The Critical Link Conference, 26-30 July 2010 at Aston University, Birmingham, was an eye-opener to me about an area of interpreting of which I had very little notion but which is growing in importance – community interpreting.

For many reasons, interpreters need to forge contacts and alliances. Stronger links between AIIC and other organisations and associations in the interpreting world can only help to further the general cause of interpreters everywhere.

At the opening ceremony of our 2009 Assembly we were all impressed by the skills of the sign language interpreter who made it possible for us to appreciate the excellent speech of the President of the French association for the deaf and hard of hearing.

At that same 2009 Assembly, we created a project to try to help interpreters in areas of conflict, which is arousing considerable interest. I therefore look back on that Assembly as a turning point in the life of AIIC: a point at which we definitively turned our back on the ivory tower to which many have condemned us. That tower was a protection, but like many mediaeval castles, it has served its purpose and now must give way to a more modern edifice. Modern architecture is open and full of light, inviting in the outside world. With these thoughts in mind I headed to Critical Link 6.

In September 2004 Communicate! published an article by Maria Rosaria Buri giving a history of Critical Link and her impressions of Critical Link 4 in Stockholm, so I don’t need to repeat all the background. In a nutshell, Critical Link conferences bring together delegates from the world of community interpreting or what some would call public service interpreting. The terms are as diverse as the areas covered and the national context in which it occurs – signing, court and legal interpreting, interpreting in a medical environment, etc.

I went there mainly to meet an American interpreter – Maya Hess (who turned out to be Swiss!) to see if we could cooperate on our project to help interpreters in conflict areas. I’m sure we can, as well as with FIT and others. I also went to learn more about community interpreting which, because of increased migration, is a growth area, especially in developed countries. One of my friends has recently turned to community interpreting - in the medical field - rather than conference interpreting and is finding great fulfillment in doing so.

I was more than surprised by this Critical Link 6. First, it was much bigger than I had imagined: about 300 delegates were on the list - about as many as we gather at our own Assemblies. Nor was it, I finally realized, simply a meeting of practicing interpreters. Most of the participants were representing university departments and presenting academic studies, although some were also practicing interpreters. The subjects they covered were just as varied as anything we have ever looked at - from codes of ethics and good practice to the introduction of new technologies, taking in
linguistic competence, training, and the role of the interpreter along the way. All in all, five gruelling
days of papers, kilometres of corridors and lots of networking. It was all very well organised by the
University of Aston, but the large number of presentations made parallel sessions necessary and it
was sometimes difficult to choose which one to attend.

I found the debates on ethics and good practice interesting. Perhaps more difficult than our own
choice of absolute confidentiality and impartiality, their choice has to take into account the very
special circumstances in which they work: in a direct, caring and empathetic environment it may be
more necessary for them to intercede in order to redress the balance of equality between two often
very unequal parties. One keynote speaker aroused considerable interest - you may have read his
story on the Internet when he spoke out in the name of justice against the practices of the American
Immigration and Customs Enforcement. Although a staunch supporter of absolute confidentiality in
our field, I would like to think that we would have supported a citizen speaking out in the name of
human rights.

In regard to court and legal interpreting, I was very impressed - or perhaps I should say shocked - to
learn that it is the court environment and established practices (often, it seemed to me, unbending
and anachronistic) that determine the way in which the interpreters work; it is very difficult for them
to change these habits of a legal lifetime. Cash flow problems are obviously also more important
than human rights here. We have our own problems in advocating our concept of good working
conditions on our market, but others are in even greater difficulty.

Some of the participants told me they were disappointed that this time Critical Link had become
more ‘academic’ and less a gathering of individual interpreters exchanging ideas or seeking advice
and support. There are also obviously doubts about the very nature of what this conference should
become: like us, they too are reconsidering ‘structures,’ although not for the same reasons (they
don’t seem to have many at all at the moment). They are moving from a Canadian to an international
arena, trying it seemed to me to better organise their profession, perhaps not to try to ‘govern’ it but
to become a ‘resource,’ a place of exchange, for its different branches. Nevertheless, many things
reminded me of our own association. I tried to contribute some opinions on the basis of our
experience and gained much insight myself.

And I was pleased to meet other AIIC interpreters there: Maria Rosaria Buri helping to disentangle
some UN staff in Brindisi from conflicting roles in their workplace; Ruth Morris, who has been
sending me articles she finds about interpreters in conflict whilst writing erudite articles and training
interpreters in court interpreting, as well as presenting papers to Critical Link; Christiane Driesen
and George Drummond presenting a paper about their training course for court and public service
interpreters; Ruth Levy – with whom I sat on AIIC Council many moons ago - still enthusiastic
after many Critical Links and very interested in interpreting in psychological counselling. There
were probably others of our members there; maybe I met them and didn’t know they were members,
in which case I apologize. SCIC, the ICC and FIT were also present.

What I think is significant is that these conferences happen and are important for interpreting, but
too often we don’t know about them or think they don’t concern us. What I learnt in Birmingham is
that we have much in common with this other branch of our profession. It is important to know that
others are developing codes of practice, are trying to obtain - and sometimes obtaining - recognition
and status, and are seeking to professionalize their field. What happens to them will affect us and
whatever we do will affect them. It’s just like the communicating markets of our Agreement Sectors
and Private Market Sector. We should cooperate for the good of us all.

In the Winter 2010 edition of Communicate! Holly Mikkelson concluded her very interesting article
by saying:
This analysis of the different types of interpreting has shown that regardless of the adjective preceding the word "interpreter," practitioners of this profession the world over perform the same service and should meet the same standards of competence. What accounts for the tremendous disparity in working conditions and status is not the nature of the interpreting itself, but external factors that affect the market in which interpreters render their services. The way to lessen this disparity is to recognise the commonalities in interpreters' work and to form strong professional associations and alliances that will unite practitioners striving to achieve common goals.

In a global practice, alliances and common goals are of vital importance. People I spoke to, if they had ever heard of AIIC, said they saw us as a strong association that had done much to organise our profession. Certainly the delegates there were striving for the same goals. I saw many possible alliances. AIIC is represented at many events, our committees and individual members have activities beyond our own field, but we are sometimes remiss in disseminating the results of all this networking. We could do better.

We must continue to broaden and strengthen these ties. ‘Unity in diversity,’ which has become the motto of the EU, could very well become that of interpreters the world over.

I left Birmingham dreaming of an AIIC Assembly as vibrant as the one I had just witnessed. Perhaps we too could invite researchers who find interpreters so fascinating to present the results of their studies; a little change could be interesting. There was just one downside at this Critical Link, which many participants commented on: the registration fees were very high. Maybe that’s why so few individual interpreters were there.

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