One area we might consider is offering to coach those who choose to (or are forced to) give papers in English; we can help edit the webcast of the meeting and do any translation work associated with the meeting. We have to adopt a professional approach and put the client first (in the past we've tended to see the interpreter as the centre of things).
Advice for newcomers

As every interpreter and every market is different it is difficult to offer general advice, but some of the speakers were prepared to try.

EU market: both the Commission and the European Parliament face a major shortage of English language interpreters when the current baby-boomers retire in 10-15 years from now, as changes in the UK educational system mean that people are no longer learning languages to a high level. Both institutions see the English booth as key to their interpreting structure. Everyone agreed that any new entrant to the profession will need a strong A language and some will require a solid B they can work into from all their Cs. Cs should include an accession language, but these requirements are fluid.

Freelance market: outside the institutional market newcomers will probably need to broaden the range of the services they provide: translation work, escort interpreting, guiding, teaching, subtitling. Increasingly national language plus English seems to be the main interpreting requirement, which puts pressure on the profession to maintain high standards when living away from the A or B language.

General conclusions

The general tone of the contributions from speakers and the ensuing discussion was cautiously buoyant. Clearly the interpreting market is changing so we need to cover the languages required and we need to do it superbly and strive for the very highest calibre, prepare thoroughly and evince community of interest with the meeting organiser.

In Westminster nobody waved a magic wand or gazed into a crystal ball to vouchsafe a vision of interpreters gambolling on the sunny uplands of international interchange. Yet there was a quiet confidence that if we react sensibly to the current changes we have a future.

As for me, ring next January.

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