A Brussels sprout view of interpretation

Ah Brussels!!! What can I tell you, my experienced and well-travelled interpreter colleagues, my knowledgeable and distinguished conference organisers, about Brussels that you don't already know? You've visited the Grand' Place, you've tasted the moules at Chez Léon, you've seen the Atomium from all imaginable angles... still, Brussels is a city that holds many secrets in any aspect of daily life.

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What might apparently seem simple from the outside usually turns out to have many more folds and crevices than one would have imagined. But then again, is that really surprising in a city whose main symbol is a metre-high, angelic looking, cuddly, chubby-cheeked cherub that is constantly trying to piss in your face? Let me give you a taste of this. Oops! Badly chosen introduction. Let me illustrate what I mean. Let's have a look at interpreters in the land of the Brussels sprouts.

Crossroads of Europe, indecision-making centre of the European Union, Brussels must no doubt hold the dubious honour of giving shelter to the highest number of interpreters per square kilometre in the universe. If you don't believe me, just have a quick glance at the latest version of the AIIC directory and count the pages. And that's just the declared AIIC interpreters. If you add the interpreters that are just passing by, renting their vocal chords to the EU institutions, NATO or any of the other international organisations or European Federations that have an office in Brussels, the number soars to mind boggling levels. If to that you add the fact that only an estimated 10% of the bustling private market is in AIIC hands, well then its no surprise to hear people say that if on a sunny Brussels weekend you decide to take a quiet stroll around the Forêt de Soignes, if you turn over a stone you'll soon have four or five freelance interpreters crawling out from underneath offering you their services.

Frites et mayonnaise

Let's start with the basics: ‘frites et mayonnaise’ are to the average Belgian what the EU institutions are to the freelance interpreter. They represent the staple food of nearly everyone working in this profession in Brussels worthy of being called a conference interpreter. In spite of the forked tongues that spurt out venomous comments as to the boring nature of the frites one earns at the EU institutions, the fact is they can just as easily be accompanied by the tartar sauce of bitter negotiations between the social partners at the Economic and Social Committee, by a spicy chilly pepper sauce like they serve at European Parliament hearings, or by a more delicate and elaborate béarnaise for those who have the chance of working at a European Summit. Now of course, mayonnaise is the main sauce in the EU and, let's face it, French fries five days a week, 52 weeks a year, is more than enough to drive your cholesterol levels soaring through the roof of the Justus Lipsus building. So let's have a look at the Belgian market.

Countless abbey beer
A friend once told me he was spending his summer holidays travelling around Belgium visiting the numerous abbeys that lie scattered throughout the country. By the third day he was stone drunk, after his first week he had lost count of the different types of beer he had tasted and after three weeks I was visiting him at the local hospital as he was coming out of an ethylic coma. Just as countless as the abbey beers one finds in Belgium are the number of consultant interpreters that organise the bulk of meetings in the AIIC segment of the private market. For the most part, these are colleagues that have been present on the Belgian market for years and who have managed to develop a small portfolio of loyal and devout clients that have entrusted them with the recruitment and preparation of the teams of interpreters that will service their meetings. Many of these clients are as attached to their consultant interpreter as the connoisseur who has found his favourite beer and would sooner sell you his mother than give you a sip of his brew. Of late, several new brands have started to appear on the market. Less concerned about the quality and reputation of their product and more attentive to the business, moneymaking side of things, they put anything in the barrel and call it beer just the same. So you've been warned: if someone comes around peddling Abbée de Budweiser or Tour de Miller at much lower prices than your average abbey beer, beware. And in case of doubt, you can always call my friend, the human sponge, who can tell the real McCoy and who, by the way, is not an interpreter, nor a conference organiser for that matter (just avoiding misunderstandings and the crooked wits in the crowd).

Foul weather

It's a known fact that nine out of every ten days in Brussels the weather is miserable, which makes this city the ideal conference venue: participants only need to look out the window of their hotel room to be clear that it is better to attend the meeting they came for than to stroll around the city and end up looking like a waterlogged sod on the verge of catching pneumonia. It is no coincidence that so many intergovernmental organisations have decided to settle down in Brussels. Notorious as civil servants are for their dexterity at card games and their generosity with coffee breaks, had the EU decided to pitch up their tent in Nice, Capri or Marbella, the beaches would be strewn with fonctionnaires taking in the rays, the café terraces would be overflowing with officials playing gin-rummy over their espresso or reading the paper while sipping their pastis and the EU would only be composed of the six founding member states and not the twenty—.. how many was it at the last count? So you see my point, Brussels is a productive venue.

What certainly is a funny coincidence is that the nine out of ten ratio also applies to the number of meetings with interpretation on the Brussels market that use non-AIIC interpreters. I, for one, know a few excellent interpreters that work in the non-AIIC market, the problem is you can just as easily get one of those as you can get translators turned interpreters for the day, students that are not really ripe for the job, or people who claim they speak Italian or Spanish because they spent their last summer holidays in Tuscany or the Costa del Sol.

Still, as the saying goes, "every cloud has a silver lining". And in Brussels that lining tastes of fine Belgian chocolate.

Fine Belgian chocolate

Let's suppose you've organised a meeting in Brussels. The weather is putrid, so it looks like conference attendance is guaranteed but, unfortunately, after the first day of the conference you discover some things can be more appalling than the weather in Brussels, namely, the interpretation services you've hired at Take the Money and Run Language Experts Inc. Your conference has just curdled and gone sour on you. You seek shelter in the cosiness of your 5 star hotel room but the phone is constantly ringing - calls from conference participants and keynote speakers saying they'll stay locked up in their hotel room munching out on a king size box of Belgian chocolates, watching
CNN until the weather clears, if you don't change the inept, babbling fools that have sat all day in the booths trying to sink your conference. So, what do you do?

Well, for a start, don't order that case of abbey brew you were going to have brought up to your room for you to drown your sorrows in. Your meeting has just caught fire and fire and alcohol don't mix well, unless you really want to go out with a bang.

My advice to you would be that if fire is fought with fire well then certainly you must fight fine chocolate with fine chocolate, and if there is one fine Belgian chocolate on the interpretation market in Brussels that must certainly be AIIC.

What unarguably makes Belgian chocolate the best is that it is the only chocolate produced with 100% pure cocoa butter. No nasty animal fats, no other vegetable oils to lower the price, no, just 100% pure cocoa butter - guaranteed to tinkle your taste buds.

Following the same principle, AIIC offers only professional interpreters, inured in a thousand battles, native speakers of the language they are working into and with an excellent, well verified, quasi perfect command and knowledge of the languages they are working from. That's right, 100% pure linguistic competence - guaranteed to tinkle your eardrums.

Much like with the abbey beer market, in the chocolate market you'll find attractively wrapped chocolate bars of all tastes and sizes, chocolate surrogates disguised with all sorts of fillings, crunchy wafers and the rest. If what you are looking for is genuine chocolate, 100% pure cocoa butter fine Belgian chocolate is your choice; if its genuine interpretation you want, your choice is AIIC.

....and the famous sprout that carries its name....

A delegate showed up in the booth the other day at the end of a meeting. He was so extremely grateful and appreciative of the service we had provided him that my colleague and I decided to offer him a drink. After all, it's not every day you get a chance of having your professional ego inflated to such a size that you feel you're floating over the clouds for the rest of the week.

We got to talking about interpretation which gave me a chance to try out my "frites et mayonnaise, abbey beer, foul weather, Belgian chocolate" bit before throwing it out at you. Once I had finished expounding my theory, our thankful delegate drinking pal put forward his ideas, which I offer all my interpreter colleagues as a bit of food for thought.

To conference delegates attending a meeting, interpretation is much like the vegetables that garnish the main course one orders at a restaurant:

- no one wants to eat them unless it is absolutely necessary.
- those who have never eaten them look at them with suspicion and disdain.
- when they are not yet ready to be eaten, as when they are being cooked, the stench can spoil your whole dinner.
- when they are well prepared and served with care, they are an unexpected and appreciated addition that can turn a fine dish into an exceptional meal.

So there you have it, my delegate's description of what we represent to our listeners and my own personal views of the wonderful world of word weaving, Belgian style. A singular market for interpretation services though it probably holds many points in common with other markets around the globe, after all a vegetable is a vegetable no matter where you are and we are the fried carciofi alla giudia that accompany the saltinbocca alla romana, the choufleur dans sa sauce béchamel that lies beside the tournedos au poivre, we are the Sauerkraut that cradles the Wurst, yes we are the chips that flank the fish.... take it from me, I've been a Brussels sprout for years.
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