Interview with new AIIC President Linda Fitchett

What drives AIIC’s new president? What does she see as the main challenges facing our profession today? What would she like to accomplish in her 3-year mandate? We delved into these and other matters in a recent talk with Linda.

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AIIC has an assembly just once every three years. Can you tell our readers what goes on at an assembly and what, if anything, distinguishes it from conferences held by other translators/interpreter associations?

AIIC assemblies are very much a meeting place for members who, spread out across the world rather than living in a single country, don't have many chances to see each other. Rather than being a federation of national associations, AIIC is composed of individual members, roughly 3000 in 100 countries. They may see colleagues who live nearby, many may work in our different committees and working groups, very often communicating only via email. An assembly gives us an opportunity to actually meet up face-to-face, share a meal, have a chat, catch up on family news, and meet new people.

Like most associations we need to cover quite a lot of internal business. Assembly is rather like a parliament. We have to discuss and approve any new laws or rules and regulations. We hear reports from our committees and governing bodies, adopt resolutions, elect our officers (the President and governing body) and the members of our important committees: the Admissions and Language Classifications, Budget and Disciplinary committees. We approve our budget and membership fees, our program of activities…and we hardly ever have enough time to do it all!

Most other associations are either national bodies, which probably do similar things, but don't have the added spice of trying to coordinate between so many different cultures, and can also meet more often, or are Federations which often suffer from being rather too diffuse in nature. We're a very specific group, but that doesn't mean that we're not open to the world and to other branches of the translating/interpreting world.

I think it would be more interesting if we could open up our Assemblies a bit more. Try to deal with some of the administrative business elsewhere and have time to invite non-members, say to a special theme day. In a word, have more time to talk with the outside world.

In your opinion, what were the 2-3 highlights of the meeting?

Well first of all we had a wonderful opening ceremony. This is really the only time we can invite guests to join us, and we were very proud to be able to welcome Professor Pedro Luis Barcia, the
president of the Argentinean Academy of Language and Literature, who gave a really interesting and amusing talk about developments in the Spanish language which everyone thoroughly enjoyed. We were also treated to a very passionate demonstration of tango, and the same couple gave lessons to some of our members during the lunch breaks, which perhaps contributed to the passion of debate later!

We also took a historic decision to recognise sign languages as conference languages and to open our doors to conference interpreters of the signing community. This idea was rejected by Assembly several years ago, so it proves that even though our Association is no longer young – it'll be celebrating its 60th birthday next year – it's nevertheless very capable of adopting new ideas.

And something really exciting, we think, is that we saw a preview of some of the features of our new website which is currently under development. It's still pretty secret, but I'm sure it's going to be a success with both members and non-members – just like Interpreting the World, the Facebook page that we rolled out recently and which has proved very popular.

**What would you put high on your agenda for the next three years? Are there critical issues facing language professions that AIIC should be paying more attention to?**

I really think that we have to put cooperation high on the agenda. Languages develop naturally, the world changes and so must our professions. There are lots of people who think that Global English and automatic translation will put us out of business. I'm not so sure about that. Good quality translation and interpretation is still hard to find. It does exist, but people must realize that good interpreters and good translators have studied long and hard, continue to study all their careers, and live up to high professional and ethical standards. So they are just as expensive to hire as any other professional, and to provide a good service to their clients they need the best working conditions and up-to-date technology that suits them rather than the developers.

Too often clients choose the cheapest solution, are disappointed, and go away with the idea that interpretation or translation 'doesn't work'. But it does if the right 'pair' of client and service-provider gets together. Studies have shown that Global English is not always the best solution. That's true for conference interpreting, for public service ('community') interpreting, for court interpreting and for translating.

So I think that all language associations should be working together to spread this message, to improve professionalism, and to convince governments that language teaching is worth spending money on.

**You've been active in AIIC initiatives on interpreters in conflict zones. What's happened with that project over the last three years?**

We've achieved quite a lot. We held a forum in Rome in January 2010 that brought a lot of people together and gave rise to an interesting study by Professor Giulio Bartolini. We spurred interest in the Council of Europe where parliamentarians signed a declaration calling for the protection of interpreters in conflict zones. We took part in a project called Languages at War and we'll be publishing an article in their conference journal this summer. And we've been working with FIT and Red T to produce a short field guide for interpreters in conflict zones. In fact, it was just finished and can be seen here. The guide is a first step focusing on general principles that both the interpreters and the people using their services should be aware of. Cooperation in this area has been very important to us and I hope we can expand it in the future.

**You recently wrapped up a long career at the European Parliament. What values lead a retired staff interpreter to keep working for the profession?**

As a matter of fact, I spent only half of my career as a staff interpreter in the European Parliament.
Previously I worked as a freelance. So I've seen the advantages and problems on both sides of our working world. I loved the job. But I do think that a service profession with a majority of women has a hard time gaining the respect enjoyed by other professions – where women are generally only respected if they behave like their male counterparts. As in the arts and academia, to which we naturally lean, the linguistic professions are often seen as a kind of unnecessary appendage, only to be used if the economic situation is good but otherwise expendable.

This imbalance doesn't seem to be taking the world into a very bright future. In my own way and now with a little more time on my hands, I'd like to continue to promote the profession which gave me so much satisfaction in my working life.

**How do you think AIIC can attract more staff interpreters to its ranks?**

With great difficulty! Because many staff see AIIC as being mainly useful to freelances, for example in negotiating working agreements for them with major international organisations. Staff are usually represented by their own unions. But it's not an impossible task. Many staff jobs are not as secure as they were and some are not full-time. Interpreters may change during their career from freelance to staff and back again.

In 2007 the AIIC staff interpreters' committee did a survey to find out why staff did or didn't join AIIC. The answers they gave in many ways corresponded to what freelances might have replied. For example, they said they expected a professional association to set technical and ethical standards and to defend working conditions. But they also thought the fees were too high for what they could obtain from AIIC, or that they didn't like the entrance procedures.

Unfortunately our 2009 Assembly rejected the idea of change on those.

But staff interpreters also said they didn't get enough information about AIIC. We think we need to put out information about us in the schools of interpretation and to young interpreters: most of our staff members actually joined before becoming staff and remained out of solidarity, e.g. for our 'trade union' activities. We have our [Vega network](#) which does a lot for young interpreters, and we also think our new websites will have interesting things for them as well as for established interpreters, whether freelance or staff. But mainly I think we can interest everyone in their own profession. We offer seminars and courses that a lot of staff attend. There's been renewed interest in our staff interpreters' committee and quite a few staff attended our recent Assembly and played an active role there. We could do more. We'll try.

**To wrap up, what do you like best about AIIC?**

The renewed enthusiasm I felt at the Assembly.

**This Issue**

- Regular *Communicate!* columnist Phil Smith was in Buenos Aires pen in hand and dancing shoes on feet. He gives us his take on proceedings and tango classes in [Fair Winds: AIIC Assembly Highlights](#).

Our latest statistical survey in now on the members-only website - thanks go to Jacquy Neff for his work. We offer our readers a summary of the results in [AIIC Statshots: Numbers Worth A Thousand words](#).

Next we feature two articles on Media Interpreting. Chikako Tsuruta and Vincent Buck, both veterans in the field, sat down for a chat and wrote up their discussion for us in [Exploring Media Interpreting](#). Then Chikako talks of her own fascination with the work in [Media Interpreting: A Passion for Being There](#).
Do you feel that interpreters are often overlooked? How then must sound technicians feel? Mary Fons i Fleming decided to ask them about their work, and reports on what she learned in *Equipment Suppliers and Technicians Speak to Interpreters*.

Thai interpreter Benjawan Poomsan has written about our métier in *The Interpreter's Journal*, "a thoroughly enjoyable book for anyone with an interest in interpreting, languages, Thailand, and inter-cultural issues" according to Annie Trottier. Read her *review of the book* for more.

Tired of lugging stacks of glossaries and/or your computer to work? Jayne Magistris says there's a *Lightweight Glossary Solution: Interplex for iPad*.

Many believe that training in sight translation contributes to learning simultaneous. Verónica Pérez Guarnieri explains why she agrees in *La traducción a primera vista: el primer paso en el camino de la interpretación simultánea*.

The AIIC Staff Interpreters Committee held their annual meeting at the headquarters of the UN International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda in Arusha, Tanzania. You can find out about interpreting services at the ICTR, training initiatives in Africa, and related matters in *AIIC Staff Interpreters Meet in Africa*.

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**Recommended citation format:**