Letter from the Editor – standardisation and quality

AIIC developed professional standards knowing that working conditions affect quality – and thus communication. In the 1970’s, the association collaborated with the EU and ISO in elaborating technical standards for built-in booths and sound equipment (ISO 2603), and later extended that cooperation to mobile installations (ISO 4043). Further efforts to understand and promote quality have continued with AIIC-sponsored projects such as the Work Load Study. This collective concern with quality is also felt individually by members, perhaps in ways that might surprise some.

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Published: December 5, 2006 Last updated: December 2, 2015

In 1996, the Private Market Sector invited an expert on quality control systems to a meeting in Lisbon to explore the possibility of AIIC or its members applying for ISO quality certification. Interpreters instinctively knew that good performance was a competitive advantage, and consultant interpreters were beginning to recognise that quality had to be made visible to the potential client. But how could we do that?

Our quality control expert recognised the difficulty of the task. Quality would be difficult to control in conference interpreting precisely because it depends on so many factors beyond the interpreter. Listeners may very well form different impressions and give different evaluations. In other words, he deemed that a degree of subjectivity was unavoidable. Solution? Perhaps to leave individual certification aside and seek a general quality guarantee through a series of complementary measures: sound admission procedures, definition of more objective criteria, professional standards and norms designed to facilitate quality, and promotion of the ISO standards on booths and equipment. This, he said, would be tantamount to creating a quality system.

It's clear, however, that this system is not a closed, controllable one. Interpreters do not run a production line with fixed inspection points; we work within society. Communication occurs among people and all involved must be aware of the role others are playing, but all too often the interpreters' role is misunderstood or forgotten. The world we live in has its own commonplace assumptions that seem ineradicable (and curiously universal): anyone who speaks more than one language can be an interpreter; talent is the determining factor in performance; interpreters can work alone (because they are so talented); preparation is irrelevant because translation is about words; the way a speaker talks won't influence the interpretation; any sound coming through a headset must be good sound; if you can hear you don't need to see, etc. Such preconceptions lead to good standards falling by the wayside.

Individual certification doesn't seem to be the answer, although it is still a popular idea in a profession that does not require a license. In fact, AIIC doesn't consider its admission process to be certification in the strict sense of the word. By requiring a minimum number of days worked under
professional conditions, AIIC effectively asks applicants to pass the "test of the workplace." By requiring sponsorship from members who have worked with and listened to an applicant, AIIC again puts the emphasis on performance in real settings. And applicants swear to abide by a code of ethics and professional standards that have been designed to promote professionalism and quality.

When AIIC decided to post a Directory of Consultant Interpreters on this website, it also established a Best Practice for Consultant Interpreters. In effect, it extended its quality system. It is not surprising that some of the groups on that list would search for further ways to improve the services they offer by looking into ISO quality management certification. It's a logical step in the quest that our association embarked upon 50 years ago.

This Issue

We start off this issue with a review of booths - what they look like, what they offer, and why the two may not necessarily go together. Standards provide information on the indispensable minimum needed for good communication, as Danielle Grée illustrates in On the use of standardised booths for optimal interpreting quality.

Within AIIC the reference point for all technical questions is our Technical and Health Committee. This issue offers fresh information on what the THC is doing, who is involved, and how to contact them.

Turkey has hit the ground running as far as technical initiatives go, organising information sessions, lobbying for remodeling of booths, and pushing for standardisation at the national level. Hande Guner elaborates on these developments in Technical standards in interpreting: at work in Turkey.

Phil Smith has come out for a breath of air. His newly oxygenated Off mic examines booths from both sides of the anti-glare glass, and asks some questions that you may be able to answer for him.

We shift gears with our next two articles to take a look at another kind of standardisation - quality management certification - and how two AIIC consultant interpreter groups have handled it: The way towards ISO certification - the experience of CRIC in Rome and AMI opts for ISO certification.

In January 2007 there will be a joint Private Market Sector and Inter-Regional meeting in Bangkok. Nur Deris Ottoman points her eyes eastward in anticipation and wonders if we might not be back on the Silk Road.

And the usual bookend to this introduction, Language in the News, is back with some further quality considerations from the EU, some information on R&D, and a short reflection of interpreters as fictional characters.

We at Communicate! hope you all had a busy - but not too busy - year. We wish you a happy holiday period and look forward to being back with you in 2007.

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