AIIC and EU enlargement: a private market perspective on the new multilingualism

A comparison of EU and private market interpretation settings and needs at a time of enlargement.

Burckhard DOEMPKE.
Published: April 29, 2002 Last updated: December 2, 2015

Much has been said and written about the forthcoming enlargement of the European Union and the impact that adding ten more languages to the existing eleven official languages is likely to have. Most comments have focused on the implications for the European institutions themselves (Parliament, Commission and Council). While it is undoubtedly true that the profession of conference interpretation should be and largely is practiced in accordance with longstanding principles in all market segments and no matter who recruits, who pays or who listens, it is equally true that there are certain basic differences between the EU institutions and the private market (PM).

We don’t have to wait until 2004, the date most frequently suggested for the first wave of accessions, to examine the question. These differences exist today and the demand for Eastern and Central European (ECE) languages is growing. Enlargement of the EU will add new official languages, but in many instances those languages are already being demanded on the private market. For example, many European Works Councils have members and/or observers from ECE countries. Their languages are used either actively or passively, and interpreters from and into these languages are being recruited regularly.

The issue of enlargement and the New Multilingualism (NML) has been on the agenda of AIIC’s Private Market Sector meetings for a number of years, and a degree of consensus has been built on what the main problems are and how they might be solved. I will try to summarise these ideas here, but I would stress that the views I express are mine alone and do not necessarily represent a majority view. Nonetheless, they are grounded in experience - my own and that of colleagues active on the private market.

Let me start by highlighting some practical differences between the prevailing situation in EU institutions and the PM. This list is not complete and not in any particular order of priority, but it may illustrate how interpreter recruitment and team composition on the private market has evolved in response to a changing environment.

1. While EU institutions have conference facilities with built-in booths, on the PM we are more likely to work in mobile booths set up in hotel meeting rooms or other conference venues. The space available is often limited and may not be sufficient for the required number of booths.

The result is that it is difficult to secure booths designed for 3 interpreters, visibility becomes a problem, and the organisers may be tempted to place the booths in an adjacent hall, restricting our view to what we can see on a monitor.
2. It is the organisers themselves who have to fork out the money for the team of interpreters rather than an anonymous administration working on a general budget. The price of interpretation as a share of the overall meeting costs is therefore more visible.

It follows that the organisers exert considerable pressure on the recruiting interpreter to find colleagues in situ or as near to the venue as possible, often to the detriment of ideal language combinations and top quality. Thus it may not always be possible to increase team size in order to cover the maximum number of languages directly, avoiding relay or retour. This trend is sometimes exacerbated by the fact that the organiser perceives interpretation as a necessary evil to be done away with as soon as possible.

3. The number of participants per language is frequently very small, often only one person. The number of interpreters can easily exceed that of the delegates.

Again, this leads to pressure to keep the team as small as possible. It is difficult to convince clients that 3 interpreters are really needed for a single delegate who speaks a « minor » language, all the more so if the delegate in question speaks only once (or not at all) in the course of the meeting, thus reducing the need for a retour to near nil.

4. It is more difficult to convince clients of the need to respect our rules governing working hours, lunch breaks, etc.

While meeting secretaries and chairmen at the EU institutions are familiar with and generally follow the rules of their respective bodies, those organising meetings on the private market will insist that interpreters bend over backwards to meet their specific needs, especially when the delegates themselves are willing to put up with uncomfortable travel conditions, longer hours and shorter breaks.

5. Increasingly English is the language of reference and the predominant one spoken on the floor. Participants are encouraged to use it and meeting organisers may even insist on it, even though frequently there may not be a single native English speaker in attendance.

This trend has a number of implications, including the gradual elimination of a separate English booth, which is replaced by a retour into English from the other booths, and the growing use of English as the only active language with interpretation offered into other tongues. Delegates who are not native English speakers often tend to prefer non-native English interpreters because they find them easier to follow.

6. Meetings are organised at ever shorter notice and languages added or withdrawn at the last moment.

This makes it more difficult to find local interpreters with the right combinations, let alone the best interpreters for a given combination. Costs associated with bringing in interpreters from further afield go up and the organisers feel pressure to cut back elsewhere.

At this point, I would like to put forward a few ideas on the likely impact of EU enlargement on working conditions, team composition, recruitment and similar matters.

**Two pivots per language**

Our rules say there should be at least two pivots for any language that will be interpreted through relay. Some staff interpreter colleagues are suggesting that as the number of languages increases, a third pivot per team might have to become the norm, and perhaps even four interpreters per booth instead of the three now required for any meeting with six or more floor languages.
Because of the previously-mentioned constraints on recruiters, it is unrealistic to hope for such a development on the private market. To the contrary, conditions on the PM would seem to favour more frequent use of retour into English with only two interpreters per booth. Apart from the difficulty of finding additional pivots and the cost involved, there is the issue of lack of space and decreased comfort in the booth, which can lead to greater stress and diminished concentration.

The question of the number of interpreters per booth has implications for booth dimensions and the layout and size of conference rooms. We risk losing credibility (and market share) if our demands become unrealistic in the eyes of clients, all the more so when a larger number of languages is to be used at a conference. More interpreters means more space problems, which in turn means greater pressure to use video or teleconferencing.

**Increasing prevalence of interpreters with A/B combinations vs. a greater number of C languages per interpreter**

We probably all agree – in theory - that working into one’s A language is ideal. However, in view of the constraints and pressures mentioned above, does the theory still hold for the NML environment? Does it make sense for the PM recruiter to have to contract an otherwise far-from-brilliant A only because she/he has a rare C language, which he/she may hardly use during the conference if the single delegate with that language chooses to remain silent? And how many C languages can the run-of-the-mill interpreter really keep up to standard? Putting together a team can also be quite a chore as these rare birds are not easy to find at short notice, the good ones being on long-term contract with the EU. This problem is likely to be exacerbated by a reform of the European Commission’s Joint Interpretation and Conference Services which aims to increase the share of FL work. Result: you take what you find and quality suffers, particularly interpretation into English which is usually the main floor language and the language of the minute taker.

I would like to digress a bit at this point to comment on the role of English on today’s conference market. On the PM (and increasingly in EU institutions) there are many among the Anglophone audience whose first language is NOT English. Some of them find fluent, colloquial, off-the-cuff, native English more difficult to follow than the less sophisticated rendition of a non-native English interpreter, provided the message is clear and faithful (incidentally this is also true for colleagues listening to English for the purposes of relay).

In quite a few cases it is indeed easier and cheaper for the PM recruiter to put together a team with a greater number of bilingual retour booths. In this situation not all the interpreters need to have ECE languages or offer a retour back into EN. In view of this trend, it may be justified to ask if AIIC should not change its present definition of a B language to reflect the fact that many interpreters will often depend on a relay from a B language pivot.

When all is said and done, however, things are not done all that differently on the PM as compared to the EU institutions. In the NML environment mixed teams and asymmetric combinations “on demand” become the rule rather than the exception. This is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future.

**Finding capable colleagues with ECE languages**

The experience of PM recruiters seems to indicate that existing national interpreter associations in ECE countries are not reliable sources of information. Some groups – formal or informal in nature - seem acceptable. The most satisfactory way to locate good interpreters at present is by word of mouth, recommendations from colleagues that one knows and has worked with. By and large,
recruiters on the PM give preference to colleagues with ECE languages living and working in the West.

So-called SCIC/EP accreditation does not seem to be the solution either. In countries with few AIIC members and no guarantees on the validity of language combinations, interpreters call themselves “SCIC accredited.” They may in fact have passed a test for their A and one B language, but they often list other C, D or E languages, giving the impression that those too were vetted by SCIC or that they are even “certified” retour languages. With more freelance interpreters from ECE countries being offered temporary employment at EU institutions, such problems will only become more common.

Professionalism of interpreters from ECE countries

There are some worrisome tendencies that lead many to proceed with great caution when recruiting ECE colleagues. This following list is not comprehensive and cannot be applied to all ECE colleagues. Nonetheless, these issues do merit mention.

- Very often these colleagues can be recruited only through agencies, which move them about like interchangeable pieces as best suits their own interests without consulting client, team leader or consultant interpreter.
- They are willing to work under almost any conditions and pay little attention to the equipment to be used, travel arrangements, accommodation, etc. provided the money is “right”.
- They do not take a professional attitude regarding preparation, professional secrecy or contractual obligations. Sometimes they don’t know the difference between liaison or escort interpreting and conference interpreting.
- When organising in their own countries, they consistently work with a “pilot” language for purposes of relay even if that language is not one of the conference languages.
- Difficulties about tax liabilities (VAT) and invoicing requirements arise all too frequently.

I hasten to add that the above problems are NOT exclusive to interpreters from ECE countries. It is sad to note that such behaviour occurs virtually everywhere and can even be seen among some AIIC members - but that is another story.

I’d like to conclude with some suggestions in regard to some of the points raised.

- It is important that AIIC members who work with ECE interpreters anywhere make an effort to talk to them in private, to explain how we work and why, to ask how they work and why, to enquire what they think about the profession, etc. AIIC’s NML project is a good start to greater mutual understanding and hopefully further steps will be taken.
- If market conditions make the use of relay more common, AIIC needs to give some thought to the role of the pivot. Recommendations on training and professional practices might be in order.
- AIIC rules on team strength may need to be revised in order to bring them into line with current and probable future practice. Instead of issuing a detailed table (which will never cover all eventualities), would it not be better to stick to a few straightforward rules such as an interpreter should never be alone in the booth, there should be two different pivots per language and double relay must be avoided.

Summary

- The initiative taken by AIIC to study the implications of EU enlargement for the association, the different institutions, the private market and interpreters in general is a welcome one.
Contacts with interpreters in Eastern and Central Europe and their integration into teams recruited on the PM should be encouraged.
The association must continue setting standards for the exercise of the profession in the light of changing demands and circumstances.
There is a clear need to uphold professional standards and quality requirements especially when faced with an increase in the number of languages used and changing market conditions.

Acronyms

- **ECE** Eastern and Central Europe
- **EP** European Parliament
- **EU** European Union
- **FL** freelance
- **NML** New Multilingualism
- **PM** private market
- **SCIC** Joint conference and Interpretation Service

Recommended citation format: