The business of conference interpreting in a changing environment

Conference interpreters are often perceived as individualists but quite the opposite is true. The way multilingual events are organised today means that we need to interact with many different parties. But do we all really know each other? An AIIC gathering with PCO representatives in January 2010 in Rome provided some surprising answers to the question.

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Where do we come from?

In the infancy of the profession, conference interpreters were trained mainly on the job; only later did university programs come on the scene, initially teaching mainly consecutive techniques. Today universities offer comprehensive training for would-be interpreters, and research undertaken by faculty contributes decisively to a better understanding of the highly complex processes behind what we do. The profession has experienced an astonishing development in a comparatively short period of time, and it now offers modern solutions attuned to the fast pace of the 21st century.

The Conference Business

A very different aspect of the ongoing changes in our field is the way interpreters fit into the larger picture of the conference business. While in the past every interpreter had an individual contract with the client, today some customers, especially when organising large multilingual events, prefer to resort to a consultant interpreter to take care of recruitment and perhaps even provide technical equipment and support. AIIC recognised the growing importance of consultant interpreters and established a directory of the same with strict criteria for inclusion.

But things have gone further. Many customers prefer a "one-stop-solution" to cover all their needs, which might be as diverse as travel, hotel, flowers, catering and interpretation. In most but not all cases, this means that recruiting is left to a third party that may not know the interpreting profession all that well. Professional conference organisers (PCOs) are part of this group of service providers. This has led to a closer relationship among interpreters, consultant interpreters and PCOs. Again, AIIC was awake to the change and added an annex on PCOs to our professional standards.

Forum with PCOs

Taking advantage of the diverse group attending an AIIC Private Market Sector (PRIMS) Interregional meeting held in Rome in January 2010, AIIC organised a forum on the subject.
On the podium were Emma Golinelli Aru from EGA Congressi, Pierre Fournier, Chief Interpreter of FAO and AIIC member, AIIC President Benoît Kremer, Cristina Monterisi, representing our local colleagues and CRIC, Beatrice Santucci-Fontanelli, Council Member for Italy, and Jean-Pierre Allain, representing the PRIMS.

We also had the great privilege of welcoming a number of Italian PCO representatives who took an active part in the discussion.

The Forum gave interpreters and PCOs an opportunity to put themselves in each other’s shoes. Many similarities were uncovered, even during introductory remarks:

- While PCOs and interpreters contribute to the bustling cosmopolitan life of a city, both groups feel that they don’t get due support or recognition.
- PCOs often suffer from a lack of or out-dated infrastructure. They feel that governments and other entities do not do enough to correct the problem, nor do they sufficiently publicise their city as a congress venue. For their part, interpreters suffer from the fact that the profession is not recognised in any way and there are no formal entry requirements; all who speak or claim to speak two or more languages can call themselves a conference interpreter.
- In January 2010 the economic downturn was hurting everybody. But even in the face of a more competitive business environment, PCOs and interpreters alike opted for higher quality standards. All agreed that only quality would prevail.

Getting to know each other

The discussion showed that we don’t really know each other all that well – even though conference interpreters and PCOs should be no strangers to each other.

On their side, the PCOs present readily admitted that they needed more help from interpreters to better understand the profession and our expertise beyond “knowing languages”, e.g. the intellectual processes involved in transmitting a message. On our side, we know it is not enough to find professionals who simply “know the languages” if we want to put together an optimum team; choosing the right interpreters for a specific event involves much more. The complexity of the subjects dealt with in congresses demands thorough preparation (and the know-how that assures it), as well as a high degree of specialisation.

Another important aspect is the environment that interpreters work in. If PCOs want to succeed, they need to acquire (or outsource) expertise regarding equipment and assure the competence of the technicians handling it. This implies far more than providing good sound for interpreters and attendees, often in difficult settings. It also requires know-how in ever more diverse technical fields, e.g. systems for remote interpreting and knowledge on how they work.

On the other side, interpreters quite often - and wrongly - assume that all this is known and understood by others. Also, as one PCO representatives noted, interpreters are often perceived as complainers. This may be explained by their anxiety to make sure that early and direct communication with the end client - for instance to obtain documents and briefings - is facilitated by the PCO. This aspect is crucial to minimising stress and misunderstanding. Ultimately it would improve service and quality to the benefit of all parties involved.

Taking risks

It was also interesting for interpreters to learn that PCOs do not see themselves as “intermediaries”. On the contrary, they are fully-fledged businesses that often take on financial risks spanning several years. As Emma Golinelli explained, tenders for major events are opened 4 to 6 years in advance.
PCOs draw up global budgets at that time, but some parameters are only defined later on. Sometimes it turns out that specifications have not been drafted very precisely. Moreover, customers frequently redefine requirements even after a budget has been submitted, creating new risks for the PCO. One example that was highlighted: “What if the customer has originally requested interpretation in two languages, but four years later, on the eve of the event, he changes his mind because his attendance list now shows that three languages are needed?” In such an instance, they have no choice but to find savings elsewhere in the budget.

**The importance of PR**

The PCOs’ experience suggests that no matter how diligently a bid is prepared, making oneself known, engaging in extensive public relations activities, and even lobbying are a must. Of course, good references are also essential.

This applies to interpreters as well. One conclusion of this highly interesting exchange was that, despite all efforts to make the profession and its great wealth of experience known, the outside world hasn’t taken note. Perhaps this is related to one of the main characteristics of interpreters: discretion.

In spite of our efforts to publicise what we can contribute and the value added by collaborating with professionals like AIIC interpreters, some PCOs are just beginning to understand that interpretation is more than a line in the budget. This is good news, but conference and consultant interpreters still need to do more to make the profession known, hopefully with the active support of our professional associations.

Two of the key words heard throughout the forum were professionalism and quality. Professionalism also means that each sector needs to respect the competence, expertise and complexity of the other. PCOs and interpreters alike must constantly improve in order to offer premium services. We agreed that for a multilingual conference to be a success, it must have professional services across the board. So why not join forces to realize our common goal – to deliver the best possible solutions for international congresses.

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