A statistical portrait 2005-2009

Demography, stress, language needs, market demand and workload are just some of the elements contributing to a panoramic view of an association with over 2900 members spread across 99 countries. This executive summary covers some of the highlights for the private market gleaned from responses to the online questionnaire for the year 2009. For the first time, it examines market evolution over a 5-year period.

Jacquy NEFF.
Published: March 14, 2011 Last updated: June 28, 2016

Statistical World Report 2009

The 2009 Statistical Report is a detailed examination of the period 2005-2009 and takes into account not only quantity and nature of work but also other aspects related to the working world of conference interpreters, such as remuneration, language combinations and various stressors.

The 2009 response rate (24.4% of membership) was the second highest in the 5-year survey period.

Respondent's profile

Age breakdown of respondents irrespective of status (staff in red, freelance in blue) shows a normal distribution in comparison to numerous other academic professions with a late start to professional life: 77% of all members are between 31 and 60 years of age and only very few become members before reaching the age of 30 (2.6%). However, these figures also show that a growing number of members will reach retirement age (staff members in particular) without a corresponding potential for replenishment: at one end of the scale, only 1.6% of respondents are young staff members (under 30), while at the other 9.4% are 61 or over. For freelance interpreters, the picture seems to be brighter: 18% of freelance respondents are over 60 but tend to continue to work up to the age of 70. The 3.3% of interpreters retiring is offset by a replacement rate of 2.7% of interpreters under 30.

Conclusion: AIIC needs to find ways to attract younger members.

New blood

Membership in AIIC seems to have remained steady over the period, hovering around the 3,000 mark without really going beyond it (exception: 2007). The trend concerning candidates and pre-candidates is worrying as their number continues to fall, dropping from 254 in 2005 (8.5%) to only 110 (3.7%) in 2009. As this is the category that will counteract any fall in membership due to retirement and contribute to the growth of AIIC as a professional association, special attention should be given to the issue.
How much do they work?

With a share of nearly half of all working days (47.6%), the Private Market Sector (PriMS) remains the most important source of work for interpreters worldwide, independent of domicile. Its importance varies, however, according to geographical region or individual countries. In all regions but Africa and Europe, PriMS represents the largest market segment, accounting for up to 80% of all work in South America, 63.4% in North America (USA and Canada) and 70.2% in Asia-Pacific.

On a five-year line (2005 – 2009) of market share, it appears that the PriMS (light blue line) and the United Nations System (UNSS – brown line) are the two most volatile markets. On a year-to-year basis, no practising conference interpreter would be able to predict exactly how these 2 sectors will evolve. In contrast, the European Union (EU) and the Coordonnées (mostly Council of Europe) display a steadier curve; even in difficult years, work for EU institutions (dark blue) grows steadily and represents on average about one quarter of all work. The UNSS sector is a rather unsteady market with ups and downs, whereas the Special Terms market (governmental and international bodies not covered by an agreement – yellow line) has shown slow but steady growth over the last five years and now accounts for over 10% of all working days, almost as much as the UNSS market. Smaller market segments show varying trends: Coordonnées (green) has grown slowly over the period, Interpol has remained stable, and the Global Union Federations (GUFs) have gone down by almost 2/3 from 2005 to 2009.

Over a 6-year period, the interpretation market worldwide, expressed in mean working days per interpreter, enjoyed steady growth from 2004 through 2008, and then plummeted in 2009. The PriMS and the Agreement Sector (AS) remain the two largest providers of work and usually compensate each other’s fluctuations: if one segment declines, the other tends to make up for the lost days (except in 2009 when both moved downward). However, the growth of these two market sectors over the years has been such that together they could provide enough work for an ever-growing population of conference interpreters.

In terms of overall work trends, 2009 stands out for the underlying market difficulties evidenced. Whereas in 2008 only 20% of freelance respondents reported that their workload had gone down, 37% of them indicated that it declined in 2009 (28% less work, 9% much less work, purple and light blue lines respectively). Although workload remained stable for 40% of all respondents (2008: 41%), less than a quarter had more work (22% as opposed to 39% in 2008). The upward trend in the overall market seen in 2008 did not carry over into 2009, and overall work seems at best to be steady between 2005 and 2009.

In conclusion, the recession of 2009 had a clear impact on workload in countries/regions with less differentiated markets.

Workload tends to diminish with age. From 40 onwards more than 30% of respondents in each category reported a drop in work in 2009 compared to 2008. Conversely, colleagues under 40 saw their workload steadily increase or at least remain stable. Even in a difficult year such as 2009, this trend has continued.
Modes of interpreting

The world average for different modes of interpreting has shown a slight shift over the five-years under consideration. Pure simultaneous has moved gradually downward, from 86.5% in 2005 to 84.9% in 2009. The use of bidule has gone in the opposite direction, from 2.6% in 2005 to 4.5% in 2009 (with a peak of 5.6% in 2008). Chuchotage (whispering), at 2.4% in 2009, was up from 2008 but overall fell from its 2005 share of 3.0%. These three taken together as various forms of simultaneous accounted for 91.8% of the total.

Pure consecutive represented 6.5% in 2009 (2005: 5.7%) and liaison interpreting 1.7% (2005: 2.1%), accounting for 8.2% of all working days if joined under the heading of consecutive.

Special market segments

Over the period 2005 – 2009, only interpreting for radio and television was a steadily growing market worldwide; all other segments remained stable.

Remuneration

Average private market remuneration levels in 2009 were highest in Switzerland (mean lower rate CHF 1111/mean upper rate CHF 1324), Germany (€ 696/€ 868) and France (€ 587/€ 791). The lowest average rates were reported in South America, Israel and Mexico/Central America.

Evolution 2005-2009: All regions/countries saw average private market remuneration levels move upward over this period, with the Arab Countries doing best with +153.1% average lower range/+81.7 average upper range. The mean worldwide rise was around +10% lower range and +18% upper range. In Europe, with its very competitive private market, rate increases were far below the world average (Austria +0.2%/+23%, Belgium +8.9/+12.5%, France +3.2%/+1.1%, Germany +3.0%/3.9%, Netherlands +7.1/+9.3%, Nordic Countries +2.7%+4.9%, Portugal +8%/+2%, and Switzerland +4.9%/+6.3%). Regions with above average increases were all outside Europe, except for Greece & Cyprus: Arab Countries, Asia-Pacific and South America. In the USA, rate hikes were also below the world average, whereas in Canada, CECO and Italy rates seem to have stagnated.

That nasty stress

In 2009 the most stressful factors cited were (in order of importance): “Fast speeches”, “Unintelligible speakers”, “Technical matters”, “No Documents”, “Poor air supply in booth” and “Job security”.

In all countries/regions, fast speeches are identified as the number one stressor. Differences appear in the second most cited factor: unintelligible speakers are named by respondents in 9 AIIC regions (Asia-Pacific, Belgium, CECO, France, Italy, Malta, Nordic Countries, Spain and Switzerland), all places where speakers commonly express themselves in imperfectly mastered English.

In summary, respondents in Europe complained a lot about the widespread use of Globish (badly and rapidly delivered) and travel conditions.
Satisfied?

Overall job satisfaction levels were again very high in 2009 in spite of what everybody agrees is a difficult job and a stressful life-style. 78.5% of all respondents declared themselves highly to very highly satisfied with their work.

Compared to 2005 (a year with a detailed analysis of the same feature), things have not changed much, although there are some signs indicating that the general image of the conference interpreting profession among the professionals themselves is changing. Overall (all interpreters) job satisfaction was higher in 2009 than in 2005, indicating that things have changed for the better.

Languages

Respondents were asked whether they had used each of their individual language pairs “a lot”, “regularly”, “infrequently” or “never” in 2009. The first two options were recoded as “Used” and the last two as “Unused”.

In 2009, about 39% (2004: 35%) of respondents used all passive-active pairs in their official AIIC language combination. About 52% (2004: 50%) of respondents reported using over 3/4 of their nominal language combination.

64.3% of respondents (2004: 67%) worked actively into 2 languages. The vast majority of respondents worked mainly into A or B. However, C-languages can also be used actively and are, especially in Africa (41.7% of all respondents), Arab Countries (30%), Brazil (32.4%), Israel (54.5%), Netherlands (30.6%) and Turkey (50%). Worldwide 14.3% (2004: 11.5%) of all C languages were reported to have been used as active languages. There is thus a slight progression in the use of C-languages as active languages compared to 2004.

No correlation, however, could be found between respondents using consecutive above the average level and those using their C-language(s) as an active language (which would have indicated that C-languages are primarily used actively in consecutive interpreting), nor with responses to the question about languages being studied (C-languages about to become B-languages). Thus an explanation for this high level of use of active C’s has to be found within the regions themselves.

Demand

Based on languages indicated as source languages, an estimate of those most commonly used as conference languages was made.

Once again in 2009, the most frequently used conference languages were English and French (92% & 75% of all days reported respectively). Spanish (48.7%) still remains the third most common conference language. Although limited to Europe, German was again in fourth place, its falling use on a world level made up for by greater use in Europe. Fifth ranked Italian is mainly restricted to Europe and accounts for 22% of all days indicated. Portuguese, though a world language, comes in behind Italian with only 17.6% of all conference days. There were 23 other languages that recorded more than 1,000 days of use, but all were rather small compared to the big 6 mentioned above.

In 2009, as in 2004, an extrapolation of the relative demand for active languages was again made on the basis of the reported utilization rate of passive-active pairs and respondents’ workload.
Worldwide, the top language pairs were again FR into EN and EN into FR (2004: EN into FR and FR into EN). Both pairs were almost equally in demand, with a slight advantage to the former. The third pair, ES>EN, had a ratio (relation between numbers of working days indicated for this language pair and overall working days) of 1:5 (2004: 1:5), whereas EN>ES had a ratio of almost 2:1 (2004: 2 to 1 for EN into ES). There was an almost 2.5:1 (2004: 3:1) ratio between the top two pairs and those at 5 and 6 (ES>FR, EN>DE, FR>ES and DE>ES), indicating fierce competition among these languages.

Continuing education

Respondents were asked whether they were learning languages with a view to working from and/or into them at some point. They were free to choose any language, including those already present in their official language combination.

35.6 % (2004: 38%) of respondents reported studying languages.

The most reported among them is English, commonly studied across all AIIC regions; in Asia-Pacific, Brazil, Canada, Germany, Italy, Spain and Turkey it was the most frequently studied language. French is still an attractive addition in almost all regions as well. Kurdish seems to be an up-and-coming language as it was cited by respondents in 5 regions.

Conclusion

2009 was a difficult year by all standards. The economic and financial crisis, combined with a newly elected European Parliament and a new EU Commission, meant that the overall market plummeted with no segment of it able to cushion the fall.

Compared to 2004, however, all market segments are larger, with the average number of days worked days showing an upward trend.

Many thanks…

… to all AIIC interpreters who took the time to participate in the 2009 survey and to all AIIC groups and individuals for their precious comments.

Members can read the full report (45 pages) and see regional breakdowns there also. And don't forget to participate in the 2010 Survey now on the Extranet.

Jacquy Neff is a trainer of conference interpreters at the Johannes Gutenberg University of Mainz (Germersheim).

Recommended citation format: