



Trials and tribulations

The AIIC Legal Interpreting Committee promotes high standards for legal interpreting at all levels.

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Published: October 24, 2018 Last updated: October 24, 2018

Christiane Driesen, coordinator of AIIC's Legal Interpreting Committee, works as a freelance conference interpreter across the private market, European institutions, and for a number of European and international courts and tribunals. She also serves as a sworn interpreter and translator for the City State of Hamburg.

"I sometimes work for the police and local courts as part of my personal commitment to the grass roots of professional experience, which I endeavour to pass on in my capacity as an interpreter trainer," she says.

Having initiated a course for legal interpreting at the University of Applied Sciences in Magdeburg, Christiane is currently the scientific director of a training course for legal interpreters at the Centre for Further Education at the University of Hamburg.

Two other active members of AIIC's Legal Interpreting Committee, Liese Katschinka and George Drummond, come from a similar background, having experience in national courts, international courts and in interpreter training. The committee aims to bring together members with a shared interest in improving legal interpreting.

Early years

The AIIC Legal Interpreting Committee was established after the former 'Commission des Écoles' – coordinated by Pat Longley and Jenny Macintosh – decided in the 1980s that issues around legal interpreting warranted more attention. In 1987 the Commission contacted Christiane – whose doctoral thesis, supervised by Danica Seleskovitch at ESIT, was on the subject of court interpreting – asking if she would set up a special committee. She enlisted colleagues with interpreting experience at both national and international courts: Liese Katschinka, Karla Dejean Le Féal, and Ruth Morris.

They decided on a modest structure for the committee – just three active members plus corresponding members.

"At that time interpreting at national courts was having bad press as far as many AIIC members were concerned," Christiane explains, "However we have always tried to be represented on each continent, in most cases by specialists in those fields which are relevant to the Committee."

The composition of the current Committee still reflects representation of relevant expertise and Regions: Emmanuel A. Ayuk (Africa); Sarah Bordes (France, interpreter training); Annie Bougault

De Benedictis (Netherlands, International Criminal Court); Veronica Perez Guarnieri (Argentina, ISO); Elke Limberger-Katsumi (Germany, Nuremberg Trials); Andrew Meehan (Japan); Olivia Reinshagen-Hernandez (USA); and Susan Vo (Canada, Khmer Rouge Tribunal, training).

A platform for networking and learning

As well as holding regular training and information seminars, the Legal Interpreting Committee engages in dialogue with the users of court and legal professional interpretation services – such as legislators, courts, judges and bar associations.

“We cooperate with other professional associations and provide interpreters offering their services at national and international courts with a platform for networking and learning,” Christiane says.

As an associate member of the European Legal Interpreters and Translators Association (EULITA), AIIC actively participates in events with shared objectives. Since its conception, the Committee has hosted or co-hosted over a dozen events, the most recent of which was a symposium on the subject of “Legal interpreting – Challenges and Solutions in the US and Europe”, held in June this year in San Francisco.

The Committee is working on the [legal interpreting bibliography](#), an initiative of Ruth Morris, one of its eminent members.

“Since we now have corresponding members on each continent, we shall endeavour with their support to keep abreast of developments in legal interpreting throughout the world,” Christiane says.

In the pipeline is a seminar – to be held in collaboration with the Canada Region – on the fringe of the Nuremberg Exhibition.

The Nuremberg Trials legacy

The Nuremberg Trials, which are widely accepted as being pivotal moment for modern conference interpreting, with widespread use of simultaneous interpreting, serves as a reference point for best practice in legal interpreting.

The Committee makes use of the Nuremberg Exhibition ‘One Trial – Four Languages’ to impress upon those responsible within national courts that two-tier legal interpreting is unjustified and unacceptable.

“Their impact has been much more prominent on the approach to interpreting at international courts, especially criminal courts,” she says. “These, in particular, are scrupulous in upholding the right of defence and the right of witnesses to be heard, a guiding principle in Nuremberg, where strict criteria were applied in an exemplary manner to recruiting interpreters and to monitoring their performance.”

At both national and international courts, the interpreter has the same responsibility: to contribute to the search for the truth, through reliable interpretation, and to contribute to the respect of human rights.

“In doing so, the interpreter must put the accused, who does not speak the language of the court, in the same position as a native speaker and at the same time, respect the dignity of victims and witnesses,” Christiane explains.

National courts

In line with the tradition of Nuremberg, international courts require qualified interpreters, mastering all interpreting techniques and applying a code of ethics. National courts, however, are all too often unaware of the Nuremberg tradition and have scant knowledge of the profession. In order to reduce costs, many national courts use completely unqualified people, based solely on their self-professed ability to speak a language, severely reducing the value of the testimony.

Another consideration in the professional ethos of legal interpreters is their commitment to confidentiality.

“In legal matters confidentiality is anchored in law,” Christiane states, “It is interesting to note that the secrecy of consultation between the accused and his counsel is covered by law and the judge may not require the interpreter to divulge this secret.”

Along with other professional associations, universities, and the legal profession, AIIC has contributed to a number of initiatives to improve standards for interpreting in national courts. These include the 1986 legislation in the US, European Directive 2010-64-UE and other related directives, several projects financed by the EU aiming at best practice ([EULITA](#)) and more recently a new ISO standard for legal interpreting.

Supporting all interpreters

AIIC, through the Legal Interpreting Committee, has achieved a great deal in improving standards for legal interpreters. However, Christiane would like to see the Association doing more to support legal interpreters, such as opening up training projects – beyond those facilitated by the Committee – to legal interpreter associations.

The Association should also play a greater role in training schemes to give serious qualifications to working interpreters, particularly in cases of languages of lesser diffusion, continuing the remarkable job being done by Barbara Moser-Mercer, for the InZone project, and the Interpreters in Conflict Zones Project convened by Linda Fitchett.

Finally, Christiane says, she would like all AIIC members to understand that two tiers or three tiers interpreting is unacceptable, especially in court.

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Recommended citation format:

Christiane J. DRIESEN, AIIC Communications. "Trials and tribulations". *aiic.net*. October 24, 2018. Accessed May 2, 2020. <<https://aiic.net/p/8677>>.