



AIIC Staff Interpreters examine role and perception

How the job of conference interpreters is seen is of significance in the workplace. Making all aspects of our workload visible is thus of great import.

Staff Interpreters.

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The AIIC Staff Interpreters' Committee (SIC/CdP) met again through a virtual platform on Saturday 21st May 2017, four months to the day after its first distance meeting of this type. Vice-Chair Andrew Constable, responsible for handling the IT platform, facilitated the meeting due to Christina Edwards' benighted internet connection.

Hamlet famously said, in praise of humankind's innate complexity, "What a piece of work is man!". He's taunting Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, of course, former university chums become spies and henchmen of the king. Later, having accused and enraged the king, Hamlet again spars with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern; they have scurried off to intercept him, from under the shadow of a king dark with rage. Hamlet says to the machiavellian pair, tapping their chests with a pipe he's been playing:

Why, look you now, how unworthy a thing you make of me! You would play upon me; you would seem to know my stops; you would pluck out the heart of my mystery; you would sound me from my lowest note to the top of my compass: and there is much music, excellent voice, in this little organ; yet cannot you make it speak. 'Sblood, do you think I am easier to be played on than a pipe? Call me what instrument you will, though you can fret me, yet you cannot play upon me."

Hamlet has a point. But the king has one too: if Hamlet is a prince of the realm, if – to put it bluntly – that's his *job*, then notwithstanding his (and our) multi-dimensional personhood, the job comes with strings attached... Not pulled as tight as puppet strings, mind you, with a tune to dance to; not something, in short, that trivialises and instrumentalises us. But to misquote Shakespeare, there's the rub: how does an organisation know it's getting the most out of an employee and how does the employee show he's doing the utmost for his job? What does a prince do when he's not cutting ribbons in the public eye (or talking to skulls in graveyards)? And talking of graveyards, what do interpreters actually *do* when not in the booth? It's a giddy question, that can turn into sour suspicion: ironically, like Rosencrantz and Guildenstern – Hamlet's erstwhile student pals –

non-interpreter colleagues may become disgruntled instruments of the powers that be, suspicious of perceived interpreter freedoms in the workplace, even though the organisation itself may in fact understand and have adapted to the interpreter's role. But as judges will often have it, justice must be seen to be done. So who needs to see? See what, and why?

Colleagues reported on statistical dashboards, clocked up by booth overtime and lengthy travel. Although not assigned to a meeting, interpreters could then waive them like white flags, to prove they'd done their dues; interpreters or their head of service, for that matter, glimpsed in the sweep of the auditor spotlight, lit up in the institutional dark.

Other colleagues translate when not interpreting. Other organisations provide HR-style training – harassment in the workplace, abuse of authority – which features in interpreter “utilisation factor” calculations. Resources permitting, colleagues can volunteer outreach or terminology projects; others are shoehorned into them through a job description's “other duties”.

But indications suggest that some brazen organisations would simply guffaw at Hamlet's pipe-playing accusation. Pipes cost less than human beings, you know, and when times are hard, so too becomes the face of management: with the price of a pipe, you could buy more security. Or perhaps a car.

And so it goes.

At one institution there were (unfounded) complaints about interpretation quality. Ironically, when sounding out interpretation users about the service they received, about how its quality could be unwittingly impaired, talking met with dubious results. Questionnaires were better. Manichean numbers, like black and white notes on a musical score, apparently speak louder than words and are felt to ring true... But either way, pedagogy-fatigued interpreters should take note: when something is perceived as faulty, it's legitimate that people should want to know why.

From time to time, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have reappeared in various literary guises. In Kafka, in Pinter, as malevolent (or indifferent) extensions of some unfathomable protocol. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern eventually rooted out Hamlet. It took them a while. He didn't have an office. Since most staff interpreters don't either, this has perhaps helped the Rosencrantz and Guildensterns of the institutional world distill suspicious whispers (by the way, Hamlet's uncle kills Hamlet's dad by pouring poison into his ear). That said, when it comes to weight-pulling, suspicion can also prevail among sedentary office workers: occupying an office doesn't mean you're occupied. Lest it fall on deaf ears, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, despite being part of the system, are ultimately manipulated (by the King, by Hamlet?) and Pied-Pipered off to the chop.

So does it all boil down to perception? About how convincingly employees *show* they're working? Has a prima facie belief that they *are* working become so fragile? Perhaps Hamlet's hopeful outlook on what a fine piece of work man is has now ended. From Shakespeare's “All's well that ends well” to Samuel Beckett's “All's well that ends”. Colleagues say that when non-interpreters see them leave the building before half-past five, they feel judged. Hope resides, others comfortingly say, in getting across to non-interpreters the gudugeons of time they devote to preparation, to glossary learning, to being spot on in the booth: does an audience really assume a Shakespearean actor glides swan-like onto stage without having learned his lines, researched the character, read other plays, rehearsed and recited, alone and with others? No, it doesn't. No more than it assumes actors do nothing off stage. They might even sleep (perish the thought), to calm their nerves or to replenish spent batteries. It's worked for some. Take it from Macbeth:

Methought I heard a voice cry ‘Sleep no more!
Macbeth does murder sleep’ – the innocent sleep,
Sleep that knits up the raveled sleeve of care,

The death of each day's life, sore labor's bath,
Balm of hurt minds”.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern probably did think they could play people like a pipe. Tom Stoppard looked into it, he wrote “Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead”. The problem is, they aren't. And won't be. The solution, colleagues felt, is not to bemoan disembodied statistics. It's to do what we're best at: talking, communicating, convincing. This time, though, in our own name.

Members in attendance

Christina Edwards (UNON – Chair), Andrew Constable (ICC – Vice-Chair), Christopher Davies (STL – Secretary), Marina Marton (IMF – Group Coordinator), Polycarp Ambe-Niba (ECCC), Julia Antony (UNOG), Francisco Garcia Hurtado (UNHQ), Olivier Pean (OECD), Ludovic Martin (UNOV), Christelle Petite (SPC), Petra Van Eynde-Neutens (EP), Jennifer Fritz-Alcalay (ICAO), Katalin Fedineczne Vittay (EU Commission)

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