Interpreters in times of economic crisis: The tale of a taxi driver

Trusted professional credentials, comprehensive language services, and business certification are some of the ways that enterprising interpreters are responding to Greece’s hard-hit meetings market.

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Published: April 8, 2013 Last updated: August 19, 2016

Both for tourists and locals, taking a cab in Athens is an unforgettable experience, to put it mildly. And for all the wrong reasons. Cabs are usually filthy; you may be obliged to share with anybody vaguely going your way, and cab drivers smoke and behave impolitely, never give you a receipt, and never charge the same fare twice for identical routes. The latter is typically Greek: the anecdote has it that if you ask ten Greeks their views on any issue you will get at least eleven different opinions!

But the crisis is changing this and much more. Cab drivers seem to be more civilized lately. I hadn’t realized why until a cab driver confessed – not without some regret – that it was his first week at the wheel. A university graduate and respectable businessman, he directed his own clothing company for 20 years but had to close it down because of the crisis. He started working the night shift driving a friend’s taxi. It would seem that there are hundreds more like him.

So what about interpreters in Greece? Will we share the destiny of our friend the taxi driver? What can we do to survive in the middle of this postmodern war zone?

Some of our colleagues have, indeed, taken up a second job. I know of one who has opened a successful Prosecco bar in a trendy Athenian neighborhood. Another one, as a sideline, rents out flats to foreign journalists covering the Greek crisis (how ironic life can be), and several more have added equally original second jobs.

But what about our profession? How has the crisis influenced our clients and our work?

The state of language services by sector

The public sector has traditionally been a major source of work for freelance interpreters in Greece. Not any more. The number of events organized by central or local authorities has plummeted, and payments come very late or are even blocked for ages by the Ministry of Economy. Meanwhile, the danger of passing from the strong euro to the inflationary drachma is looming with all the consequences that would have for contracts executed but not yet paid. At the same time, in order to achieve further cuts Ministries have started to depend on interpreters accompanying visiting foreign dignitaries instead of hiring locals for high profile meetings with Greek counterparts, which has led to disastrous results on more than one occasion.

The Greek private sector, on the other hand, organizes fewer events but – strangely enough – seems
to be more open to arguments in favor of quality service. The pressure for lower rates is felt less in the private sector and clients seem to have adopted a new mentality, hiring interpreters only when they are really needed and demanding high quality and guarantees. The private sector has readily embraced the idea that “it’s our last opportunity - let’s get it right this time”. This has strengthened interpreters sporting trusted professional credentials (AIIC membership, accreditation by EU institutions), giving them a comparative advantage.

A third - and traditionally very strong - part of the Greek market, namely conference tourism, has also been hit. Potential customers have been deterred by riot footage and reports of social unrest that dominated the international media for many months. They have cancelled events and still pretty much avoid planning conferences in Athens. Although the situation is beginning to return to normal, perceptions are difficult to change.

Paradoxically, though, there is a new, large and generous market: institutional clients headed by the Troika itself! For many interpreters with active Greek and English, the European Commission, IMF and others with work related to the economic crisis (Task Force for Technical Assistance to Greece, new foreign foundations, official visits, negotiations, etc.) represent 10-20% of their annual workload. One wishes that the troika could add 10% to the country’s GDP just as easily!

Many agencies and other intermediaries, which had been charging very low rates for a long time, found it difficult to adjust by further cutting prices and have suffered the consequences. Moreover, they have pretty much lost their biggest client, the public sector. Several agencies have gone out of business or “into hibernation”.

The result has been that interpreters with a quality label behind them have seen new opportunities arise. Indeed, our role as the trusted professionals who work in extremely demanding negotiations with the Troika has been much appreciated. Now it’s up to us to consolidate this position for the “after-crisis era”.

But that doesn’t mean that things have been easy or work plentiful for anyone. Many interpreters have seen their annual workload decline by double-digit figures, as high as 70-80% for those not accredited by the EU institutions. At the same time, taxes and social contributions have skyrocketed. This has led many interpreters to opt out of the public pension and social security system, making them even less employable since they are unable to invoice without being affiliated.

Many interpreters are supplementing their income with translation work. Although rates have collapsed, translation seems to offer a valid alternative. Others have taken a more visionary approach by trying to become more competitive by improving and diversifying the services they provide - offering integrated language services for conferences (including translation and equipment), getting recognized business certification, or even moving to more prestigious office space now that rents are going down.

During this period we have seen a surprisingly high number of interpreters in Greece applying or preparing to apply for AIIC membership. It seems that they see AIIC as an advantage in these turbulent times. At the same time, the pressure to relax standards (on working conditions and the like) is increasing, as in wont to happen in times of crisis.

Overall, the impact of the economic crisis on AIIC interpreters has been harsh but we have several advantages: we are dealing with an exportable good, we are versatile (as by definition is every interpreter!) and we also have the AIIC brand that can help us reposition ourselves for the after-crisis era.

It is commonplace to point out that the Chinese ideogram for “crisis” is the same as that for “opportunity”. Yet, if the taxi driver taking you to the airport on your next visit to Greece confides
that he is a former interpreter, I suggest you refrain from reminding him of that fact.

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