A manager’s view of professional interpreter associations

Professional associations benefit not only their members or the profession as a whole, but also the managers and employers of interpreters. A few examples from my own career illustrate this.

I began to interpret professionally when I joined a NATO agency in Luxembourg in 1976. It was at that time that I was invited to apply for membership in AIIC and began to discover the wider world of the profession. As a staff interpreter, the association seemed to me to be largely preoccupied with matters affecting freelancers. In some ways, it almost acted like their trade union opposing the ‘bosses’. However, I soon realized that aspects of its work had wider relevance. Examples were the ISO technical standards for interpretation facilities (booths, sound systems and so on) drafted with considerable input from AIIC, and the staff interpreter’s charter which I helped to write with André Scialom and others.

Those norms, together with professional standards on team strengths, the length of time linguists may interpret, rest periods and so on, helped my boss in the early part of my career to provide a high quality service in the best conditions. For example, he was able to convince our employer to improve conference facilities and to ensure that adequate numbers of interpreters were assigned to meetings.

In 1989, I moved to SHAPE (NATO’s supreme headquarters in charge of military operations, located in Mons, Belgium) as Head of the Linguistic Service and found myself caught up in a highly bureaucratic and hierarchical structure populated by military officers and civilians who mostly had very little knowledge of or interest in linguistic matters. The booths and sound systems we were expected to use were inadequate in many ways, to such an extent that I was obliged to refuse service in two conference rooms. In another meeting room, the booths had been fitted with ‘one-way mirrors’: the interpreters could see into the room, but the participants could not see into the booths, all because a high-ranking officer did not like to see interpreters! In yet another case, there was only a partial view of the room from the booth and the interpreters could not see all of the participants or the projection screen.

The ISO technical standards were the principal arguments that I was able to use to convince the authorities to improve facilities. The decision-makers began to realize that our ‘complaints’ were not just an example of interpreters being difficult (they can be prima donnas, you know!).

As head linguist at SHAPE, I was responsible for the linguistic services in the entire Allied Command Operations structure and for the internal directive that governed our activities. When I first arrived at the headquarters, that directive mostly covered bureaucratic matters, such as how to request translations or interpretation for meetings. I decided however that it needed to lay down proper standards for linguistic support and I therefore added provisions largely based on professional...
Another thing that greatly helped me as a manager was the existence of the agreement between AIIC and the Coordinated Organizations on the employment conditions of freelance interpreters. The agreement considerably simplified the hiring of freelancers. On the one hand, the financial services could not argue that we were overpaying them or that they were not entitled to per diems or travel expenses. On the other hand, we did not have to spend time arguing with interpreters about how much they were to be paid (although some tried to!) or how much per diem they were entitled to. The rates were the rates!

We regularly needed to hire interpreters in language combinations we could not handle in-house and in which we had little expertise. Whenever possible therefore, we hired members of the professional associations as we knew that their membership was a guarantee of quality and professionalism.

Lastly, the professional standards were constantly in my mind when, from the mid-1990s, I became responsible for organizing linguistic support for NATO’s operational HQs in the Balkans and Afghanistan. In those theatres, and especially in Afghanistan, it was much more difficult to recruit qualified professionals for languages like Bosnian, Albanian, Dari or Pashto. We therefore had to employ staff linguists (both translators and interpreters) who sometimes did not meet the standards expected in other parts of the world, so we endeavoured to bring them up to professional levels of competence through training, supervision and organizational measures.

In 2011, for the first time, NATO adopted a doctrine on how to provide linguistic support for military operations. I was its main drafter and included in it the AIIC team strength standards. One of the difficulties experienced by interpreters in the field is to gain the trust of local people and sometimes of the military personnel employing them. That trust is however enhanced by the knowledge that linguists will abide by ethical standards like neutrality and confidentiality. The doctrine therefore includes a code of ethics based on codes adopted by professional organizations. Furthermore, that code helps employers to understand what can (and cannot) be expected of interpreters.

In addition to defending the interests of its members, the work done by AIIC and its sister associations thus greatly assists international organizations like NATO as well as users and employers of linguists generally.

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