



Birth of a Profession... in English

The 2019 publication of AIIC's history, in English, reveals a gradual but tectonic shift in the world of international conferences, conference interpreting and AIIC over the past 65 years.

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The AIIC History group was first set up in 1997, the first version of its history, "*Naissance d'une profession*" published in 2013 to coincide with AIIC's 60th anniversary and the English version, "*Birth of a Profession*", in July 2019. The 21 years that have elapsed between these milestones mirror the changes that have taken place, but much more gradually, both within the profession and within AIIC.

A new lingua franca

Conference interpreting is generally considered to have started after the First World War during the negotiation of the Treaty of Versailles, in which the victorious powers of the United Kingdom and above all the United States insisted on expressing themselves in their own language and not French, which had been accepted as the "*lingua franca*" of diplomacy for the previous two centuries.

The first conference interpreters like Mantoux and Herbert were, naturally enough, native speakers of French who had learnt English. The founding members of AIIC, like Andronikof, Kaminker and Jacob, were either native or quasi-native speakers of French. It was natural therefore that the first common language of AIIC, in both its meetings and its basic texts, was French. In 1997, the first members of its History group, most of them born in the early 1920s were all native speakers – and writers – of French.

And yet, 100 years after the Treaty of Versailles, the inescapable fact is that English has now established itself as the global language. Today, all conference interpreters must have a sound knowledge of English whereas an increasing number find that French is no longer required.

A changing profession, a changing Association

"*Birth of a Profession*" is therefore more than just a translation into English of a book that first appeared in French, it is also the expression of a gradual but tectonic shift in the world of international conferences, conference interpreting and AIIC over the past 65 years.

From its beginnings with only 35 members, all in Paris, Geneva and London, AIIC has grown to become a worldwide association with over 3000 members. It has accepted almost 1000 new

members since 2010. An increasing number of these members no longer have French as a working language.

The book is for them of course but one hopes that this augmented and updated version of AIIC's history will also be of interest to all its members as well as the increasing number of academic historians interested in this specific area of international relations. Some of its chapters are indeed important historical documents.

Early days: 1919 –1953

The first is Wadi Keiser's seminal piece on conference interpreting between 1919 and the foundation of AIIC in 1953, that Wadi researched and wrote specially for the first edition of the book and that appears for the first time in English. In pursuing his research, Wadi gathered a huge trove of documents, now part of AIIC's historical archives in Geneva and referenced for the first time in "*Birth of a Profession*".

As an interesting aside, Wadi also kept every single edition of "L'INTERPRETE", the first ever journal devoted exclusively to conference interpreting, a collection which is now also a part of AIIC's historical archives.

1963: setting a high bar

Another important section of the book is the landmark speech given by Constantin Andronikof at AIIC's tenth annual Assembly in 1963. Andronikof, Chief Interpreter of the OEEC in 1951, was the convenor of a lunch in Paris at the end of that year, in which he, André Kaminker and Hans Jacob, two fellow Chief Interpreters, agreed on a process that would lead to the formal establishment of the International Association of Conference Interpreters two years later.

Again, this text appears for the first time in English. Reading it today is a reminder of the lofty values and ideals that AIIC set out at its inception and against which it is sometimes sobering to assess the current state of professional conference interpreting.

Nuremberg: the launchpad of simultaneous interpretation

The significance of the Nuremberg trials as the launchpad of simultaneous interpretation is covered with a concise and beautifully written first-hand account by Marie-France Skuncke, that also appears for the first time in English and is an important contribution to the growing interest in the role of interpretation in the first major international criminal trial conducted in four languages. Anybody who has seen the itinerant exhibition "*One trial-four languages*" will appreciate the many references to Nuremberg in the book.

Only a few years later in the United States, the French "productivity missions" enabled many other historic AIIC colleagues to start their careers. Specially for this new edition, Anne Berry-Decoster has written another first-hand account of these years and their importance for the wider development of conference interpreting.

The European Union and multilingualism

Coming closer to the present day, the European Union, and particularly its “big bang” enlargement in 2004, has brought a large number of new languages into the mainstream of conference interpreting.

Nobody could be better placed than Patrick Twidle, former Head of the Enlargement Unit of the European Parliament Interpretation Directorate and former Director of the interpreting service of the European Court of Justice to describe the impact of this influx on the practice of conference interpreting and its most representative professional body in another specially written piece for this edition, entitled “AIIC and multilingualism”.

Keeping up with the times

And of course, this new edition brings up to date the continuing efforts of so many volunteer AIIC members to further the interests of their profession by negotiating and monitoring its collective agreements, vetting membership applications, monitoring the non-agreement sector as well as its outreach over the years into areas like legal and court interpreting, sign language interpreting, teaching and research.

All of which is now widely broadcast on a number of dedicated websites that have been professionally designed and regularly updated to ensure that AIIC is well represented on the Internet and social networks.

Finally, the book includes the latest version of AIIC’s basic texts in English, a brief record of every Assembly since 1953, showing the names of the principal elected officers and the major decisions taken, as well as, again for the first time, a short bibliography as a pointer to further reading and a testimony to the growing literature on the practice and teaching of, as well as research on, conference interpreting.

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