

# THE CIAP BULLETIN

# INTERPRETASIA

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## EDITORIAL

**I**s globalisation obliterating cultural diversity? Fifty years ago, when six countries in Europe started uniting within the European Coal and Steel Community (the precursor of today's more political and economic European Union), there was interpretation in only three languages. Today, with the expansion of the EU to 27 countries, interpretation is sometimes provided in more than 20 languages. Our lead article explains why the EU has opted to offer 'language-equal' opportunity.

And yet, in other parts of the world, English seems to frequently be imposed as the lingua franca. This puts non-native English speakers on an unequal footing with those who have spoken English all their lives. CIAP interpreters recently worked at a meeting where interpretation was provided only into French, Spanish and Portuguese but those listening to interpretation were obliged to speak in English. They were not allowed to speak their own language!

Languages reflect the diversity of human cultures, which is what makes life so interesting ... for interpreters!

*The Editors*

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## European Parliament to wrestle with 20 Official Languages

by Honor Mahony<sup>1</sup>

**A** committee room in the European Parliament is the perfect way to see the practical effects of European enlargement. Here it is possible to realise just what it means to be a union of 25 member states operating in 20 official languages.

On any given day, members of the European Parliament (MEPs) hold forth on a pet subject, ranging from investment services to fisheries policy to trade issues, and all around them their words are being relayed into 19 other languages. In the small translation booths at the sides of the room, the lips of interpreters move constantly, their faces a picture of concentration. In the committee room itself, the headsets emit a constant background chatter as MEPs listen to the interpreters, without whom nothing would function as parliamentarians often need to fall back on the familiarity of their own language to tackle complex and highly technical issues.



At the back of the rooms, lobbyists, journalists, and MEPs' assistants clamber for the last available 'public seats' equipped with headsets – if they



Interpreter working in a well-designed built-in booth like those used at the EU headquarters

<sup>1</sup> Adapted with permission from an article published by the EUobserver.com in April 2004

miss them there is nothing they can do except watch in frustration as the debate wafts incomprehensibly by. In the booths though, where interpreters work for 3 ½ hour slots, the interpreting goes on.

"It's very stressful", said Estonian interpreter Hanna-Liisa Tamm. "Since you're the only person who really understands, you have the responsibility to render it understandable to everyone else." The 25-year old says that she is confronted with any range of subjects in a day. The most difficult task is, however, to translate back into a foreign language. As hers is a 'small' language, it gets translated into English, French and German and then translated on into Hungarian, Polish, Portuguese, or Maltese.

### Interpretation costs

Aside from the logistics of simply trying to find and train so many interpreters, there are also the costs involved. After enlargement, the cost of the EU's translation service is set to rise to around 800 million euro a year or about 2.55 euro per EU citizen.

Is it worth it? Very much so, argues Davyth Hicks, editor of EuroLang, an office on minority languages in the EU. "Lack of linguistic diversity has been compared to a decline in biodiversity. When you lose a language you lose a whole conceptualisation of the

world." He says it is unfair to use economic reasons for not granting people the right to speak their own language. And certainly it is hard to argue against citizens being allowed to elect a monolingual MEP.

### Rise and rise of English?

Enlargement will also boost the need for a common

*de rigueur*. But with Swedes, Finns and Austrians joining the EU in 1995, it was the start of a slippery slope.

The new member states will accentuate the trend. A Eurobarometer survey carried out last year found that English is the most spoken foreign language in the new member states, followed by Russian and German. But for all that, Europe is set to keep its Babel

tower for the foreseeable future.

### Europe's Babel tower

From 1 May 2004, the Germanic (German, English, Danish, Dutch, Swedish), Romance (French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese) and Greek languages have been joined by the Slavic (Polish, Slovak, Czech,

Slovenian) and Baltic (Latvian, Lithuanian) tongues. But that is not the end of it. In a few years, Bulgarian, Croatian and Romanian could be added to the list of official languages.

"Good that Maltese with 300,000 speakers and Estonian with 1 million will be EU official languages, but why not Catalan with at least 7.3 million speakers, Basque with over 600,000 or Welsh with 550,000?", asks Mr. Hicks. ■



Socorro Browning & Salma Tejpar-Dang, for once delegates rather than interpreters – at the AIIIC Assembly 2006

language that everyone can already speak. And it is English, which is spoken by such a large number of people as a second language, that it is becoming the lingua franca. To the horror of the francophone.

In principle, the three working – as opposed to the 20 official – languages of

the EU are French, German and English. Back in the days of Jacques Delors as Commission president, French was very much

*"Lack of linguistic diversity has been compared to a decline in biodiversity. When you lose a language you lose a whole conceptualisation of the world"*

**Honor Mabony**  
Deputy Editor  
EUobserver



# Whither the Profession of Interpretation?

An interview with the co-editor of *Interpretasia*

**Interpretasia:** *What is the most striking change to the interpreting profession since you started your career in the early 1970's?*

**Jean-Pierre Allain:** When I started out, delegates actually made an effort to be understood by other delegates and, of course, by the interpreters. This seems to have been lost, except in negotiations. Interpretation is a necessary part of international meetings, but at many conferences, particularly scientific ones, delegates seem to be unaware of the fact that they are being interpreted. Few of them attempt to communicate ideas; most simply try to read through their text as quickly as possible, often in barely intelligible English. This is exacerbated by the demands of organizers who cram too much into a conference programme and ask that all presentations be made in English, in the mistaken belief that everyone understands English. The task of interpreters, as communicators, has therefore become more difficult.

**Interpretasia:** *In what areas do you feel that interpreters and translators have been most affected by recent technological advancements?*

**JPA:** Interpreters today make extensive use of Internet-provided information to prepare for conferences. Most organisers nowadays do not send documents, but indicate a website where interpreters can find conference information. Speakers increasingly use PowerPoint for their presentations. Interpreters' booths need to be located close enough to the projection screen for interpreters to see the screen, the speaker and the audience. The speaker uses words, pictures and gestures to make a point. The interpreter only has words.

Translation memory and machine translation have certainly facilitated written translation work, for instance to identify the same words or phrases in a text and



CIAP associate Manuel Pastor doing consecutive interpretation at a press conference for Roger Federer at the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing. Consecutive interpretation, which does not require modern technology, is still used at meetings.

instantly provide the corresponding translation. The human element is nevertheless always needed to ensure that technology has produced what the author intended. For this, qualified, trained and knowledgeable translators are essential. Only a human being understands that language is the expression of thoughts and feelings, not a string of words with an exact equivalent in another language. Any written translation meant for publication must be checked by a human translator. Machines can't replace human brains, because they don't think.

This is even truer for interpretation. There is no software programme yet that is able to distinguish between different ways the same words may be pronounced in different contexts or according to the intonation used. Between "what" and "what?" for instance!

Computerized interpretation is also difficult to achieve because of the widespread use of English. This beautiful language is mispronounced so badly by many non-native and even native speakers at conferences that it is impossible to create a database that can fathom the different ways in which words are pronounced or the way punctuation is used. An interpreter can recognize 'ship' when a speaker says 'sheep' or 'cement' when it sounds like 'semen' but a machine can't.

**Interpretasia:** *What would be the dream technology to make the life of the interpreter easier?*

**JPA:** A technology that automatically sends written statements that are to be read out at a conference to each interpreter well in advance would make interpreters' lives easier and contribute to their efficiency.

**Interpretasia:** *What is your vision of the future of the interpreting profession?*

**JPA:** There will be more conferences held exclusively in English, or should I say in what passes as English. There will be less need for interpreters with the formerly dominant world languages – French, Spanish, German – and more need for interpreters with less frequently used languages, such as Indonesian, Vietnamese, Chinese, Japanese, Thai, Cantonese, Korean, Urdu, Bulgarian, Estonian, Slovak and other East European languages. In all cases English will still be needed, as the connection between languages. ■



**Jean-Pierre Allain** is a consultant interpreter based in Bangkok, one of the founding members of CIAP and former president of AIIC.



# Living in a Foreign Culture

by Salma Tejpar-Dang

Like many foreign-language interpreters based in Asia, I have spent most of my life as an expatriate in different parts of the world. This has meant adjusting to the host culture, and – being a typical interpreter – trying to learn the local language, even if it's only enough to communicate at a very basic level.

The first time I felt literally 'alien', was when I arrived in Thailand with my husband and 18-month old daughter in 1982. I felt illiterate, unable to read the signposts as soon as we ventured outside Bangkok, and unable to ask for directions because no one spoke anything other than Thai. I felt powerless. Within one week of arriving in Bangkok, I signed up for intensive Thai classes, which I attended conscientiously for four months.

Thai is a tonal language, and was therefore totally foreign to my ear and tongue. I would play the tapes repeatedly to hear the difference in tones and then repeat the drills to make sure that I said 'doctor' instead of 'saucepan'. The Thai word is the same: *mob* pronounced in two different tones. But I persevered, playing the tape in the car as I braved Bangkok traffic to drive myself to and from my Thai classes at the other end of the city.

I ended up able to talk to taxi drivers, bargain with the fruit and vegetable vendors at the market and generally felt more at home in Bangkok, where we lived for over 13 years. But it took me a long time to accept that people would immediately have a blockage when

they heard me struggling with the language. They would look askance at my non-Thai-speaking but Thai-looking husband when I would order food at restaurants, as if to ask him 'what IS she trying to say..?'

So, in addition to learning the language there was the equally important – no, more important – cultural adaptation. For example, a people's culture is expressed in the way they greet each other. Most Asians won't simply say 'hello' or 'hi'. They will say 'Have you eaten [rice] yet?' This is part of Asian hospitality. If someone has eaten, it means that they are well...!

Having good manners in the west means saying 'thank you' for every service rendered. In the east, people get confused at the constant thanks proffered, just as westerners are bemused by the constant apologies expressed by the Japanese when they start a sentence.

*"Living in a foreign country has been a most enriching way of discovering other cultures, other people and other ways of doing things"*

After spending a few years in Canada, we moved to Nepal. The first time I answered the phone, I heard "Who are you?" And, of course, my reaction was: you are phoning me, so you should know who I am. More to the point: who are you? Then I remembered that like in Bangkok, there is more chance of people reaching the wrong number than the right one. So, rather than waste time with polite niceties, it's easier to identify who you are talking to first!

Living in a foreign country has been a most enriching way of discovering other cultures, other people and other ways of

doing things. One learns that there are as many perspectives to life as there are people. ■



Nepali woman performing her daily puja ritual at a neighbourhood shrine

Foreigners often feel their privacy is being invaded by the questions that Thais and other Asians will ask about their personal lives: How old are you? How much do you weigh? How much do you earn? Are you married yet? Why not? These questions are not to pry into people's lives, but simply to get to know the other person. If the person is older, s/he is addressed with greater respect.

**Salma Tejpar-Dang**  
is a consultant interpreter based in Kathmandu, one of the founding members of CIAP, currently Council member for the Asia-Pacific region and a vice-president of AIIC.





For the 18th consecutive year, CIAP recruited the team of interpreters for the World Economic Forum on South East Asia held in June 2008 in Kuala Lumpur. Socorro Botero-Browning, CIAP associate, has been organising interpretation for the WEF since it started meeting in Asia in Hong Kong, in 1991.

## SOME INTERPRETATION TEAMS ORGANISED BY CIAP IN 2008

Shanghai	Jan	WTTC Forum on Chinese Tourism and Human Resources in the Tourism Industry
Guangzhou	Feb	International Table Tennis Federation Assembly
Harbin	Feb	International Federation of University Sports
Shanghai	Mar	Fourth Automobile Industry Leaders Roundtable
Dubai	Apr	The Global Travel and Tourism Summit
Tokyo	Apr	G8 Development Ministers Meeting
Seoul	May	Egmont Group 16th Plenary
Tokyo	Jun	Intl Council of Creators of Graphic, Plastic and Photographic Arts – CISAC
Kuala Lumpur	Jun	World Economic Forum on South East Asia
Shanghai	Jul	International Conference on Judicial Protection of Intellectual Property Rights
Tokyo	Jul	G8 Justice & Interior Ministers Meeting
New Delhi	Sep	ArcelorMittal Leaders Conference
Manila	Oct	Universal Federation of Travel Agents Associations - General Assembly
Seoul	Oct	Codex Task Force on Antimicrobial Resistance
Manila	Oct	Global Forum on Migration and Development



CIAP associate Laurence Bastit interpreting the chairman at the 2007 IASAJ conference in Bangkok

Visit our website! [www.ciap.net](http://www.ciap.net)

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## WHAT IS AIIC?

**F**ounded in 1953, AIIC (**Association Internationale des Interprètes de Conférence - International Association of Conference Interpreters**) is the only worldwide association of professional conference interpreters. AIIC has over 2,800 members in 90 countries and is recognised by the United Nations, the World Bank, NATO, the European Union and many business organisations as the only representative of professional interpreters and the authoritative voice on matters of conference interpretation.

AIIC sets professional standards and working conditions accepted worldwide. Together with the International Organisation for Standardisation, AIIC's Technical and Health Committee has drawn up standards ISO 2603 for built-in booths and equipment for simultaneous interpretation and ISO 4043 for mobile booths for use in conference rooms without built-in facilities.



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## WHAT IS CIAP?

**C**onference Interpreters Asia Pacific (CIAP) is a network of consultant interpreters, all members of AIIC, who live and work in the Asia-Pacific region. Established in 1990, CIAP provides teams of conference interpreters for simultaneous and consecutive interpretation at meetings of all sizes.

Its members advise conference organisers on language requirements, choice of conference venues, technical requirements and even seating arrangements, and recruit teams of interpreters suited to the needs of a conference. CIAP also provides written translations of conference documents.

CIAP associates can provide simultaneous interpretation teams for English, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, French, Spanish, German, Italian, Portuguese, Russian and other languages.



CONFERENCE INTERPRETERS ASIA PACIFIC

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*There are CIAP Associates in several cities in Asia-Pacific. For the consultant interpreter nearest to you, please see the list of names and contact numbers provided in this issue.*

*Web: [www.ciap.net](http://www.ciap.net)*