

Conference Interpreting: Profession and Communication

First of all I would like to thank Angela Keil, who formally presented my nomination, and the colleagues who signed it along with her.¹ I would also like to thank the jury who deemed me worthy of the honor and the Danica Seleskovitch Association for having confirmed their choice. Special thanks go to Edgar Weiser and Marianne Lederer for their kind remarks this evening.

Addressing colleagues in the Danica Seleskovitch Room at ESIT is a formidable task. You are experts in the various types and styles of speeches, and great anticipators. In fact, you may know what I'm about to say even before I do as I've chosen to talk from notes rather than a written text.

Much of what I will talk about is intimately connected to AIIC. I'll start with an overview of the FTC investigation of translator and interpreter associations in the USA, proceed to my work as editor of AIIC's online publications, briefly cover my experience teaching, and end with a few comments on major challenges to the interpreting profession.

The FTC Years: The Profession on Trial

In the early 1990s, the US Federal Trade Commission (FTC) decided to look into possible anti-competitive practices within various translation and interpretation associations, not anything new for them as they had done the same with other liberal professions. The main focus was on setting or recommending rates, but the FTC staff lawyers also examined *non-price restraints* that might, in their view, affect market prices (e.g. rules on length of day, team size, etc.).

It should be noted that here we are in the domain of administrative law, different from either criminal or civil law. The FTC is overseen by 5 commissioners and has its own lawyers. Cases are first heard by a government-employed administrative law judge and can be appealed to the Commission (i.e. the commissioners).

When this whirlwind swept through the T&I community, I was a relatively new AIIC member and had recently moved to Washington after many years in Europe. In 1994 I became the US representative on AIIC Council, and for the following three years I was the main liaison with our lawyers.

In late 1994 the FTC lawyers approached us with consent decree, in colloquial terms an invitation to enter into an agreement without admitting guilt to the alleged charges while promising never to do them again. Two associations had already signed such agreements,

¹ Gisèle Abazon, Christine Adams, Odette Buyse, Silvia Camilo, Josyane Cristina, Jennifer Mackintosh, Claudia Marin, and Christopher Thiéry.

*Speech delivered by Luigi Luccarelli, laureate of the 2018 Danica Seleskovitch Prize,
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and it seems likely the lawyers expected us to do the same. AIIC's response was that although it had not published rates for some time before the investigation began, it would be willing to sign an agreement on them ... but wanted all provisions on working conditions removed.

Why? Because we felt that said conditions were justifiable on grounds of quality service, long-term interpreter health, and provision of helpful market information. Moreover, we maintained that said conditions did not affect the market price for interpreters, and if anything, had pro-competitive effects (e.g. through more information and market diversity).

They refused our offer and thus began a long process of litigation. The discovery phase was long and arduous. Eventually, the administrative law judge ruled against us and we appealed to the Commission. That hearing occurred in October 1996. We had an expert witness to address matters regarding market power in our sector, and the head of AIIC's Research Committee, Barbara Moser, to underline our arguments on quality and health. I was called to testify on timelines and other general matters.

The final decision was announced in February 1997. The provisions on price, which we had offered to accept from the beginning, stood. But all mention of working conditions were deleted. As the Opinion of the Commission states: "the record in this case is virtually devoid of evidence of anticompetitive effects flowing from the non-price restraints." If anything, the FTC lawyers ended up getting less than they would have gotten by accepting our initial offer.

In addition, we proposed that the order state that our agreements with international organizations were excepted from the order in whole, and submitted a text to that effect. Said text was included verbatim as Section V of the final order, making clear that present and future collective agreements are acceptable under US competition law.

Early on I knew that I couldn't always act as a neutral reporter. AIIC is an association of individual membership and I (the individual) wanted AIIC to fight. But as Council member for the USA and liaison with our attorneys, I also knew that I had to provide comprehensive information in an objective fashion. From the start I separated said information from my personal stance, labeling the latter as such in documents and meetings.

There was disagreement within AIIC. Some members thought that ignoring the matter and cutting off the US region, if it came to that, was a viable option. Others believed that one just didn't fight the FTC. The US region itself was ready for battle; whenever votes were taken (and there were many) only 1 or 2 "noes" would be recorded. And in an AIIC Extraordinary Assembly convened in Luxembourg to decide how AIIC would respond, a vote to continue our defense of proper working conditions won by a 3-to-1 margin. Credit should be given to then-President Malick Sy, who expertly managed the matter, the governing Bureau, and all members who stood up to voice their opinions.

To bring this section to a close, it should be emphasized that AIIC acted in accordance with the genuine role of a professional body, namely to establish the norms by which the

profession is practiced. In today's gig economy, those norms and values are again facing challenges ... but more on that later.

AIIC Communications: Opening the Doors

Following the period I describe above, AIIC began to look beyond its traditional borders. On the one hand, we had united around an issue and felt strong; on the other the world around us was changing. Within AIIC we structured work around major projects, such as VEGA, initiated by Silvia Camilo, which reached out to students and interpreters starting out in the profession; Multilingualism, coordinated by Michel Lesseigne, which looked to Eastern Europe and other parts of the world, and several others.

In 1997 Council appointed a working group to assess AIIC communications policy and identify future needs. The results spurred a significant shift towards broad-based communication efforts, especially efforts to raise AIIC's visibility. The group recommended that the focus be on projecting AIIC as **“open, representative, expert and professional – an indispensable reference point”**. The nascent AIIC website was identified as the main medium for doing so.

AIIC opened its first website thanks to Vincent Buck, who designed it on a volunteer basis. A bit later he also suggested that AIIC institute a webzine to turn over content and attract more viewers. The initial team was composed of Vincent, Silke Gebhard, Jean-Pierre Allain and myself. A year or so later I was asked to coordinate the group and eventually to act as Editor-in-Chief, a post I have held up to the present.

The decision to publish an online webzine – *Communicate!* – proved to be a good one. First of all, it was defined as a *curated publication sponsored by AIIC* featuring articles on interpreting and related fields. The editor was given broad leeway in regard to what was published, and the focus was on reaching out to a broad community of interests. *Communicate!* was never meant to be an AIIC mouthpiece, as a disclaimer makes clear: “Articles published in this section reflect the views of the author(s) and should not be taken to represent the official position of AIIC.”

That was a bold step and one that I believe served the association well. A diversity of subject matter and views have had a positive effect. Opinion pieces, reviews, research papers, interviews and general reporting covered a broad spectrum – practical aspects of interpreting, history, ethics, training, professionalism, multilingualism, etc. Articles have been widely cited in the literature on interpretation. (More recently we have begun to offer a shortened issue in PDF format, some of which have been distributed here tonight.)

In the near future I will be stepping down; 20 years at the helm seem enough. I do hope, however, that *Communicate!* will live on as the “multilingual webzine that records the voice of interpreters on the conference circuit,” reaching out to future interpreters, linguists of all stripes, researchers, clients, and all people interested in the language professions.

The Craft of Teaching

I love the classroom and have taught off and on throughout my career. If I had to choose just one class to teach, it would be introduction to consecutive interpretation – so much begins there.

When I studied I don't recall anyone stressing the role of preparation. We might know that next week the general subject would be 'economics', but no precise information would be given. This "dealing with the unexpected" approach helped in ways at the start of my career, but not when I was hired for a conference on die-casting. Fortunately there was a trade fair that began a few days before that meeting, and I got a quick lesson on how one can spend more time preparing than actually interpreting!

In 2005 I enrolled in the University of Geneva's post-graduate program on teaching interpreting, and wrote my research paper on preparation and its role in the classroom. And from then on out, I searched for ways to bring it into the learning process as early as possible.

This takes us to another of my interests – improvisation (aka *thinking on your feet*). When we add preparation to being asked to improvise (speak off the cuff, tell a story, imitate a speaker, etc.), we have something akin to an improvisation on a melody.

The classroom is a place where all present, teacher included, are learning how to learn. In our field, general knowledge, analytical thinking and grasp of a speaker's intent are of utmost import. A undergraduate education that strengthen those intellectual abilities will serve would-be interpreters well, and help them get the most out of a post-graduate conference interpreting program.

Challenges

De-professionalization

In an increasingly corporatized world, liberal professions are losing standing and experiencing an erosion of autonomy. Having never been fully professionalized, the fields of interpretation and translation feel this evolution most poignantly. Nonetheless, efforts to professionalize must continue (e.g. by promoting proper working conditions, undertaking further research, cooperating across sectors, etc.). And de-professionalization being an international phenomenon, we should not allow ourselves to be balkanized into ever-smaller entities.

Language professionals facilitate and optimize *communication* – an abstraction, not a commodity that can be measured and sold in units. We must work together to put that message across, and fight together when a fight is called for. To do that we need strong professional associations working across geographical and professional borders.

New Technologies

Distance interpreting is now in its adolescence and maturing very quickly. AIIC got off to a slow start, but recent participation in ISO groups and a new project to formulate an AIIC position on distance interpreting bode well. Especially important will be efforts to define best practice and working conditions for new settings, including ways to maintain the fruitful booth-partner relationship forged with the advent of simultaneous interpreting.

An English-only World?

The idea of simplified English as a *lingua franca* will not go away anytime soon. We already see how in certain fields, experts may be comfortable communicating in English due to a preponderance of their trade's literature being written in it.

However, all recognize that the global English movement has limitations, especially in the world on international conferences, and we should do more to elucidate them. In the end, it's all about communication! We need to work with conference organizers and equipment companies on details like informing participants that *interpreting is for everyone*, not just those who don't 'speak' EN.

In that regard, it's important to note how conferences stipulating that presentations must be given in English, with interpreting services into select languages, are converting the *right to speak* into a diminished *right to listen*. Moreover, research shows that participation is stronger in multilingual meetings than in English-only ones.

To end, I would like to thank all of you who have come tonight to share this moment with me, as well as the Danica Seleskovitch Association for organizing tonight's event. Thank you all for your attention.