Fair winds: AIIC Assembly highlight

AIIC members travelled to the banks of the River Plate in great numbers and their Argentine hosts had them dancing in the conference room and the streets. Speeches were heard, cheeks were pecked, issues debated, steaks eaten, and legs well and truly shaken.

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The opening: Let a thousand bridges bloom

Doesn’t the Spanish language just keep coming at you? All that vocabulary. The real fun comes with words that in one country mean paperclip and in another sexual intercourse. Of course you can all see the potential for hours of amusement, when simply taking a taxi is fraught with opportunity and innuendo. The language is growing apace (thanks to all those paperclips) and the USA is the now second largest Spanish speaking country in the world after Mexico.

We learned all of this from the Pedro Luis Barcia, President of the Academia Argentina de Letras who opened the Assembly with a fascinating and lively presentation on the language as it enters the 21st century. Think of our Spanish-speaking colleagues: there are eight words for tyre, three for maize, four for green bean. No wonder they need longer than the rest of us. And a siesta.

The speaker came up with a compelling image: interpreters are like bridges - they connect, many use them, but few really notice them.

Organising really is a skill

Organising interpreters has been described as herding kittens. Try arranging a quiet dinner for six in a local trattoria or a trip to the cinema and you will see what I mean. One wants to eat only Icelandic lamb, another is on a diet that forbids her anything that casts a shadow, while yet another was not really listening and turns up at the wrong restaurant. Now imagine trying to teach these wayward children to dance.

In Buenos Aires our colleagues arranged lunchtime tango classes. Tango is the very essence of Buenos Aires, and has been described as the vertical expression of a horizontal desire. I was told to go because there was a man drought at the lessons, so I turned up looking nervous and clutching a bottle of water. We shuffled and gazed anxiously at our feet. However our teachers – the ever patient Alejandra and Daniel – showed us the steps and we did make progress by the end of the week. The health and safety committee visibly relaxed.

Any assembly involves routine stuff, such as how many new members have joined, is oxygen getting to the booths, or which side of the brain an interpreter uses to calculate the per diem (the answer’s both). We found out from CACL (our onomatopoeic gatekeepers) that people still want to
join AIIC and that we are moving into new parts of the world – we now have members working with Kinya-Rwanda, Ki-Swahili and Basque.

Setting our sites high

One of the central debates at the assembly was on our website. You have probably heard that we are currently overhauling the old system that was starting to show its age – always a sensitive point. Our computer consultant/expert/guru began his explanation of the work involved by showing us an iceberg. We were told about the importance of link juice, reference tunnels and sliders (the latter presumably for negotiating the iceberg). The conclusion was that this is a major project that will give us a website that will last and look good – an ambition many of us share.

The website’s success will depend on content, so all members are asked to submit news items, short articles and photographs. This means you!

We spent quite a lot of time voting because all the committees were up for election, and we had to choose a new president. We used electronic voting so democracy was instant. We now have a disciplinary committee to keep the scallywags on the straight and narrow – a kind of Inquisition but without the milquetoast leniency. Our new president is Linda Fitchett – if you see her coming look busy.

The lurking beast

Assembly began its debate on Global English but nobody could understand.

Sorry, I never could resist an open goal.

We conceded that this variety of English is here to stay, but we are very well placed to see its limitations. It’s frustrating for the English booth when a delegate cannot say what he wants to say and you could because you know the underlying structure or turn of phrase lifted from his native language.

Why is Global English so popular with delegates and such a problem for interpreters? Because poor command of vocabulary, grammar and word stress deprives us of the usual markers of intention and narrative direction that you get from the native speaker. It’s akin to the disorientation we suffer when thick fog cloaks a familiar landscape. If you are simply chatting to someone, you have the “wait and see” option when things are not clear, but of course not in the booth. We would be wrong to think only about our own difficulties: Global English causes native speakers to switch off (or go shopping), and provides but seeming understanding and communication. Research has shown that delegates understand more when they speak their own language and use an interpreter. Global English is a kissing cousin of management-speak, thus compounding the problem that a poorly mastered language is larded with a generous portion of out of place jargon. Or to put it in words we all understand: we must re-engineer our toolbox, using all clusters on the roadmap going forward.

Innermost thoughts

The subject of jargon brings me to governance. All right, the word is useful shorthand for a long and hard look at how we run the association. The study involved looking at the size and membership of council, the length of its meetings and coffee breaks. I was seriously distracted by an empanada (Argentinian pasties), but am sure someone made an impassioned plea regarding cleavage. I immediately asked for photos but was ignored. As this project would mean a major reorganisation, many felt we should have the courage to opt for change. And we did: at this, our fork in the road, Assembly chose “the road less travelled by”.

Everyone’s favourite bit of the assembly is financial matters. This year I steeled myself and stayed
in the room, although I did have an erotic daydream about an empanada. The rating agencies have so far left us alone (but we’re not triple A – CACL wouldn’t allow it). The fun of finance is in the small details. Did you know there was such a thing as a remote region? Do they mean a long way away – and from what – or is it a region that just does a lot of weed? I mean, it gets an allowance so it must be spending it on something. We also produced a Euro-pacific DVD, and in fact they asked me to be one of the dancers. Tango lessons open many doors. Oh, by the way dues went down.

All good things come to an end. We all took home some great images of Buenos Aires and Argentina: moonlight on the Paraná River, a melt in your mouth steak at Puerto Madero, “las remeras verdes”, Iguazu, Perito Moreno and medialunas saladas.

It was great – thank you to the Argentinian colleagues. In terms of legacy, all I need to do now is find some tango lessons for two left feet.

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