Letter from the Editor: freelance interpreting

An interpreter is an interpreter is an interpreter. The proliferation of titles and categories is often nothing more than a marketing ploy - create a niche and occupy it. Employers play the game too, searching for ways to corner markets and cut expenses. What's a freelancer to do?

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Interpreters

Our lead article from Holly Mikkelson more than adequately covers the "labels attached to different types of interpreting"; there is not much to add.

I'll offer but one thought. I was introduced to conference interpreting as a general field, not a specialisation; if I were successful in my studies, I would be prepared to accept assignments and gain experience. The focus was on working one's way from beginner to established veteran and it never occurred to me to think of progressing from one subcategory to another as if there were a hierarchy, or of choosing one over others as if they were distinct fields - for one simple reason: all were interpreting and could figure in my career at any time.

Today we see that employers and middlemen use adjectives for their own purposes with the result that practitioners are Balkanized. I doubt much good comes from such compartmentalization; perhaps the time has come for us to drop the qualifiers and simply call ourselves interpreters.

Freelancer, I presume

A similar evolution has occurred with how we are defined by others as economic actors. Freelancer is general enough - one can offer services to all and sundry and choose among them. Plus the word freelancer conjures the image of a person. But with changing tax codes, company-centric globalization and a general move away from traditional employment relationships with their balance of rights and obligations, other terms have come into use. Let's look at a few.

Independent contractor is used as a synonym for freelancer, consultant or self-employed person in general. Companies hiring freelancers like the term because it would seem to absolve them of any obligations they would have toward an employee (health benefits, pensions, maternity leave, etc.).

In general, people equate being an independent contractor to running a business, and many intermediaries have their own general contracts setting out the terms of the relationship (business-to-business as it were). Example: an agency once sent me a framework contract that stipulated that I would work for the quoted fee for any assignment in a 12-month period, would never have contact with a client (i.e. if I had an on-the-job question, I would pose it to the agency's project manager who would relay it the client!), and was prohibited from working for their client or anyone else I met on the job for the following 24 months! I refused. Among other reasons, I set fees according to the demands of a specific job and will not give up the right to do so (as I am sure the
agency wouldn't vis-à-vis its clients).

Recently some of the core elements of this legal category have been challenged in the United States. Read [federal class-action lawsuit challenges independent contractor definition](#).

**Vendor**, in the most general sense, refers to a business entity that supplies a good or service. As in the case mentioned above, the client/vendor agreement is usually ongoing, with a purchase order stipulating the details (time period, fees, etc.). The same problems mentioned above occur.

A **Subcontractor** is a natural person or business that enters into agreement to perform all or part of another's contract. In others words, it would seem that we are *de facto* subcontractors whenever hired and paid by a middleman.

An end-user's expenses are bound to increase as the supply chain lengthens, as one entity contracts another that hires yet another and so on. The prevalence of such arrangements never ceases to amaze me. It may come down to the fact that language services have indeed become *big business* and enterprises will become even bigger (see [Language in the News](#) under the current brand of globalization - all the more reason for practitioners to unite.

**Will something change?**

Wikipedia says "In Europe, the perceived disadvantages of being freelance have led the European Union to research the area, producing draft papers that would, if enforced, make it illegal for companies or organisations to employ freelancers directly, unless the freelancer was entitled to benefits such as pension contributions and holiday pay."

It may be that so-called *labor market flexibility* is being re-examined; I hope so. I love being a freelancer and would not like to see freelance work disappear or be relegated to intermediary firms. And I have to wonder if the world economy and even government can survive on a foundation of independent contractors and vendors.

**In our own hands**

It must be mentioned that some organisations hire freelance interpreters as *temporary employees* or *short-term staff* with concomitant benefits. Such is the case for work under [AIIC agreements](#). Contributions to pension funds are included and health insurance coverage is provided, as I can certify: last year I came down with a vicious case of food poisoning while on assignment with the FAO and ended up in hospital. Not only did the group health plan cover me, but I was also spared any loss of earnings for the day I couldn't work.

So freelancers - navigate the global sea with an eye to danger. Keep your radar and radio on, pass information along, and come home with more effective ways to work together.

**This Issue**

As promised above, we start off with a reasoned examination of the use of categories in interpreting. Author Holly Mikkelson says "The title of this paper may seem simplistic, but it represents decades of reflection on the practice of interpreting." See [Interpreting Is Interpreting - Or Is It?](#)

Our next offering begins with similar candor: "Cet article ne sera ni objectif ni docte. Il aborde un sujet brûlant... et d'une complexité infinie... Il résulte d'observations glanées au cours de 13 ans de travail au Le Tribunal pénal international pour l'ex-Yougoslavie (TPIY) où est née une nouvelle désignation linguistique, le bcs (bosniaque/croate/serbe)." Kia Deschamps' [À quand une cabine flamande ... ou wallonne?](#)

Good old-fashioned phrasebooks never go out of style - they have too many charms. "The first
A surprising fact about phrasebooks is that you hardly ever find what you want to say in them." Read more in My Accidental Greek Wedding by Phillip Hill.

AIIC colleagues in Africa have looked to the future of the profession and taken action, as Jibola Sofolahan tells us in Training, upgrading, mentoring: Nigeria responds to needs.

As usual at this time of year, the AIIC Staff Interpreters' Committee sends us their "insiders' update on developments across organisations employing conference interpreters." Go to Overview of Organisations: 2009.

We wrap up this issue with an extended view of markets, similarities of language use in very different cultures, a few good reads, and the usual panoply of links to sites of interest in Language in the News.

Articles reflect the views of the author(s) and should not be taken to represent the official position of AIIC.

Communicate! invites submission of articles from members and non-members alike. Please contact l.luccarelli@fjd2tq.aiic.net or info@wtj1wwxwx.aiic.net.

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