Letter from the president: the year of the tiger and other reflections on language and interpreting

The Chinese Year of the Tiger has just begun. This simple statement can veil many things, depending on our own culture and view of the world. This is why I would like to share some ideas with you.

Benoît KREMER.
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Let's begin with the image of the tiger. For a European the word evokes the animal, lithe and ferocious, a hideous beauty and the "man-eater" of exotic stories. A schoolchild will conjure up a big cat with striped fur. Someone well-heeled and dressy may see a wonderful fur coat. A zoologist will think of where the tiger can still roam free, of places it is under threat, of its habitat and how to protect it. An Indian villager will fear its growls too close to human habitation. For an Asian the tiger is a male prince, a warrior, a symbol of strength, whilst a Buddhist will see it as symbolizing faith and spiritual endeavour. In Chinese astrology the Year of the Tiger denotes a time of quickening change, hardship, uncertainty and of opportunities for the taking.

Because of their training interpreters will clearly have a fine sense of what the tiger is and evokes, but without a dominant view or preference, and they can draw from this well as and when circumstance dictates: the zoology at a veterinary congress, the social aspects at a meeting on the coexistence of wild animals and towns and villages, the environmental aspects at a meeting on bio-diversity.

We can well imagine that as soon as they hear the word "tiger" interpreters will see the animal in their mind's eye, but also its attributes and associations. We all know that interpreters do not work with words. No speaker would ever utter the word "tiger" in isolation, and then wait for the interpreter to render it into another language. The word occurs in expressions (for example "Year of the Tiger") that are part of a sentence (for example "Happy Year of the Tiger") which is itself in a precise context (a speaker addressing an audience).

The context is not arbitrary and the speaker utters the sentence for a reason. He may be Chinese and simply using a turn of phrase that is usual at this time of year (in other words he wants to be courteous or just follow a social habit), or he may be a Westerner and wish to surprise or engage his audience (in other words he wants to fascinate, to stand out).

The situations and context in which this sentence may be used are multiple and the interpreter has to adapt to each of them by discerning the nuance or intention behind it. I think this speaks volumes about the cognitive process within the interpreter's brain. And it forms a clear link with how we approach our translating activity, consciously or not. Contrary to what many unfamiliar with our
profession think, our brain is not a huge dictionary that stores the translation of the word "tiger" (and all the other words...) in all imaginable languages. But it decodes the value of the word in the context in which it is uttered, taking into account all that surrounds the act of speech (intention, social norms, cultural references, but also environment and communication).

Interpretation therefore operates on meaning, and this encourages me to quote from Stephen Pinker's "The Stuff of Thought: Language as a Window into Human Nature":

Semantics is about the relation of words to thought, but it is also about the relation of words to other human concerns. Semantics is about the relation of words to reality – the way that speakers commit themselves to a shared understanding of the truth, and the way their thoughts are anchored to things and situations in the world. It is about the relation of words to a community [...]. It is about the relation of words to emotions: the way in which words don’t just point to things but are saturated with feelings, which can endow the words with a sense of magic, taboo, and sin. And it is about words and social relations – how people use language not just to transfer ideas from head to head but to negotiate the kind of relationship they wish to have with their conversational partner.

I think this describes perfectly the breadth of the field in which our profession has taken root: life itself with all its "technical" activities, human beings with their conveyed intentions, and above all the social relationship among individuals imbued with their own experience, knowledge and feelings who come together at the very heart of the communication process.

Can we rise to the challenges of understanding fully the deep meaning of the words, in all their technical, social and human dimensions?

I wish you a happy Year of the Tiger.

This Issue

AIIC is an association of individuals and “Interpreter Voices” aims to present them in all their variety. Mary Fons i Fleming leads off this issue with a conversation with Loreto Bravo (in Spanish and English).

Laura Bertone’s The Hidden Side of Babel was awarded the initial Samuel I. Hayakawa Prize for “the most outstanding work published in the past five years on topics of direct relevance to the discipline of general semantics.” In his review of the book, Eduardo Kahane deems it “a volume that opens horizons; it is timely and well documented and written with dedication and love for the profession. It deserves our gratitude, if for no other reason” (in English and Spanish).

Back in 2008 AIIC members were invited to participate in a survey – and 704 of them took up the offer. Cornelia Zwischenberger and Franz Pöchhacker now give us a glance into what they said in Survey on Quality and Role: Conference interpreters’ expectations and self-perceptions.

In January of this year a “panel discussion in Rome drew attention to the plight of interpreters in conflict areas and called for fairer treatment by employers.” Read more in Linda Fitchett’s chronicle of the SRO event.

Giulio Bartolini was one of the featured speakers at that forum and has kindly allowed us to post his paper on how the principles of international humanitarian law can be applied to interpreters in conflict situations (in Italian and English).

When is interpreting more than the sum of its parts? Perhaps when it becomes part of a work of art. Take a glance through the gallery window with Benoît Krémer’s Interpreting through an artist's eyes (in French and English).

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.lucarelli@f1jyct.aiic.net or info@pzchexa2.aiic.net.

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