Interpretation and certification

Is certification just a buzzword, a passing trend? Must the interpreting community pay reverence to it regardless of who does the certifying? Or has it become just a synonym for qualified? No one answer will suffice; interpreters need to examine the underlying question: how can we ensure what clients, users and practitioners all want: quality.

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“I’m looking for a certified interpreter for Spanish. Are you certified?” an American asked me over the phone. When I asked if he needed someone for written or oral work before a German court, he replied: “No, I’m planning a meeting with Spanish business people, a full day of presentations and Q&A sessions. And I need a certified interpreter.” It took me a while but I managed to convince him that competent interpreters with no formal third-party certification but with a wealth of experience would serve his purpose quite well.

I remained intrigued by this conversation. As I’m not very familiar with the market situation on the other side of the Atlantic, I got in touch with a colleague in the US. He explained that many private sector clients in the USA – and in other countries, as I have learnt since – seem to believe that the only certification interpreters can obtain is the one provided by courts. And that only interpreters with court certification are fully fledged professionals.

As Holly Mikkelson aptly put it, “Interpreting is Interpreting.” But that doesn’t obviate the fact that customers don’t always know what they are looking for or what to expect from interpreters. The language field has grown and become more diversified, but the interpreting profession itself still remains unknown or poorly understood.

Of course, potential customers can’t be expected to know how interpreters are trained or what kind of credentials they might have. If they are not used to working with interpreters, they don’t know what questions to ask or how to judge if the interpreters they are considering are really the best choice for their event. Moreover, many customers are first time users. Practicing interpreters have the experience and know-how to help them find the best solution. I’m proud to say that I succeeded in convincing the American who called, and he ended up extremely satisfied with the interpretation services we provided.

Qualifications

If you need consecutive and/or simultaneous interpreters for an event, what qualifications should you look for? Indeed, what best qualifies as qualification?

First of all, in today’s world it is perfectly reasonable to expect a conference interpreter to have undergone specialised training, usually at the post-graduate level. A Masters degree is a front-line
qualification in its own right. Recognition of the importance of postgraduate training has expanded in recent years with the European Masters in Conference Interpreting programme (EMCI) and broad United Nations collaboration with interpreting schools. And The AIIC Training Committee has laid out Best Practice Recommendations as part of its survey of interpreting schools and programmes.

Many freelancers work with international organisations and national governments that require a stringent test (overseen by staff interpreters) to get on to their list of approved interpreters. But often this is not considered a formal certification as the entry test is for internal use and the organisations in question do not consider themselves accreditation bodies. Nonetheless, proof of ongoing work for the EU, the UN and other such institutions must be considered a qualification of the highest order.

Interpreters must deal with a variety of subjects, and adapt to new technologies and changing market demands. Continuing education is a must and learning how to learn is central to their work. Learning opportunities have proliferated in our professional environment and taking advantage of them is a sign of professionalism.

Interpreters get used to being examined; they are on the line every time they work, judged by peers and public alike. This may be the toughest test of all – the test of the marketplace. Experience and references provide a good yardstick in choosing interpreters.

Membership in a professional association is also an indicator, especially when entrance requirements exist. The International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC) has strict admission criteria based on peer review by senior members.

These are some of the quality criteria customers will want to look for when planning a multilingual meeting. But certification also comes up in a different and much broader context: standardization and quality assurance.

The interpreter’s environment

Standardization is not about practitioners, but about goods and services. In regard to interpreting, booths and sound equipment readily come to mind. AIIC was an active partner in the drafting of ISO standards for fixed and mobile booths.

Today standardization of processes is drawing attention in the service sector. Conference interpreter groups have started to apply for ISO 9000 certification to guarantee that their management system is sound.

Earlier this year AIIC sponsored a meeting on quality assurance in Vienna where we heard how Milan-based AMI, a group composed of AIIC members, opted for ISO certification. One reason was that having a certified quality assurance system in place is a prerequisite for participating in public tenders launched by regional authorities in Italy.

Was it worth the effort? As AIIC and AMI member Mariolina Mappelli puts it, “The system is about constant improvement of the quality you offer, so you can’t rest on your laurels. Key indicators and constant monitoring of processes help you to be more aware of every little detail, and this leads to more quality in general terms. The quality in the interpretation booth may only benefit indirectly, and there are many other aspects that influence quality in interpreting, like the technical set-up. But documenting and monitoring each and every step in the organisation and preparation of an event helps you to constantly improve the general service you provide.”

The discussion
AIIC and its members have been examining certification and standards for conference interpreting for a long time. Many think that proper certification of conference interpreting would be very difficult if not nigh impossible to institute. On the one hand, it would be difficult to find qualified quality inspectors able to judge the performance of interpreters during a conference. On the other, there are valid questions about how such a “test” should be organised (A 10, 20 or 30-minute segment? In just one conference or several? Revalidated how often?). Some colleagues also claim that certification tests are short by necessity and thus less reliable for indicating quality than a MA and work experience.

Some national accreditation authorities have incorporated specialised studies at an advanced level (e.g. post-graduate) into their requirements, and at least one (NAATI – Australia) accepts membership in AIIC as sufficient for an interpreter to be granted their highest level of interpreter accreditation – conference interpreter. This accords with the view of experts in both academia and the quality assurance community that strict admission criteria are central to quality.

AIIC has taken a holistic approach, recognising that a combination of competent interpreters, suitable working conditions, good equipment and technical personnel, sound conference organisation and so on is needed to ensure quality. To that end it has supported research and developed an array of materials (e.g. checklists and guidelines) to help not only interpreters and consultant interpreters, but also speakers, architects, equipment providers and PCOs with one aim in sight: optimum quality.

We all know, however, that our work is never done. We look to our professional association to take the lead and to continue to provide a forum for discussion among all the parties involved.

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