Letter from the Editor: The craft of interpreting

Mastery of the medium leads to peak performance - and sometimes more.

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There is something about the human mind that loves hierarchy, that belief construct that places one category above another. Thus, “serious” music and literature are seen as being inherently superior to their respective popular forms - or vice-versa depending on one’s taste, ideology, social class or self-image. Art is placed above craft in the abstract; it must be better precisely because it is art.

The characteristic often cited as distinguishing art from craft is creativity; the artist creates something from nothing giving birth to the new. The craftsman allegedly creates something from something; the object, which also happens to be useful, is thus conferred a lesser value. I’ve always thought this distinction odd, especially since in the visual arts it was often based on medium: painting was art; ceramics was craft. Why the use of semi-liquid pigments should be inherently more creative than the use of semi-liquid earth always confounded me.

I like to think of interpretation as craft. In Old English cræft meant skill, and I am convinced that interpreting is a skill and not an innate ability (talent). In Middle English the word craft was used to refer specifically to the artful construction of a discourse. And today the word is still associated with the skillful use of language. It seems to fit. Moreover, both translation and interpretation are eminently practical as were traditional crafts.

For conjuring an image I turn to ceramics. The master potter knows the clay through his senses. He can feel that today’s batch has more elasticity than yesterday’s and his fingers adjust accordingly. Or he may decide to add sand for grittiness and a rougher texture. He is attentive to a conversation going on outside himself - between materials, tools and hands. And in that conversation he hears mutterings of the future and anticipates the drying, glazing and firing of the clay even as it is still moist between his fingers.

Craft implies the eminently practical mastery that comes from an inside out knowledge of materials, that intimate knowledge that allows you to speak through them – and they through you – without annoying distractions.

If we look at interpreting through a craft-tinted lens, we can appreciate that it is a practical skill learned over time and dependent on a mastery of our specific materials and tools. Expertise comes through the practice of the profession and not merely through studies about it. We are practitioners
and many of us are content to leave it to others to study and describe what we do.

None of this implies that theory is useless or that practitioners are unaware of what they do. Craft is awareness. I have frequently noted that interpreters, while not always up to date on the latest linguistic theories, are great talkers – and even practical theorists – when it comes to their profession and how it should be practiced. I say “keep talking” so that we can continue to learn from each other.

Taken in a wider sense, however, our craft is about more than working with language. Interpreters have to be skillful in myriad ways to carry out the task before them, create a successful practice and uphold the profession.

This issue

It is with such practical considerations in mind that we open this issue with a well-crafted Practical Guide for Professional Conference Interpreters. This updated and greatly expanded version of an older AIIC text of the same name aims “to share practical advice on professional practice”. It achieves that goal several times over. Although “the major target audience of this guide is beginners, new colleagues who have completed their professional training… and are now venturing out onto the market and into the booth,” I have already heard one veteran who had a sneak preview say that it should be read once a year by all interpreters. The only comment I can add is that if you have been looking for clear, sound, practical advice on the nitty-gritty of professional practice, you’ve just found it.

If interpreting is inherently practical, how does one go about teaching it? Is it simply a question of practice? Does practice always make perfect? Is there a more hands-on approach to add value – or insight? How is mastery of a craft transmitted? With some of these questions in mind, Silvia Camilo gives us an overview of Why trainers should be practicing conference interpreters.

Mirroring the growth of our profession over the last half-century, interpreter training programs have proliferated, and with them academic research into what we practitioners do. According to author Franz Pöchhacker, his recently published book Introducing Interpreting Studies intends to provide “a map of the interpreting studies landscape.” “It succeeds admirably in its aim,” says our reviewer Andrew Dawrant, whose commentary offers a useful summary and evaluation of the book.

The German region of AIIC has contributed several articles to Communicate! and is back once again with a most interesting topic. Aude-Valérie Monfort attended the first congress of the German Association of Sign Language Interpreters and prepared this report about the proceedings. We can only hope that this kind of practical collaboration with other branches of our profession will continue in the future.

We close this issue with a new feature that you’ll be seeing here periodically in the future. The editors have been tracking stories about language, interpreting and related matters; Interpreting in the News presents a selection of what we have found recently – and not so recently. We hope you’ll enjoy these tidbits, and perhaps be inspired to share your future favorites with us.

As I was preparing this short article, I re-read an essay by renowned literary translator Gregory Rabassa.[1] He wraps up his reflections on craft with an excellent description of the difficulty we face, and the combination of humility and chutzpah that we need to meet the challenge day after day:

This matter of choice in translation always leaves the door open to that other possibility. We cannot be sure of ourselves. Translation is a disturbing craft because there is precious little certainty about what we are doing, which makes it so difficult in this age
of fervent belief and ideology, this age of greed and screed. To paraphrase Villon in a way that would have suited Montaigne, 'Où sont les que sais-je d’antan?’ The translator must be alert to that other possibility (or possibilities), even if it doesn’t rise up and bite him on the buttocks. He must assume the mind of the old Vermonter, who always sees that other side. When asked by the evangelist, 'Friend, have you found Jesus?’ his perfectly logical reply is, 'God, I didn’t know he was lost’. The translator can never be sure of himself, he must never be. He must always be dissatisfied with what he does because ideally, platonically, there is a perfect solution, but he will never find it. He can never enter into the author’s being and even if he could the difference in languages would preclude an exact reproduction. So he must continue to approach, nearer and nearer, as near as he can, but, like Tantalus, at some practical point he must say ne plus ultra and sink back down as he considers his work done, if not finished (in all senses of the word)."


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