Letter from the president: AIIC and multilingualism

No concept is more fashionable these days than multilingualism. At the start of the new millennium, AIIC launched a New Multilingualism Project (that later led to the creation of our Teranga Network); the European Union has a Commissioner for Multilingualism, and finally, 2008 has been declared the International Year of Languages by the UN. This is the perfect time to take stock of this seductive but rather ambiguous concept.

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AIIC launched its New Multilingualism Project to take the initiative when the EU was about to enlarge and "new" languages were starting to be used in conference situations. We felt compelled to examine and voice an opinion on the use of A, B and C languages, the use of relay, and related technical considerations. The last of these, in particular, led to a recent agreement regulating conditions for use of remote interpretation in the European Union, which will serve us as a reference point when reviewing our own texts, and which could serve as an inspiration for other sectors in our association that already have to respond to requests for remote interpreting.

Questions related to interpretation to and from languages used less frequently in the past have now been taken on by AIIC's Teranga/Dialogue, the continuation of the multilingualism project. Within this framework, AIIC regions decided to sponsor/partner countries in which our association was not yet represented and whose languages were not widely used by members, and lent support to professional interpreters residing in those countries.

As for the European Union, it has a Commissioner for Multilingualism charged with promoting language teaching, linguistic research and multilingual communication in the Union in order to foster linguistic diversity, a command of various languages, and the greater mobility of workers.

We, conference interpreters, support the principles of openness and tolerance, attitudes that are enhanced by a knowledge of languages (see our declaration of linguistic diversity). We cannot but be delighted by the importance the EU has accorded this matter. However, we must be careful to make sure that behind the commendable objectives, the promotion of multilingualism does not conceal hidden, less desirable goals, such as the creation of a brave new world in which professional language intermediaries are "unnecessary" because everyone "speaks languages." AIIC would never subscribe to such an approach because we know better than anyone to what extent approximate communication is not real communication and does not lead to genuine mutual understanding.

As for the United Nations, it has declared 2008 the International Year of Languages. AIIC must welcome this initiative because it is aimed precisely at strengthening not only linguistic diversity in general, but also the use (and therefore translation and interpretation) of all the official United Nations languages. The UN does not have an enlargement (including a linguistic enlargement) to
cope with like the EU. Therefore, through the International Year of Languages, it can improve the resources and working conditions of language services in order to optimize quality. Speaking in more general terms, the Ambassador of France to the United Nations, Jean-Marc de la Sablière, went so far as to declare: "Multilingualism is the equivalent of multilateralism in the realm of language, culture and civilization."

I hope that the International Year of Languages will further imbue us with the awareness that we have a specific role to play: to foster communication across languages and cultures using our comprehensive understanding of and respect for them. We approach this task with professionalism, armed with all the learning and know-how we possess, aware that we can contribute something that a more-or-less well-spoken lingua franca could never contribute. Thus, for us multilingualism means that everyone should be allowed to express his or her thoughts spontaneously and naturally in his or her own language, the ins and out of which he/she masters. We'll be there to grasp what they mean to say and render it in another language with all its original flavor: that is what our profession is all about.

Happy New Year to you all!

This issue

Every year AIIC invites members to participate in a confidential survey on the Extranet. Jacquy Neff has studied the data from the last two years and has sent us this statistical portrait of AIIC: 2005-06.

In past issues Wadi Keiser has evoked memories of Vienna and Wroclaw. Now he has decided to share with us some reminiscences of post-WWII conference interpreting for international unions.

AIIC members work in myriad national and international organisations, and the members of the Staff Interpreters Committee share information on changes and trends in their respective workplaces. Once again we offer our readers their annual Overview of Organisations.

There seems to be no shortage of literary appearances for interpreters these days. Does Suzanne Glass' The Interpreter convince more than others? Check out Ken Colgan's review of the book.

Phil Smith recently started out on a cleaning spree and found himself on memory lane. Little Triggers is his latest Off Mic contribution.

AIIC members have been invited to discuss professional secrecy in the January 2009 Assembly. To make an early contribution to that examination, Language in the news visits various websites with something to say on ethics and interpreting.

This year we'll be publishing only four issue of Communicate!. Any submissions for our summer issue should be sent in before 7 May 2008.

Recommended citation format: