Sign of the times: AIIC and sign language interpreters

AIIC, the home of conference interpreters worldwide, welcomes sign language interpreter members.

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For many of us these days, the words “sign language interpreter” conjure up images of Lydia Callis, the interpreter whose skilful renditions of New York Mayor Bloomberg’s press briefings during last year’s Hurricane Sandy earned sign language interpreting a place on nightly news reports around the globe. Callis’ performances spawned everything from pseudo-scholarly treatises on the use of facial expressions to reflect grammatical inflection in sign language to light-hearted late-night comedy show spoofs of her work, and in the process raised awareness among the general public of just what it is that sign language interpreters do.

Interpreter associations know that the work of sign language interpreters (or SLIs) extends well beyond the occasional catchy headline, however. We also know that SLIs, just like their spoken language colleagues, can clearly benefit from membership in organizations that defend their profession and reflect their needs as professionals.

For some time now, AIIC’s Sign Language Network has been working together with other associations such as WASLI (the World Association of Sign Language Interpreters) and efsli (the European Forum of Sign Language Interpreters) to see how AIIC can best contribute to addressing these needs. These efforts culminated in the resolution, adopted at AIIC’s 35th Assembly in Buenos Aires, to include sign languages in the language combinations recognized for membership, thereby giving SLIs who work in conference settings access to membership in the world’s only global conference interpreter association.

I recently caught up with Aude-Valérie Monfort, Coordinator of AIIC’s Sign Language Network, to find out more about what this landmark decision means for sign language interpreters, for AIIC, and for the profession as a whole. Here’s what I found out.

MH: The news that AIIC, an association dedicated to conference interpreting, has decided to accept sign language interpreters as members might come as a surprise to some, since people tend to equate sign language interpreting with work in community settings such as hospitals, schools, or courts. But many SLIs also work in the conference setting, isn’t that right?

AVM: Yes, that’s right. Sign languages have been used at conferences for many years, but mainly at national events. This is why spoken language conference interpreters who work mostly at multilingual meetings in international settings are often not aware of this fact. The decision to welcome sign language interpreters as members of AIIC will hopefully contribute to changing this perception.
MH: How much conference work does your average sign language interpreter do? Where might one find an SLI at work?

AVM: If you compare an SLI’s workload with the average workload of a spoken language conference interpreter on the free market, you will see that there are no major differences. In any given year, a sign language conference interpreter might work approximately 20 days at national conferences (interpreting between spoken French and French sign language, for example) and another 20 days for a University (at university lectures, *viva voce* examinations, etc.). Broadcasters are also increasingly using the services of sign language interpreters and some SLIs (like their spoken language counterparts) work very regularly for such clients. The rest of an SLI’s assignments will probably take place in a community setting.

National parliaments represent another conference-style setting where SLIs can be found. Did you know that the linguistic service of the German Parliament offers several sign language interpreting assignments every month, and that this trend is increasing constantly? These types of events are carried out without the participation of spoken language interpreters, though, which is one reason why the spoken language interpreting community is not aware of them.

At the level of international events, The European Union of the Deaf (EUD) is very active in Brussels, lobbying for greater access through the provision of sign language interpreters in the European institutions and at international events. The election of a deaf MEP (Ádám Kosá) in 2009 has also contributed to increasing the profile of SLIs by bringing sign language conference interpreting onto the floor of the European Parliament.

MH: The fact that AIIC now accepts sign languages will undoubtedly increase contact between the two interpreter communities. What can spoken language interpreters learn from sign language interpreters (and vice versa)?

AVM: AIIC is the only global association of conference interpreters. It is active in all areas affecting conference interpreting, i.e. it promotes high standards of quality and ethics in the profession, it represents the interests of its practitioners towards all our clients (international and national institutions, the private sector) and encourages quality in the training of conference interpreters. In view of the fact that an increasing number of sign language interpreters work in a conference setting, they can benefit from AIIC’s expertise in these areas.

As for spoken language interpreters, we can benefit from exposure to the different dimensions that characterize sign language interpreting. For instance, SLIs work primarily with a linguistic and cultural minority and apply different interpreting techniques and skills to interpret between an auditory and a visual language.

Researchers in Interpreting Studies are also increasingly looking to SLIs to learn lessons about the
interpreting process and feed our knowledge of how conference interpreters work.

Another area where we might learn from one another has to do with assignment-related stress encountered in certain conflict situations. Sign language conference interpreters tend to have more experience in managing this type of stress and have even established a coaching system to help their less experienced colleagues deal with it. Cooperation between the two communities, not to mention direct contact between sign and spoken language colleagues, would be extremely beneficial in furthering our knowledge in this regard.

**MH: What are some of the special requirements that must be kept in mind when organizing a mixed team of sign and spoken language interpreters?**

**AVM:** Even when we work in a common setting with similar requirements relating to team strength, the documents needed for preparation, etc., there are some elements that differ in importance for SLIs, such as the need for briefings with the speakers prior to the conference. Also, considering the fact that sign language conference interpreters work in the conference room itself and not in booths, it is useful to arrange an advance meeting of the full interpreting team so that all members can discuss the assignment together. This will allow the various interpreters to get to know each other and help to create the team spirit that is necessary to ensure the success any interpreting assignment, while facilitating the coordination of our work.

A concrete example of this need for coordination can be seen when a sign language conference interpreter interprets a panel involving several deaf participants. In such cases, it is helpful for the spoken language interpreters in the booths to know who s/he is interpreting at any given moment.

**MH: Tell me a little bit more about AIIC’s decision to put sign languages on an equal footing with spoken languages in our association, which was taken at our Assembly in Buenos Aires in January, 2012. What does this decision mean in practical terms?**

**AVM:** In the past, sign language interpreters who worked in conference settings had no opportunity to join a professional association that focuses specifically on conference interpreting. Now, they can apply to join the only global association dedicated to the conference interpreting profession, and enjoy all the benefits that full membership in AIIC offers.

As for what the decision means for AIIC, we aim at being a universal association, representing all conference interpreters wherever they are in the world and whatever the particular type of conference interpreting they perform. Sign language interpreting is an essential aspect of conference interpreting, it is therefore only logical and indispensable that it finds its proper place within our association.

Also, with this decision, AIIC is the first professional association of conference interpreters to take on board sign languages, i.e. to put sign language conference interpreters on an equal footing with spoken language interpreters. It means that we are in a better position, as consultant interpreters, for example, to organize and coordinate a mixed team of sign and spoken language interpreters to meet the specific needs of some of our clients. We can also ensure the appropriate coordination between the conference organizer and the full team of spoken and sign language interpreters prior to the conference, as we discussed a moment ago.

**MH: What has been the response of the sign language interpreting community to AIIC’s decision to include sign languages?**

**AVM:** The response has been overwhelmingly positive. Indeed, the SLI community has been supporting our efforts to raise the profile of sign language conference interpreters since long before Buenos Aires.
Both WASLI and efsli have helped our Network to explain the situation and status of sign languages, sign language interpreting and sign language conference interpreters to our members. In the run-up to Buenos Aires, they both helped us with background material on sign languages to support our resolution. More particularly, in spring 2011 the AIIC Sign Language Network and the efsli board worked closely together to prepare the necessary documentation to support the proposal at the AIIC Assembly. efsli sent a request to the AIIC President together with extensive support letters from WASLI and well known academics in the field (Christopher Stone, Christian Rathmann and Verena Krausneker).

Once the resolution was adopted, these associations naturally shared our happiness and have since been spreading the word among the SLI and deaf communities.

**MH: Have you had any applications for membership from sign language interpreters yet?**

AVM: Yes, I’m pleased to say that we have already accepted one pre-candidate and there are several more candidatures in preparation.

**MH: To wrap up, maybe you could tell me a little bit about the work of AIIC’s Sign Language Network.**

AVM: The Sign Language Network sees its role as mainly one of creating and maintaining links with sign language interpreters and their associations worldwide, while at the same time keeping our members at the regional level informed about sign language issues. We also exchange information with sign language interpreter associations on issues related to training, ethics, working conditions, and the like. In 2010, AIIC became an associate member of efsli, furthering strengthening the bonds between the two communities.

My task is to coordinate the activities of our members throughout the world. This means keeping track of the information we collect in the various countries, as well as organising our meetings (which we try to hold as often as possible, either online or back to back with other AIIC events such as the Private Market Sector meetings, regional meetings, or the Assembly). I am also responsible for liaising with the AIIC Bureau, Council, Treasurer and Secretariat.

**MH: Where can readers go to learn more about sign language interpreting in the conference setting?**

AVM: Their first port of call should definitely be the page maintained by AIIC’s Sign Language Network. Our partner associations WASLI and efsli also have a wealth of interesting information on sign language interpreting for anyone who wants to find out more. On the efsli site, for instance, they’ll find the Sign Language interpreter Guidelines for international/European-level meetings prepared by efsli/EUD (which are also available as a video).

**MH: Thank you very much. It would appear that between Lydia Callis and the work of your Network and SLI associations, the future of sign language interpreting is in good hands!**

AVM: Thank you for your interest, and for spreading the news of our work on the AIIC Blog.

-------Information on joining AIIC

Sign language conference interpreters interested in joining AIIC can find pertinent information on these webpages:

- **[The AIIC website]**
More to explore on the AIIC website

- Guillet, A., Heimgartner, C., & Tschopp, K. *La formation d’interprète en langue des signes*.
- Monfort, A.D. *Sign language interpreter – a graduate profession*.
- Patrie, C. *Sign and spoken language interpreting – a componential approach to skills development*.

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