A brief reflection on interpretation and professionalism

The 6th National Conference and International Forum on Interpreting was held at Beijing's University of International Business and Economics in October 2006. As President of AIIC, I was invited to address the audience of students and teachers in attendance. Here is what I said to them.

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Distinguished participants, ladies and gentlemen,

I do not know whether I am more honoured or more impressed to be here. This is my first visit to China and I can tell you that I am indeed thrilled to be here and to participate in this conference. Thank you again for the opportunity you have afforded AIIC to make its voice heard on this occasion.

I will start with apologies. First of all, I have to apologize because I am not going to entertain you. Mr Benedetti came with some very interesting images and a PowerPoint presentation. As I will not be able to offer you the opportunity to look at more nice pictures, you will have nothing to do but concentrate on what I am saying. I also must apologize for the fact that most of what I am going to say has probably already been said or will be said again during the conference. You will have to bear with the repetition. And then I have to apologize because unlike most of you, I am not an owner of a PhD or a researcher in an academic field; I am simply a practitioner. It also happens that I teach interpreting at ETI in Geneva, but I am not a professor and I do not do research myself. I will just be presenting the views of someone who works as an interpreter everyday (or as often as possible), speaking on behalf of AIIC and sharing some of the collective wisdom, knowledge and experience which our professional association has accumulated over the last 50 years.

I think that the recipe for good interpretation is fairly simple. You need but three ingredients: languages, interpretation techniques and knowledge of the subject matter. The only problem is that you need these three elements at the highest possible level of proficiency and expertise. It's not merely a matter of speaking and understanding languages; you have to speak and understand them nearly to perfection. You don't just have to know what interpretation techniques are about; you have to practice them so often that you become an expert in using them. You don't just need to have a general idea of the technical subject matter you are supposed to interpret; you have to be very familiar with it, truly understand what is going on, and have a good grasp of the context in which the specific conference you are working for is taking place.

Let me give you an example of the last criterion, subject matter. It so happens that a friend of mine was working at the Geneva Motor Show where the renowned auto manufacturer BMW was presenting a number of new lines which they had decided to name the 3 series, the 5 series and the 7 series. One of the interpreters was neither interested in nor knowledgeable about cars, and simply
decided to talk about "the car with 3 wheels", "the car with 5 wheels" and "the car with 7 wheels'!

I can also offer an example on technique. I was working abroad with a colleague who was a very good simultaneous interpreter, and who was suddenly asked to interpret at a press conference in consecutive. Unfortunately for her, she accepted, although she had no inkling of what consecutive is all about. She did not know what to note down, how to behave, how and when to interpret, so the whole thing was a disaster. Although she had mastery of both languages and the subject matter, the interpretation was a failure for lack of technique.

As far as languages are concerned, I am sure you are aware of the famous language combination that AIIC, amongst others, has introduced: A, B and C languages. This is essentially a practical system. It does not mean, contrary to what some may think, that knowledge of your A language is better than that of your B, and that of your B better than that of your C. The classification is simply made according to the purpose to which each language is put. Indeed, knowing and mastering all your language is in any case a prerequisite; it is a given that a good interpreter masters his or her languages to perfection. AIIC introduced the A-B-C categories because we realized that there are different situations in which each is used. One's A language, as you know, is your native tongue or a language you are capable of working into 'without thinking' so to speak. The B language is one you work out of and sometimes into, and that can vary from practically never to almost 70 or 80 percent of the time. And your C languages are all the others you interpret from but never into. That does not mean that you master them less well than your A or B languages, but simply that you do not use them actively.

As I said, this classification system was formulated for practical reasons according to the purpose of each situation. Therefore it is important that I underline the purpose of interpretation as I see it.

I see interpretation as an act of immediate communication, and I shall dwell in turn on the three elements of that definition. It's an act and not a fact, one could say. It's an act because it is something happening, because of its oral character and because it takes place in a given situation in which other people can react to it. In that situation, things are changing, nothing is predetermined or set in concrete, everything depends on the specific circumstances. The opposite of an "act" would be a "fact", a given reality like a sheet of paper with a text on it that you are asked to translate. The latter is fixed and no longer subject to change - so you are confronted with a fact, a tangible thing that exists and will remain static. On the other hand, interpretation is all about an act, something that is going on and evolving with time.

It is also an act of immediate communication. By immediate I mean that the speaker's utterance is pronounced in a "live" situation, interpreted, immediately listened to and hopefully understood by the audience, and then either set in memory or forgotten. But in any case, unlike written translation (and with the exception of recordings), this immediate transfer of information has its aim in the 'here and now' and is not supposed to be repeated or reproduced outside the specific context of the initial, original situation.

Finally, let me insist that interpreting is always about communication. There certainly is no point in recruiting interpreters if understanding between the participants is not guaranteed, either through the choice of languages on offer or through the quality of the interpretation. Unfortunately, it is a paradox that the only persons who can legitimately give an opinion on the quality of the interpretation they are dependent upon are the listeners, the users of the service we provide. But at the same time they are the only ones who, by definition, are not in a position to judge the quality of the service, because they do not know both source and target language, and therefore have no idea whether the interpreter is really saying exactly what the speaker is saying!

On top of the three ingredients I mentioned earlier, there is another one, of the utmost importance,
which makes us not only interpreters (able to serve as bridges between cultures) and not only conference interpreters (able to master the most challenging difficulties), but professional conference interpreters. That additional ingredient is, precisely, professionalism.

From the AIIC Code of Professional Ethics, on which I could deliver a whole lecture (some other time, maybe!), I would like to select a single provision, which is directly linked to the theme of this conference (working into a B language). Article 3(a) stipulates that interpreters shall not accept any assignment for which they are not qualified.

I want to lay particular stress on this provision, which goes much further than one may think at first glance. Interpreters shall not accept any assignment for which they are not qualified. This means, of course, that if interpreters realize that they will not have sufficient time or background material to prepare for the conference (subject matter), they should refuse the assignment. Similarly, if they consider the technique required for that specific assignment to be beyond their capabilities, they should refuse. And first and foremost, they should also refuse if their language combination as defined earlier does not correspond to the communication requirements of the meeting.

Allow me to take myself as an example. My language combination is A French, B English and C German, meaning that if I am asked to work from English or German into my A language (French), I believe I can do a good, or hopefully, most of the time even a very good job, fulfilling the expectations of the listeners and the requirements of the conference. If I am asked to work from my A (French) into my B (English), all other circumstances being appropriate (namely, if I have had sufficient time to prepare the subject matter, if the hours are not too long, and if no other better qualified colleague is available), I believe I can do a satisfactory job. But if I am asked to work in any other direction, let us say from A (French) into C (German), I know that there is no way I can provide a professional service, and there is therefore no way that I will accept the offer. This rule seems perfectly obvious if one takes the example of languages I do not know at all: should I be asked to interpret from Russian into Chinese, there would be no hesitation whatsoever and I would immediately explain that I have no knowledge of these languages and therefore the very first requirement for me to be able to act as an interpreter is not fulfilled. But as soon as the distinction becomes less clear-cut, like in the case of languages of which I have some knowledge, it is up to me, as a professional, to remember this provision of the Code of Professional Ethics and decline any offer for which I know I cannot possibly provide a quality service. This is particularly true when relay is used, i.e. if I am asked to serve as a pivot, in which case the quality requirements imposed on my interpretation are even more stringent, since what I say will be used by colleagues working into other languages.

What, then, is quality service? Well, "simply" to deliver in another language, with a pleasant voice, the original message in full, with all its details, intentions, irony, humour and nuances; to deliver it fluently and without delay in a style adapted to the audience, matching that of the speaker and using the right terminology. No small feat, if one thinks of it, but anything less would not do the trick!

Why is it, then, that a relatively or fairly good service is not enough and that we constantly have to strive for perfection? To answer that question, one needs to take a look at what the outside world expects from us. And there a sobering observation has to be made: nobody needs an interpreter. Does anybody need a shoe polisher? Or, for that matter, does anybody need a doctor, a restaurant cook or a lawyer? Certainly not. However, everyone does need polished shoes, health care, good meals or sound legal advice. In other words, everybody needs the service but nobody needs the specific providers - unless they are professionals. If you notice that you can do just as well by buying shoe polish and polishing your shoes yourself, you shall not ask a shoe polisher to do it for you. Similarly, the world does not need interpreters. But it does need good communication. Only if it understands that interpreters are that particular class of people who deliver good communication services will it accept us as professionals and go on recruiting us.
So we have a tremendous responsibility: to act in every way and at every moment as professionals in order to be perceived and recognised as such. The future of the whole profession depends on each one of us. For our profession to prosper, we have to make the effort to act and be seen as acting as professionals who make a positive contribution to communication between people and cultures. This is vital for the development of our individual careers as well as for the prosperity of our common profession.

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