

## 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebrations of the AIIC Staff Interpreters' Committee

Paris, France

### Members in attendance:

David Sawyer (U.S. State Department) Interim Chair, Andrew Constable (ICC) Vice-Chair, Brigitte Kraushaar (OECD) Secretary, Marina Marton (IMF) Group Coordinator, Julia Antony (UNOG), Denitza Bogomilova Atanassova (EP), Paolo Cappelli (ITA MOD), Christopher Davies (STL), Marie Diur (UNOV), Katalin Fedineczne Vittay (EC), Francisco Garcia Hurtado (UNNY), Christopher Guichot de Fortis (NATO), Paula Lopez Novella (WCO), Dominique Marechal (ECJ), Nathalie Pham (Nato Defence College), Benoit Kremer (SCAS Observer), Sergio Alvarez Rubio (SMP Observer)

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The [AIIC Staff Interpreters' Committee \(SIC/CdP\)](#) met at the OECD in Paris on Friday 30<sup>th</sup> October 2015 to mark its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary and on 31<sup>st</sup> October and 1<sup>st</sup> November to hold its yearly statutory meeting. The entire committee remains deeply indebted to Brigitte Kraushaar (OECD) for securing magnificent meeting space in the historic *Château de la Muette* for the anniversary celebrations on Friday afternoon and the Committee's internal meeting on Sunday, as well as liaising with venerated colleagues at the Université Paris III – Sorbonne Nouvelle's Ecole Supérieure d'interprètes et de traducteurs (ESIT), where a discussion on institutional training and collaboration with interpreting programs was held on Saturday. Outgoing Chair, David Sawyer (U.S. State Department) presided and his successor, Christina Edwards (UNON), was elected by acclamation. David's guiding hand, as understated as it is potent, facilitated for the last time a rich and highly informative debate.

*We should pay tribute to Ludovic Ravet who, as a then staff interpreter with NATO, took the initiative which led to the AIIC Assembly's decision in Paris in January 1975 to set up the CdP, and who was its first president until 1979.*

*Claude Durand*

**The History and Future of Staff Interpreters in the Association**

Friday began with a cordial welcome and overview of the interpreting service at the OECD, given by host Claire Donovan (OECD, Head of Service). Keynote speeches by Claude Durand and Linda Fitchett reviewed the history of the Staff Interpreters' Committee and key contributions of this unique forum, including major survey projects on [“The Next Generation” of interpreters \(La Relève\)](#) (2005) and the [reasons why staff interpreters join or do not join AIIC](#) (2007). These projects were led by the keynote presenters, respectively, during their tenures as Committee Chairs. There was also welcome institutional and historical input from Christopher Thiéry, by letter, which is reproduced at the end of this report.



Château de la Muette, view from the park, Paris, France. Wikipedia Commons.

As Claude Durand remarked, from its inception, the SIC/CdP has been a horizontal committee of AIIC, covering the whole range of issues affecting conference interpreters employed by international and national organisations and playing 3 main roles: 1) acting as a unique observatory of the evolving status of staff interpreters in the organisations covered by the CdP; 2) establishing a constant link between staff interpreters and their freelance colleagues; and 3) significantly contributing to AIIC projects.

This contextual information set the stage for a round table discussion kicked off by a group of panel speakers, who included the three previously mentioned as well as Angela Keil, AIIC's President, and Sirpa Lehtonen, former SIC/CdP Chair. The open debate focused on the future of staff interpreters in AIIC, and it brought into stark relief the problematic retention of staff interpreters within AIIC, although it should be noted for the record that membership of staff interpreters in the association has ticked upward to roughly 12.5 percent. Highlights of the widely ranging discussion are captured in the following paragraphs.

*Just a word about staff/freelance relations:*

*One question in the SIC/CdP survey of staff interpreters addressed this issue. 386 of 409 respondents thought working relations between staff and freelance were good. Most staff members had joined AIIC as freelance and most staff were freelance at some point in their career. In fact, we recognised then that careers were less stable than in the past: many interpreters have a varied career between freelancing and staffing. This makes an excellent basis for solidarity – and explains why solidarity was the main reason for staff to remain in AIIC.*

*Linda Fitchett*

### ***Freelance and staffer: Bound to a common fate***

Arguably, freelance and staff colleagues are inextricably committed to the same fate. But each approach it from different angles. Thanks to conditions originally forged by both freelancers and staffers, staff colleagues can quote from AIIC texts in response to potentially adverse moves by their administration. Indeed, their position is less perilous than freelancers' when making recommendations to organisations. But staffers should not lull themselves into a false sense of security. Staffers work more days than freelancers. Consequently, if working conditions dip, staffers will be the first to bear the brunt. However, in the eyes of organisations, international, public or private, the very existence of a professional association means that there is a profession in the first place. No association, no profession; no profession, no common defence. Mounted by both staffers and freelancers, this common defence is of on-going relevance: staff contracts are increasingly on recurring fixed-term

contract cycles and any deterioration in private market pay and conditions may be seized upon by organisations to justify similar developments in-house. The advent of remote interpretation and the impact of technology, as well as the need for continuous training and development, are also phenomena common to both staffers and freelancers. But since staffers are in a relatively sheltered environment, since the concentrate of skills within a staff team is an on-hand training resource, their learning can then be made available to freelance colleagues. Staffers and freelancers have a duty to professionally develop. But they have the equally valuable duty to develop the profession. In this respect, the Committee's holding of its yearly statutory meeting in the wings of the Assembly is a salutary one.

### ***AIIC's perceived role: Union of quality or union of lobbyists?***

This begs the question about how AIIC perceives itself and its role both towards membership and the outside world: is it a trade union? If it is, a motivated membership achieving critical mass perhaps matters more than individual interpreter quality: are good interpreters necessarily good trade unionists? What therefore should AIIC be promoting and defending? Is AIIC primarily a hallmark of quality or solidarity? Is there an antagonistic relationship between the two? What should be made of the slightly higher, albeit still very low, membership rate among staffers – 12.5% – and the forty or so members of AIIC among SCIC's 500-strong pool of interpreters? In previous AIIC Assemblies alternative membership procedures have been mooted for staff interpreters on the basis that their quality had already been tested when passing their organisations' competitive examinations. But should AIIC outsource in this way its quality prerogative? AIIC also includes an ethical dimension: just as the General Counsel of a corporation owes loyalty to his employer, he also owes loyalty to his profession and the ethical standards that that implies.

### **The Next Generation**

The 2002-2005 study [“The Next Generation” \(La Relève\)](#) was designed to address a predicted rise in institutional demand for staff interpreters, foreshadowed by interpreter retirement and EU enlargement. Findings of this highly influential study included the need for closer ties between organisations and interpretation schools.

Arguably, this project was too effective:

schools, old and new, have constituted a supply of interpreters which in some fields has now outstripped demand. EU enlargement also brought with it a changed institutional stance, notably with the introduction of the “on request” system: member states can elect ad hoc to buy interpretation services. This has reduced visibility in anticipating demand, and the first to suffer have been young interpreters, trained in some instances in language combinations for which work has since evaporated.

The highly stimulating discussion about the history and future of staff interpreters in the association was followed by a festive wine-tasting reception in a convivial atmosphere, where the lively exchanges continued in a social setting.

### **Institutional Training and Collaboration with Schools**

The following day, the Committee met at ESIT to address training, both at diploma and professional levels. Valuable contributions were made by ESIT Director Fayza El Qasem; Tasmine Fernando-Schost, Director of ESIT’s Conference Interpretation Section; Sarah Bordes, ISIT Director of Interpreting; and Andrew Gillies from [AIIC Training and Professional Development](#). Staff colleagues spoke of training and professional development in their home institutions.

#### ***Staff interpreter training provided by their home institutions***

Colleagues expressed a need for their institutions to offer funded training in several areas, such as adding languages to one’s combination, stress management as well as behavioural training refreshers in team work and booth manners. Larger organisations could offer language learning and voice coaching and in some cases training in how acting skills can be incorporated into an interpreter’s rendition. Some institutions, in the form of non-interpreter experts, also provide briefings or workshops to interpreters on new concepts or buzz words appearing in their field. These meetings also offer scope in raising awareness among users of interpretation. Some colleagues highlighted the need for additional training areas. These include refresher courses for the A language. With English dominating statements from the floor, English As doing retour need to maintain their rarely used English. Furthermore, interpreters are encouraged to flesh out their skills in non-interpreter related fields to create scope, if so desired, for branching off into other professional areas. Lastly, colleagues were reminded of the motivational

*In SIC/CdP survey of staff interpreters, AIIC was also criticized for being Eurocentric and the need was expressed to move into other areas of interpretation beyond the traditional international organisations and conference interpretation. The CdP certainly expanded, thanks to the efforts of Chairs after me. The Interpreters in Conflict Zones project has provided an area where AIIC has spearheaded cooperation with other associations and outside bodies. The creation of EULITA in 2009 too, via our legal committee, has opened up AIIC, as has the opening towards sign-language interpreters.*

*Linda Fitchett*

effects of training and the need to organise and lead workshops, using one's own skills for the benefit of others.

### ***Bridging the gap between graduate level and both freelancing and staffing at institutions***

Staff colleagues expressed frustration at the perceived skill gap between graduate level of competence and that required by their organisations for accreditation as a freelancer or recruitment as staff. Bridging the divide is addressed, in one instance, by a mentoring system, involving a three-day training course with feedback to sensitise would-be candidates to where their current performance stands. Other instances were to provision to young graduates a total immersion course, allowing potential for ultimately appearing on the freelancer roster. Highly intensive and tailored to the needs of the institution, candidates are selected both by the school and the institution. More radically, some organisations expressed the need to train from scratch their own future in-house interpreters so as to tailor them specifically to their needs. This is true for languages of lesser diffusion, the training structure and format of such courses echoing that of ESIT's special regime. But it is also true of the United Nations. UN organisations expressed dismay at the paucity of viable Arabic booth staff interpreter candidates. They claim schools are out of touch with the realities of UN staff interpreter work, whose regular diet is fast pace sight translation and speeches read out at a rate of between 140 and 180 words a minute. Visa restrictions for freelancers seeking to operate on private markets local to UN locations has compounded the issue, since gaining prior freelance experience with the UN is not easy. In light of this, the UN has built competitively accessed (but remunerated) courses to specifically prepare candidates for the LCE exam. In parallel, they suggest schools offer an optional module for training potential UN language profiles. The low success rate of students on diploma courses and the low level of graduates being successful at EU institutions accreditation tests were also addressed: only 30% of students obtain their final diploma and only 30% of graduates sitting these tests actually pass.

### ***Institutions cooperating with schools***

The schools underscored their primary purpose of producing quality interpreters. Heavy accents, incoherent statements, excessive delivery speed and bidule are realities of the market that a solid technique, acquired under ideal conditions, can tackle with the future benefit of experience. Students are sent for internships to partner organisations, which ordinarily double as a talent scout exercise. Mention was also made of training offered to experienced interpreters: on-site but also distance teaching, with the trainer in Paris and the beneficiary at a remote location.

### ***AIIC training***

*I am sure that, thanks to its unique position as an observatory of new developments in all fields pertaining to the interpreting profession, the CdP will continue, with the assistance of other AIIC working groups, to put on the table real issues, engage with others in a thorough discussion and try to draw conclusions which are both realistic and in line with the ethical values which AIIC embodies and intends to pass on to its junior members.*

*Claude Durand*

AIIC's schools' survey came under fire. While the school rating system has been phased out, some schools continue to provide what is described as inadequate training, both in quality and course duration. On the one hand, this formed part of the debate about the perceived shortfall between graduate competence and the abilities sought for rostered or staff interpreters. On the other, it raised fears of some schools simply servicing the grey market, schools paradoxically supported (with the best intentions, but with mixed feelings) by their Paris counterparts. The debate also saw other views. While

*SIC/CdP Chairs:*

*Ludovic Ravet*

*Raul Galer*

*Jean Zinck*

*Claude Echard*

*Philippe Quaine*

*David Fox*

*Claude Durand*

*Linda Fitchett*

*Nancy Pratt*

*Sirpa Lehtonen*

*David Sawyer*

*Christina Edwards*

some "good" schools' performance was demonstrably poor with some language combinations, others are prevented by law from meeting some of the AIIC survey criteria. As a reverse segue into the Friday debate, just as good interpreters don't necessarily make good lobbyists, good interpreters, it was felt, aren't necessarily good teachers – as an analogy, if the contrary were true, all world class tennis players would also be tennis coaches. Young interpreters were also highly critical of schools training interpreters in combinations which are not marketable and complained of interpreter teachers wholly lacking in both pedagogical skill and a sense of responsibility to their students. In response to comments, Andrew Gillies pointed out that, to avoid a conflict of interest with the [AIIC Interpreting Schools and Programmes Directory](#), AIIC provides no training as part of a formal partnership with schools. He said that what AIIC can offer, however, is continuous training and professional development. Picking up on the previous theme of solidarity and the privileged training position of staff interpreters, he was at pains to make clear that staffers could also be providers of training as well as beneficiaries.

Towards the end of the afternoon, updates on two ongoing Committee projects were presented to this broader audience: a survey of test formats for institutional competitive exams and the distance interpreting survey, which was initiated by Andrew Constable as an internal project and has since grown to encompass the entire association and broader profession. The test format survey for rostering and recruiting was circulated and the purpose of the project explained by Chris Guichot de Fortis (NATO). Regarding the distance interpreting survey, approved by the AIIC technical committee, a working group has now been established. The next step is to identify a point person responsible for disseminating the survey within member organisations and beyond.

The committee members listed above were delighted to have freelance colleagues and former or retired staff interpreters, including previous SIC/CdP Chairs David Fox and Nancy Pratt, join all or part of the celebrations. Attendance on Friday and Saturday totaled over 45 association members and students.

## Message to the AIIC Staff Interpreters Committee

On the occasion of its 40th anniversary, October 30, 2015

I am very grateful to David Sawyer for his invitation to attend this event, even though I was never a member of the committee, let alone its chair! Unfortunately, at this particular time I cannot leave my home on the Ile d'Yeu.

I would especially have enjoyed coming here, where I started my life as an interpreter in 1949. It was then the Organisation for European Economic Cooperation (OEEC), set up in 1948 under the Marshall Plan. The idea was to impose some sort of cooperation among the Europeans by channelling half of Marshall aid through the organisation. At the end of the Marshall Plan in 1952, the UK wanted OEEC to be disbanded, but luckily the others did not, so a compromise was reached: a third of the staff was dismissed (the "axe"), and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) was born.

After three weeks as a free-lance, I was taken on as a staff interpreter by the chief interpreter, Constantin Andronikof, who later was to be the driving force behind the creation of AIIC. (Incidentally, I strongly recommend "Naissance d'une profession - les 60 premières années de l'AIIC", which the AIIC Secretariat will be happy to send you for the sum of 18€; an English version is planned).

In those days, interpreting at OEEC was entirely in consecutive. We were all new (very few had been through a school), but the delegates were also new, and consequently tolerant. As for simultaneous, many of us started when we were lent to the Consultative Assembly of the Council of Europe, founded in 1949. The first time I sat in a booth, George Gerard, who had had experience of simultaneous in Geneva, said to me "It's like consecutive, but you just have to speak at the same time, that's all". I may say that interpreting standards have improved considerably since then...

After three years at OEEC I resigned (as a protest against the "axe") and was recruited by NATO, when it came to Paris in 1952. After a year I resigned (they insisted on our being there, even when there were no meetings; after a time one gets bored with playing Canasta with the other two colleagues), and I was a free-lance until 1979, when I was asked to set up, with Brigitte Stoffaës, an interpretation unit at the Quai d'Orsay.

I am telling you all this simply to emphasise the fact that the free-lance interpreter and the staff interpreter are basically the same animal - the one being paid on a daily basis, the other once a month. It was the recognition of this simple truth that was one of the keys to the success of AIIC. There had been several attempts to organise the profession, limited to either staff or free-lance interpreters. Then one day in 1951 Constantin Andronikof, OEEC chief interpreter, organised a lunch, here in the Chateau de la Muette, with André Kaminker, Council of Europe chief interpreter, and Hans Jacob, UNESCO chief interpreter, and talked them into founding AIIC. The basic ideas were that it should be an association for all professional interpreters, staff and free-lance, that it should be worldwide (which at the time sounded to many completely illusory), and that membership should be individual, i.e. that it should not be a federation of national associations. The three of them signed a circular that went out on December 21, 1951, which specified, inter alia, "Si notre profession comporte des fonctionnaires et des free-lances, leurs intérêts sont similaires, quand ils ne sont pas identiques, et un même esprit de corps les anime. Ils ont aussi un souci commun, celui de garder intact le 'standing' de la profession, de veiller au maintien de son intégrité technique et morale et d'en servir le prestige...". The outcome was the founding of AIIC on November 11, 1953 at UNESCO - you will find the whole (fascinating) story in the book I mentioned.

On the face of it, of course, there is one big difference between a free-lance and a staff interpreter: the former only owes allegiance to the people she or he is interpreting for, while the latter has a permanent employer, to whom she or he owes allegiance. But only up to a point: if at a European Council meeting, during a coffee break, a member of the simultaneous team is asked to help two delegates have a private conversation, if the “employer”, the President of the EU Commission, later asks the interpreter what they talked about, the answer will be the same : a polite refusal, whether the interpreter is a free-lance or on the permanent SCIC staff: both are ruled by the same code of ethics regarding confidentiality. In fact, they both belong to a “profession”. And that is the great contribution of AIIC: to turn a craft, a job, a function, into a profession. Hence the title of the book on the history of AIIC: ‘Birth of a Profession’.

Although you are celebrating the 40th anniversary of your committee in its present form, already at the 5th Assembly in Geneva in 1958 the Council was instructed to set up a Comité des Permanents. For without in any way undermining the essential unity of the profession, it was felt that staff interpreters needed a forum to discuss matters that were not necessarily of immediate interest to the rest of the profession. In the same way, at the 23rd Assembly in New York in 1979 it was found necessary, with the expansion of AIIC, to set up regional assemblies for dealing with local matters. There again, with the principle of individual membership the unity of AIIC was preserved.

Lastly, I have a plea. That there should be more staff interpreters in AIIC. Too many fail to see the point of joining AIIC... until they approach retirement. Better late than never, but it is vital that staff interpreters should play a very active role in the association. After all, they founded AIIC. In the early days there were proposals for reduced dues, but they were always rejected, mainly by the staff interpreters themselves. More recently the idea was mooted that admission should be automatic, but it was thrown out by the Assembly, for understandable reasons. The time has perhaps come, nevertheless, for innovative thinking - and your committee is the right place for this to happen.

We must always remember, however, that AIIC is our only home, and in a changing world - and not only the climate - we must make sure that the necessary improvements and embellishments do not weaken the structure of the edifice, the loadbearing walls. The basic principles that we owe to the foresight of the founders.

I wish you a fruitful meeting, and enjoyable celebrations.

I will do my utmost to be present at the 80th anniversary.

Christopher Thiéry