Sign language interpreters from across Europe meet in Warsaw

The challenges of interpreting from a signed language into a spoken one were under the microscope at the 2015 conference of the European Forum of Sign Language Interpreters.

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Interpreting from a signed language into a spoken language presents many challenges but is relatively rarely discussed. With this in mind, the Polish Association of Sign Language Interpreters (SPTJM), hosts of the annual European Forum of Sign Language Interpreters (efsli) conference, made the topic the theme of the 2015 meeting. And nearly 300 sign language interpreters and trainers from across Europe traveled to Warsaw to participate in the discussion.

SPTJM is a relatively young organization compared to other sign language interpreter associations in Europe. It was established after individual Polish Sign Language interpreters participated in several efsli conferences through special funding from efsli. Five years ago they bid to host this year’s conference. It was amazing to witness the impact of years of efsli experience culminating in this first European conference in Poland.

Ellen Moerman and I attended this unique event on behalf of the AIIC Sign Language Network. As a member of the scientific committee, it was a wonderful opportunity for me to help bring together experts on the topic — practitioners and researchers alike.

Keynote speaker Anna Lena Nilsson cited four reasons underlying the challenges sign language interpreters face when working into a spoken language:

1. Just three to four years of training in the language and in interpreting, which is just not enough for anyone.
2. Difficulties understanding the thought worlds of deaf people, not only what a deaf person is saying but also why he or she is saying it.
3. The need to know the language in all possible settings.
4. The fact that we hear what we say, and every mistake in what we say.

Sophie Pointurier-Pournin added that in her research she had found that sign language interpreters only work fifteen percent of the time into a spoken language, hence lack experience and practice in that direction. Irma Sluis highlighted the opportunity of using the perspective of deaf people to improve our interpretation into a spoken language. By exchanging knowledge and experience, interpreters and deaf people can build a cultural bridge.

Interestingly Stephanie Feyne used the perspective of the hearing addressees and how the interpreter’s choices impacted their perception and understanding of a deaf person’s identity. Using
playful examples, Pettita and collaborators showed that in order to improve, we need to know more about how languages are structured and used; this will give us the tools to better manage our interpretation.

Other well-known presenters brought new insights on the topic and the conference ended with a powerful presentation by Linda Thomson and Emma Darroch on the psychological effects that using another person’s language has on interpreters. This impact is often underestimated, and the presenters specifically addressed the need for an emotional support framework, which should be provided in interpreter training programs as well as for working interpreters.

The next efsli conference will take place in Greece in September 2016. For more information on this years efsli conference visit the efsli conference website or twitter #efsli2015.

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