Fostering Professionalism in New Conference Interpreting Markets: Reflections on the Role of Training

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Abstract: The AIIC model of conference interpreting has been a powerful means of defending high professional standards for conference interpreters in the West, but is not necessarily a good starting point in emerging conference interpreting markets. In order to improve professionalism in markets where the AIIC model is not a natural reference, it may be better to start by sensitizing and training students and language instructors into the approach and standards of added-value professional translation as opposed to translation for language enhancement, and carry out initial training in consecutive interpreting as a preparation for high-level interpreting. Research into interpreting can also contribute indirectly to professionalization through sociological channels, by increasing awareness of the idiosyncrasies of conference interpreting and thus helping it exist in academic and other circles. Outsiders, in particular researchers in applied linguistics and foreign-language teaching, should not be excluded.

Key words: AIIC model; professionalism; new conference interpreting markets; training; research

1. Introduction

In society, the concept of professionalism is multifaceted and
includes a number of dimensions:

(1) A psychological and behavioral aspect: a “true professional” is one who has specific skills and who does his/her work seriously, conscientiously.

(2) An institutional aspect: professionals operate within institutional frameworks which define their duties, working conditions, performance standards, etc.

(3) General recognition of the profession as such by society. Without it, no matter how well a group defines its institutional framework internally, the activity of its members may be classified by society under a different category or not classified at all, and it may be expected to comply with norms and standards that are not necessarily germane to the needs perceived by members of the group.

Social and institutional recognition of the interpreter’s status is highly variable. Even in West-European countries, the conference interpreting profession is not necessarily acknowledged as such by public institutions. In emerging conference interpreting markets, there is no existing foundation to rely on in order to build a conference interpreting profession. Action can be taken along several paths. This paper makes a few suggestions, mostly on the specific role of upstream didactic action.

2. The mainstream Western model (“AIIC model”)

2.1 Historical background

Conference interpreting became a profession in the West, essentially in Europe and the USA, between the two World Wars. Conference interpreters at that time were typically highly educated civilians or military officers who had had much exposure to foreign languages in their youth, who performed in consecutive interpreting in full view of
the delegates and were much admired (Baigorri Jalón 2000). Social recognition of these personalities and their relatively high level of remuneration provided a good basis for the establishment of the conference interpreting profession as a small elite with correspondingly high performance standards and ethical standards. The institutional framework to preserve this image was established by AIIC, the International Association of Conference Interpreters, which was set up in Paris in 1953. It was largely followed and consolidated by leading interpreter training programs in Europe. The image of the conference interpreter they sought to establish was that of an educated natural bilingual or multilingual with considerable talent and skills and with a social status on par with that of professionals such as medical practitioners and lawyers. In early years and until the late 1960s or so, conference interpreters were indeed perceived as talented people, though it may be fair to speculate that their prestige was due mainly to the spectacular quality of their performance and to the fact that they performed at international settings and well-publicized events where they were seen with prestigious personalities, and not so much to their education or professional standards. Negotiations with international organizations, in particular the UN and its associated agencies (UNDP, UNESCO, UNICEF, WHO, etc.) helped establish a satisfactory institutional framework, and AIIC played a vital role in extending the professional status to the private market. Over the past decades, as conference interpreting turned into more of a commodity with an increasing number of interpreters performing in many less glorious settings, it lost much of its earlier prestige and became much like other professions, with recruitment structures, more or less (local) standard working conditions and other elements of routine. And yet, in official governmental institutions and other bodies, it is not necessarily recognized as a profession. In some cases, it is assimilated to translation, and in other cases, it is classified
in a variety of different ways. French administration, for instance, puts freelance interpreters in a “secretariat and translation” category. In spite of this, on the whole, thanks to the prestigious historical references, in the West and especially in Europe, conference interpreters can be said to have started on a solid foundation and did not have to fight their way up. The situation in other parts of the world can be very different and may call for different strategies to achieve good results in all aspects of professionalization.

2.2 Professional standards and ethics

As explained above, leading interpreter training schools have played an important role in maintaining and strengthening the AIIC model. The following are a few major features of the image adopted by conference interpreters who were trained into and observe this model:

1) They see themselves as members of a well defined professional group, distinct from translators, but also from court interpreters, community interpreters and liaison interpreters. They tend to know little about other categories of interpreters, and are not interested in merging with them. Recently, some European interpreting scholars (see for example Pöchhacker 2004) have shown interest in such other categories and expressed the view that all types of interpreting should be considered part of the same profession. However, at the same time, relevant research (see for instance Pöchhacker 2000) has shown that many if not most community interpreters and health service interpreters are poorly paid and poorly educated. I am not aware that interpreting scholars from the ranks of conference interpreting have accepted work as community interpreters, and doubt that they would accept to be treated as community interpreters are generally treated.

2) Conference interpreters see themselves as high-level respon-
sible professionals with a matching code of ethics, and demand appropriate consideration from society. They tend to be sensitive to attitudes disrespectful of their working requirements and efforts (such as failure on the part of conference organizers to send them documents for preparation, placement of the interpreting booth in a corner of the room where they cannot see the speakers and/or screen, disregard of working schedules, etc.).

(3) They feel that their duty is to produce high quality target-language speeches in terms of fidelity, clarity and language correctness. They feel stress and frustration whenever conditions or their own cognitive and other limitations make this impossible — something which occurs frequently despite the insistence of AIIC contracts on appropriate conditions for conference preparation (see for instance Pearl 1999).

Such an attitude, predicated upon AIIC philosophy, contributes to maintenance of both professionalism and relatively high performance standards. It is acquired essentially in interpreting schools and/or in peer groups of conference interpreters. In countries where AIIC is not very strong and where interpreter training programs do not follow the AIIC model, the attitude of interpreters can be very different.

2.3 Interpreting schools

Interpreting schools which abide by AIIC norms and help perpetuate the model have a number of corresponding features:

(1) They tend to place conference interpreting programs at graduate level (though this is not possible in all countries).

(2) They tend to be very selective, both at admission and at graduation (again, within the limits imposed by national legislation and regulations).

(3) They focus on interpreting skills and tend to consider that lan-
language acquisition is upstream of interpreter training and is not their concern (this has been changing in recent years with respect to language enhancement — but the boundaries between language acquisition and language enhancement can be fuzzy).

(4) They tend to hire teaching staff among practicing conference interpreters, not among academics or language teachers who, they consider, are not qualified to teach interpreting.

(5) They tend to hire instructors as members of AIIC whenever they can (which, in the West, is generally possible for major Western languages).

(6) Such instructors recommend strongly that graduating students join AIIC, and dissuade students who fail at graduation examinations from working as interpreters.

(7) These schools maintain close ties with AIIC and with chief interpreters at international organizations which hire interpreters. In particular, they invite such chief interpreters and representatives of these organizations to participate in graduation examinations and send them lists of recent graduates after every examination. Instructors also recommend their graduates to their clients.

Students of such schools are trained into the AIIC model and graduates are helped into the circle of AIIC interpreters, whereas students who fail at their graduate examinations are not, though they may find their way into the system after some time through other channels.

Note that in some countries, AIIC membership, which does not provide immediate financial or other benefits to individual members, is not considered attractive by all, and interpreters who teach at interpreter training programs may choose not to join and not to uphold AIIC professional rules and standards. Even in such countries, the label “AIIC interpreter” is generally seen as prestigious.
3. The mainstream Western model and emerging conference interpreting markets

3.1 Advantages and drawbacks of the AIIC model

There can be little doubt that the AIIC model for conference interpreters has been a powerful tool for high level professionalism among those interpreters who could be included in the system:

(1) It set out clear professional rules of ethics to guide conference interpreters.

(2) It has helped ensure good working conditions for interpreters wherever the market made this possible.

(3) It has helped maintain among conference interpreters social awareness of a professional identity, that of a distinct high-level professional group.

One could argue with reason that over the past two decades or so, the position of AIIC has eroded somewhat, with on the whole lower compensation for interpreting assignments and poorer working conditions than those recommended by AIIC, mostly due to market forces. Nevertheless, the AIIC model is still largely looked up to as the model for high-level professional conference interpreters, and no better alternative seems to have emerged so far. Is there any reason for the AIIC model and its associated training system not to be the ideal model for emerging conference interpreting markets?

Before addressing this question, it may be relevant to ask whether the AIIC model is the best in existing interpreting markets. While it has done a lot for conference interpreters so far, it has not done much for other types of interpreters and has segmented the interpreting market hierarchically, separating conference interpreting from all other types of interpreting (in recent years, AIIC as an organization has shown interest in such types of interpreting, as can be seen through various items in its activities and publications — see www.aiic.net, but the
AIIC model of conference interpreting *per se* still has the same hierarchizing effect). Without passing moral judgment, one might note that in terms of skills, justification for this hierarchy remains to be presented, at least as regards the relationship between conference interpreting and court interpreting. On the other hand, in terms of economic strategies, in the West, where working conditions and income for interpreting assignments were far better for conference interpreters than for other types of interpreters, it made economic sense for the best placed segment to defend its more comfortable position. Whether it is wise to pursue the same strategy now is another question: it seems that over recent years, working conditions for conference interpreters have been declining while public authorities have become more interested in court interpreting and community interpreting because of their social and political importance. If the gap continues to narrow, it may make economic sense for conference interpreters to try to establish partnerships with other segments of the interpreting market to defend working conditions.

3.2 Other markets: first observations

In parts of the world other than Western Europe, culture, traditions and the historical background of interpreting are sometimes very different. In some multilingual countries and in countries with recent massive immigration, language mediation is provided on a daily basis by children and by members of ethnic groups with knowledge of both languages who have neither a formal qualification as interpreters nor a high level of education, and the public image of interpreters is not that of high-level professionals (see for example Zubaida Ibrahim 2002 for an enlightening and sobering analysis of the situation of court interpreters and court interpreting in Malaysia). In other countries, there is little awareness of interpreting as a profession: people consider that it is a task to be performed as the need arises by bilingual secretaries, junior
diplomats or other people. In these and other environments, there is
little or no social foundation for a body of high-level language media-
tion professionals who claim consideration, relatively high remunera-
tion and their own self-defined set of professional rules. When the
AIIC model is put forward as a basis for claims, it is not necessarily
understood or perceived as justified. Even in European countries which
do have the historical reference as presented above, market economics
and the lack of legal protection of conference interpreting has allowed
translators and other “linguists” without interpreter training to take a
sometimes considerable share of the interpreting market without the
same professional rules and standards as AIIC interpreters, thus un-
dermining the model.

In Asia and the Pacific, the historical past of Western conference
interpreters at the League of Nations, at the International Labor Organi-
zation and at the United Nations has had little impact. In some countries,
conference interpreting was for many years part of a young diplomat’s
career and was submitted to the norms of the culture of the relevant
national administration rather than to those of the Western model. In
other countries, liaison interpreting for businesses thrives and makes
up most of the interpreting needs, so that most interpreters do both
business interpreting, with its particular requirements and standards,
and conference interpreting, with its own requirements. This in par-
ticular is the case in Japan, where there is also a distinct market for
broadcast interpreting and a distinct professional body of broadcast
interpreters whose culture and standards crystallized within their par-
ticular working environment (see for example Ino 2003). In all these
cases, the AIIC model seems remote and is not readily accepted as a
reference and a foundation upon which to build further development.

I believe that the existence of a body of high-level conference
interpreters with specific professional rules and standards is desirable,
both in the interest of users of interpreting services and in the interest of the community of language mediators as a whole. Even if only a small proportion of interpreters manage to reach the high level of skills required for conference interpreting at AIIC standards, the very existence of such a body is a reference for society at large and a goal for interpreters. The question, then, is how to prepare the ground for its establishment in emerging conference interpreting markets. Several axes for progression can be considered, including information campaigns and negotiations with public authorities on title protection and certification procedures. A particularly interesting model in this respect is that of NAATI, the National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters set up in Australia. NAATI has defined five levels of interpreting qualifications; level four and level five correspond to conference interpreting (see www.naati.com). In the next sections, I should like to focus on the potential contribution from the academic side.

4. The role of training

4.1 A position

It is suggested here that the lack of professionalism in interpreting in many countries and circles is associated with the well-known general misperception of translation and interpreting as a natural by-product of the knowledge of foreign languages without the need for specific skills except for special tasks such as simultaneous interpreting. Dispelling this myth for translation would be an important first step; once the public understands how much informed decision-making is necessary for translation, it is easier to generate awareness of problems in oral translation where everything is faster, and especially in conference interpreting, where qualitative requirements and cognitive load are high. In other words, in this matter, it is in the interest of conference interpreters that professional skills and requirements for professionalism in written translation be recognized as a basis for the
claims of conference interpreters.

The role of professional translator and interpreter schools in raising awareness and fostering professionalization in terms of both skills acquisition and socialization into professional norms is obvious. This is particularly true of demanding programs which aim at training high-level professionals. However, in most countries, they represent a small population of establishments and do not have much impact on the public at large. On the other hand, in all countries, there is a large population of students of foreign languages. Some of them take foreign languages as a major, others as a minor, and some, in particular students of business, law, science and engineering, as electives. It is suggested here that an awareness-raising effort in this population, which eventually makes up the population of clients and users of translation and interpreting services, can make a difference.

The third core message is that one efficient way of raising awareness in this population is through relatively simple didactic action — which is the reason for the choice of the topic for this paper.

4.2 Awareness-raising versus training

Saying that translation and interpreting require skills that justify professionalism implies the idea that their acquisition takes time and efforts. On these grounds, it does not make sense, economically or otherwise, to train or attempt to train all students of foreign languages to be professional translators or interpreters. Depending on the environment, it is possible to design several levels of action in terms of information, sensitization and training. A preliminary three-tier classification which could be developed and fine-tuned is the following:

4.2.1 Informative-sensitization for students of non-language faculties (science, engineering, business, economics, law, etc.)

This module (one or two hours) would explain, with illustrations, what translation involves besides mere implementation of linguistic
knowledge. Its content could include a discussion of:

— The implications of differences between languages, in particular the fact that in the absence of direct “equivalences” for all words and syntactic structures, translators must make decisions which may involve omission of some information given in the source text and/or addition of some information not explicit in the source text. Such decisions must be informed by sufficient understanding of the text and its intended function.

— The requirements for ad hoc information acquisition by translators, who are not necessarily trained experts in the fields in which they translate and must develop the ability to learn enough about them to reach the minimum level of understanding which will allow them to take the proper decisions.

— The fact that a good translation must be a clear, well-written text, which calls for good technical writing skills.

— The fact that many technical texts contain ambiguities and other flaws which make them difficult to understand and that the translator’s task includes adding value to them by making their target-language versions easier to understand for readers.

— The fact that in interpreting, analysis and decision-making must be almost instantaneous while there is virtually no possibility of using documentary and other information sources during the interpreting process.

All these and other aspects of translation and interpreting call for specific skills besides knowledge of the language (they are discussed in Gile 1995, 2005). In information-sensitization operations, students can be told about the existence of professional translators’ and interpreters’ associations and their activities, about certification examinations and pass/fail statistics, and about other facts which could bring home to them the idea that the principle of a distinct professional identity for
translators and interpreters is justified.

4.2.2 Information and sensitization exercises for students taking foreign languages as a major or minor in a language faculty with a non-translation orientation

This didactic unit (one or two days) would involve information as explained above and a few exercises in both translation and consecutive interpreting to make students actually experience some of the difficulties which translation and interpreting involve and which justify specific training. This could include translation from ambiguous or otherwise deficient source texts and exercises in consecutive interpreting from ad-libbed speeches made by the students themselves, which would show them the difficulty of instant verbalization of precise ideas as well as the level of attention required for comprehensive interpreting (see Gile 1986).

4.2.3 Training in basic professional translation and interpreting for beginners in translation- and interpreting-oriented programs

This training unit (one to two semesters) goes beyond mere sensitization. It is process-oriented translator training focusing on the acquisition of basic skills rather than on actual proficiency. The instructors’ focus is on the process, not on language or on the production of high-level translations. In written translation, they endeavor to show the basic problems to be solved and the appropriate strategies to solve them through the use of authentic texts. In interpreting, they conduct basic training in consecutive with note-taking (with speech segments of several minutes). The aims of this training in basic professional translation and interpreting is both to sensitize students to the complex reality of translation and interpreting beyond language problems and to select those students who show motivation and talent and might be directed towards full professional training programs (see for

4.3 Practical implementation

While the idea may look reasonably attractive, its implementation can be problematic for sociological and technical reasons. Technically, it may be difficult to find locally instructors with qualifications as professional translators or interpreters, especially interpreters who do consecutive interpreting with notes. Sociologically, it is natural for language teachers to resist the adoption of new norms which upset their *modus operandi* and challenge their status. It is very important to proceed carefully and with as much tact as possible.

One possibility arises when academic authorities decide to set up a new institutional framework dedicated to professional translation. At Université Lyon 2, in France, a program for professional translator training was recently set up at the department of continuing education. Only a few professional translators were available to conduct classes regularly, and the need to train other instructors arose rapidly. An introductory two-day seminar was organized to guide language teachers interested in translation into an approach and methods more in line with professional translator training (it was followed by year-long coordination between instructors). It is still too early to assess the effective results of the seminar in terms of teaching practice, but the unanimous response of the participants was favorable. This may be ascribed to three factors:

— One is the content and general atmosphere of the seminar, which was conducted with respect carefully shown to all participants.

— Another, perhaps more important factor may have been the fact that the seminar was specifically designed for a new training unit, distinct from the usual environment where these instructors taught. As such, it did not challenge their usual *modus
operandi in the environment where they felt competent. If they have imported some of their newly acquired knowledge and skills into their usual environment after the seminar (as at least some seem to have), this is a welcome bonus.

— Under the circumstances, not feeling threatened, these language instructors may have been more receptive to the potential enrichment which this seminar offered them.

In this particular case, the technical and sociological problem was at least partially solved through the creation of a distinct, dedicated environment. This solution could be implemented in many academic institutions. Officially, the new training course could be presented as adding value not because of its alleged “higher level”, but because of its different, professional orientation. This could help prevent instructors from feeling threatened.

The same approach can potentially be applied to consecutive interpreting in those institutions where the students’ level of mastery of the foreign languages is sufficient. However, its implementation is more difficult: in many universities around the world, so-called interpreting classes are given by language teachers who work mostly on a sentence-by-sentence, language-structure-for-language-structure basis. Acquisition of the cognitive skills required for genuine conference interpreting calls for a commitment and motivation which they do not necessarily have, and it may be difficult to set up “specialized interpreting courses” alongside the regular courses without a hierarchy imposing itself immediately and causing frustration and rejection among the “regular” instructors. For interpreting, the two more viable options are employing qualified interpreters as instructors or setting up consecutive interpreting courses only at a higher specialization level, after pre-selection of the most talented students.

Some conference interpreters have opposed the idea of training
students from language departments in consecutive interpreting for fear they might be misled to believe they are qualified and seek employment as conference interpreters and cause prejudice to the profession by providing lower service quality to the market. Such a risk cannot be discarded lightly, but my experience over twenty-five years suggests that a far more frequent outcome is very different: through pre-training in consecutive, students come to understand both the nature and the difficulty of genuine consecutive interpreting, and only the most talented among them contemplate working as conference interpreters — after having undergone training at a specialized school. For such students and for the interpreting schools where they are admitted, this initial training in consecutive means both a gain in time and a potential gain in output quality. For those who will not become conference interpreters but who may work later as liaison or community interpreters, the expected gain in quality is also obvious.

4.4 “Top-level”, “High level” and AIIC

It is clear that the AIIC model corresponds, at least in theory, to the highest professional standards, and that preparatory training such as suggested here is not sufficient to bring students up to that level. It seems equally clear that in emerging conference interpreting markets such as described earlier in this paper, making vocal claims about this fact and about the difference between AIIC interpreters and other interpreters can be counterproductive.

Firstly, such differences need not be universal. In countries where the AIIC model is not very strong, some interpreters not affiliated with AIIC are just as proficient and as professional as AIIC interpreters, and challenging their qualifications is both unjustified and dangerous, as they may be powerful and it is unwise to turn them into enemies. Secondly, in emerging markets where there is no long-standing tradition of AIIC schools, such schools are likely to have little power in
academia, while traditional language departments and institutes where translation and interpreting are taught, albeit with methods and criteria that may seem remote from professional needs and standards, have much more power in the academic institution. Antagonizing them through claims to superiority may also be unwise.

It therefore seems preferable to present professional-orientedness as one potential specialization with certain advantages and let students and colleagues from academia decide themselves whether they consider that such specialization is advantageous to them.

5. The role of research

Well-known interpreting schools which follow the AIIC model pride themselves on their professional orientation and are not too strong on research side. In the 1970s and 1980s, Danica Seleskovitch managed to motivate several teaching staff at ESIT, Paris, into doing doctoral work and engaging in some publication activities, but this research was confined in a closed system and gradually petered out. ESIT has opened up to a certain extent recently (it co-edits the newly-created journal Forum with Hankuk University, Seoul), but the initial impetus was never regained. Two other dynamic personalities who are involved in research are Barbara Moser-Mercer and Robin Setton of ETI, Geneva, but their research involves few other people. Interestingly, less prestigious schools which are more integrated into the academic system are at least as productive in terms of research. The University of Granada in Spain and the Universities of Trieste and of Bologna at Forlì in Italy are good examples, as evidenced by their regular input in terms of graduation theses and papers (see the CIRIN Bulletin at http://perso.wanadoo.fr/daniel.gile/).

Many practitioners and interpreting teachers show little interest in research into interpreting. Many feel that research has not contributed much to actual interpreter training or practice. They consider that some
of the publications simply restate in more pompous words what they already know, and that others are far too abstract and remote from practical concerns. A few published texts have addressed issues directly linked to professional concerns such as user expectations, the effect of long interpreting turns in the booth or the effect of remote interpreting on quality and stress. Critics of such studies are not convinced: they feel that they already know from experience what different groups of users of services expect from them; as to the effect of long turns in the booth or of remote interpreting on quality and stress, results are far from clear-cut, due to both methodological issues and intrinsic variability. Moreover, when findings on professional issues are not clear-cut, their publication might be counterproductive when presented as evidence to back up professional claims regarding working conditions. Such reservations are not unreasonable, and telling critics that it takes time — oftentimes decades — before research can claim to provide applications with an unchallengeable contribution is not necessarily enough to convince them.

There is another aspect of interpreting research, however, which can bring some benefit to practitioners from another direction, irrespective of actual findings. The very fact that interpreting is taught at university and that it is an object of academic interest, in other words, not a matter of course for any “bilingual”, could give it more credibility in the eyes of society, including academic society. The fact that some cognitive psychologists see interpreters as having special skills, in particular special working memory skills (see for example Christoffels 2004), can also help indirectly if it is leveraged to obtain some kind of institutional recognition of interpreting as a separate professional activity.

While interpreting does require specific skills and is distinct from language learning, it may also be wise to consider a participation of linguists and researchers specialized in language acquisition in research
on interpreting. Benefits can be expected from such cooperation in several ways:

— Firstly, while interpreters have high-level skills in their foreign language(s) and are generally not comparable to run-of-the-mill foreign-language learners, cognitive and other constraints tax these skills to such an extent that lexical, syntactic and other weaknesses crop up in their output. Studying them thoroughly may eventually lead to efficient preventive and/or remedial strategies, both in interpreter training and in interpreting practice.

— Secondly, scrutiny by language-teaching scholars of the interpreters’ linguistic performance may contribute to better understanding in wider circles of both the high level of linguistic mastery required by interpreters and other cognitive operations performed by them in the course of their task, and possibly help dispel the myth that interpreting is nothing that “bilinguals” cannot do.

— Thirdly, participation by such language-teaching scholars in research on interpreting may promote academic cooperation between the disciplines, whereas rejection by interpreting scholars and practitioners alike of such scholars and their endeavors is liable to provoke some resentment at what could be (and has been) perceived as the interpreters’ arrogance.

6. Conclusion: a conceptual integration-differentiation model

If the analysis outlined here is correct, leaders of the conference interpreting community in emerging markets may find it wise to aim for the same model as their predecessors in countries where the League of Nations model prevailed from the start, but to choose a different
progression path: instead of differentiating themselves immediately from both “linguists” and other types of interpreters, they may find it more efficient to start with wider integration aimed at achieving better understanding and recognition of translation and interpreting as a professional communication activity in wide circles, and establish differentiation once this is achieved.

Note that such integration as discussed here is conceptual and conducted in academia. Institutional integration in the form of professional action through practitioners’ associations or contacts with government and other authorities is more problematic for conference interpreters, as it may not be in their economic and social interest to be assimilated to less skilled interpreters. The best strategies in this respect should perhaps be left to professional bodies in each country.

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