ISO standards on interpreting

Two AIIC members active in the ISO Working Group on Interpreting discuss new international standards in the works.

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Klaus Ziegler (AIIC Germany) and Verónica Pérez Guarneri (AIIC Argentina) were in Pretoria in June 2013 for the latest meeting of the ISO Working Group on Interpreting (in ISO parlance ISO/TC37/SC5/WG2). Verónica is Convener of the ISO Working Group and Klaus heads the AIIC Project on Standardization of Conference Interpreting Services. They agreed to talk about what been done so far and what is planned for the future.

LL: First of all, thanks for agreeing to this interview. Let’s start with some general background information. How did the idea to write international standards on interpreting come about?

KZ: Actually, I was informed about the ongoing work on the Community Interpreting Standard at a quite late stage, when the project had already been going on some two or three years. At that time Standards on Interpreting were something very new to me and, to be honest, I thought it was something completely unnecessary. As far as I know, the experts on ISO level started with a project on Community Interpreting because they weren’t able to agree on a Scope for a General Standard on Interpreting. As the need for Community Interpreting Services has been growing very fast and the area was completely unregulated, this was the first step towards standardization in the world of interpreting.

VPG: It was more or less the same in my case. The idea of a standard on interpreting had been going on in my mind for a long time and when I started to get involved in national standards I learned of this community interpreting project. At first I did not see the use of it for Argentina, in particular because you know, we are a Spanish-speaking country surrounded by many other Spanish-speaking countries, except for Brazil, so I did not see at that time how this standard could be of use in the Argentine scene in particular. I did understand, however, how important this was for other countries like the US or Canada with huge numbers of people who do not speak the language of the majority. These linguistic minorities access services through community interpreters, be it at hospital, when having to discuss their children report cards with a teacher, etc. ISO DIS 13611 is a guidance document. It establishes the basic principles and practices necessary to ensure quality community interpreting services for all language communities, for end users as well as for requesters and service providers.

LL: When and how did each of you become involved in the process?

KZ: By that time the German Standard on Translation Services (which later on became a European and a worldwide standard) was about to be revised and the committee in charge on a national level was looking for additional members. I was asked if the German Region of AIIC wanted to
participate. At the same time, we learned that the Working Draft of the Standard on Community Interpreting dealt with quite a lot of settings that we as conference interpreters would definitely see as conference interpreting settings. That was when a colleague of mine and I myself began to see the necessity of AIIC participating actively in the work on standards both on a national and an international level. The Board of the German Region decided to get involved; I was appointed representative of AIIC in the national mirror committee and expert for the ISO working group, and that’s when my “standards life” began. Although it is a lot of work and things proceed at a rather slow pace (something very difficult to accept for a conference interpreter), I appreciate the opportunity to work with colleagues from different parts of the world.

VPG: The community interpreting project was the only thing that there was in the field of interpreting standardization. And let me explain a little bit of procedure here. We are a network of national standards bodies and there are different categories depending on level of engagement and participation. These national standards bodies make up the ISO membership and they represent ISO in their countries. In turn, ISO work is conducted by Technical Committees (TCs) comprising large groups of experts from all over the world. These experts (coming from the relevant industry, consumer associations, academia, NGOs and government) negotiate all aspects of the standard, including its scope, key definitions and content. In turn a TC may decide that its scope is too broad and may then set up one or more subcommittees to focus on specific parts of the overall standards requirement. Further subgroups may then be established as working groups, to focus on specific tasks within the overall programme. The TC under which we work is called “Terminology and other Language and Content Resources”. Our SC5 is “Translation and Interpreting” and WG2 is “Interpreting”, so you see that work becomes more and more detailed as you go deeper into the ISO structure.

If you personally want to work on standardization, you have to become a member of your NSB on behalf of an institution or company (and be nominated as an expert to work on a specific project). I approached the Argentine standardization body (IRAM) and expressed my interest to work on standardization in the field of interpreting. Had I said that my specialization was “car paint” or “electrical devices” they would have been more willing to accept my proposal. Anyway, I succeeded in convincing them that the work done at the ISO level would be of benefit to the country. As NSBs should establish an appropriate process to develop national positions and comments on ISO work, as well as to determine the NSBs’ representation at ISO meetings, it is recommended that national mirror committees (NMCs) be formed whenever possible. We therefore set up a NMC with other AIIC members and members of the national association of interpreters (ADICA), with myself representing AIIC, to participate in the latest stages of the drafting of this standard with a view of writing a standard on conference interpreting down the line. And right we were, because we are starting to see a growing need in Argentina for community interpreting with the large inflows of immigrants coming from countries as distant as China, Korea and Taiwan, as well as the presence of indigenous populations that were always there but whose linguistic needs had been neglected.

We have already requested that IRAM include in its 2014 Business Plan the adoption of the ISO standard on CI so that as soon as it is published by ISO, Argentina will have the standard adopted and in force in no time thanks to the so-called “Fast-track procedure”. This is possible when a document with a certain degree of maturity is available at the start of a standardization project, for example a standard developed by another organization. When a country adopts an ISO standard, it does so “as is”. The only thing you can do is add an annex explaining differences or similarities or references to the local setting. And we are happy with that because we have been involved in the drafting process and have been able to provide our input and comment on paragraphs that were not in line with Argentine legislation, for example.

That is why I cannot emphasize enough how important it is that experts participate in the ISO
process through their NSBs. Experts provide their personal view and expertise but each one comes from a different country, and you cannot lose sight of what is going on in your country, its idiosyncrasies, what interpreters needs are, their education requirements, etc. All that will be fed into the new standard.

**LL:** Talk a bit about how the Guidelines on Community Interpreting evolved and where that stands today.

**KZ:** As said before, the work on the Guidelines on Community Interpreting started some years ago (without AIIC’s participation) as a result of the experts not being able to agree on the Scope of Guidelines for Interpreting as a whole, which would have been the more logical approach instead of starting with an individual setting or specialization. But there was certainly a need for regulating an area where a lot of services were (and still are) rendered by unqualified people. Just think about children having to interpret for their parents in hospitals and the traumatic implications that implies.

Of course, I can only comment on the evolution of the document from the moment I started participating actively. What I found at that time was a document that more or less described the unsatisfactory situation, but without really giving advice on good practice for service providers and end users. In addition, community interpreting as a setting wasn’t specified clearly enough. Therefore, the project was already about to be set back to zero, which would have meant having to restart the whole procedure. As community interpreting urgently needs to be professionalized and public awareness has to be strengthened, the working group finally made a major effort to reformulate many critical aspects, for example necessary evidence of qualifications, just to name one of the major issues. A few months ago the reshaped document was accepted as a second Draft International Standard, which means that it can possibly be published in 2014. By the way, during discussions we became aware again of the importance of regulations and guidance for the interpreting profession in general, as it still seems to be quite unknown in all its complexity.

**LL:** So the idea for general guidelines on interpreting grew out of these prior discussions? What thinking lead to that?

**KZ:** Let’s say that the discussions about community interpreting lead us back to the idea of general guidelines for interpreting, as this was the original starting point some years ago. Now, as more and more interest groups got involved and more expertise came into the working group, the experts rediscovered the necessity of having General Guidelines on Interpreting that could work as an umbrella for the individual Standards on Specializations.

Finally, two American colleagues came up with the new work proposal. Once it was accepted, the ISO working group in charge started its work based on the first draft document presented by the project leader, Marjory Bancroft from the US. During the first working session in Pretoria in June of this year, the experts agreed on changing the name and scope of this project from “Guidelines” to “Requirements” for Interpreting, thus aiming for a normative Standard instead of only guidelines. This was an important step and at the same time it lead to some substantial changes on the Draft International Standard on Community Interpreting. Without going too much into details, I can say that both projects now focus clearly on interpreting as a professional activity and the General Requirements project will set the bar as high as possible in order to achieve professionalization and regulation for all interpreting activities.

**VPG:** I am very excited about this new project. There is lots of work to be done, especially regarding the agreement on minimum qualifications requirements for interpreters, classification of languages (native, mother, second, etc.), working conditions, rest breaks, etc. Remember that every effort should be made to accommodate the needs and concerns of all participating countries. However, consensus does not mean that all parties will be in agreement with the final decision. For
example, the Draft International Standard (DIS), which is an advanced step of the process, is approved if at least 2/3 of the countries vote in favor and no more than 1/4 disapprove.

**LL**: So this implies that the approach is now to draft one general document and then specific standards for various fields of interpreting.

**KZ**: Exactly, that’s the point. This is meant to be the umbrella that shall cover further individual standards on other specializations, such as court interpreting and conference interpreting. These would then focus on the specific aspects of each of them.

**LL**: How are final decisions made in ISO?

**KZ**: I guess you don’t really want me to explain in detail the whole procedure from start to finish of a project at ISO level… It would take us some hours. Generally, you should know that only the official national standardization bodies can be members of the numerous ISO Technical Committees and they are the ones that jointly make decisions by a certain majority stipulated in the ISO Procedures. So in the end it all depends on who takes part in the respective technical committees of the national standardization bodies.

**VPG**: Let’s just say that you have a group of countries (around 30 in our group) that meet once a year in a different country and several more times a year via Webex or other means to push forward a standard. There are several types of ISO publications but in the interest of time let us talk about the International Standard (IS), which can be either a Guidance Standard or a Requirements Standard. The former is only recommendations and the latter may lead into a certification program. The Community Interpreting Standard is a Guideline IS while the Interpreting-General Requirements falls under the second category.

**LL**: Tell us a bit about the AIIC standardization project.

**KZ**: Originally, we started the project in order to protect our profession against any negative impact from the publication of the Guidelines on Community Interpreting, as they were about to be decided at that time. As I said before, there were quite a lot of misleading formulations and a lack of delineation of conference interpreting and community interpreting. But from the very beginning I also saw an opportunity to develop something that might strengthen our own profession and our position when it comes to negotiating terms and conditions of conference interpreting services. The problems we encounter due to the fact that there are no official regulations and no kind of recognition of our profession are well known, I would guess. Although Standards can never be compulsory, we could at least have some kind of “official” document. Many companies and public entities base their tenders and purchasing on standards and certification, so this might be an important approach.

Until now we managed to be present at ISO level with some experts being AIIC members, the convenership of the ISO Working Group in charge of Interpreting issues (Verónica Pérez Guarnieri) and hopefully the acceptance of AIIC as A-liaison partner of the relevant sub-committee of ISO TC 37.

We are about to start working on a Standard on Conference Interpreting in Germany and in some countries AIIC members have already joined national standards bodies. I think it is important to share experience and to coordinate our efforts. For that purpose we created a working platform that allows us to share documents, discuss important issues and coordinate the work within the national standards bodies and on an international level. And we should never forget to work as closely as possible with as many of the relevant market stakeholders as possible.

**VPG**: I find it fascinating to experience what occurs at a strictly human level in these meetings with experts from various cultural backgrounds. For negotiations to advance and work to progress it is
important that everybody feels respected and that their contributions are of value. When that occurs, barriers to communication are torn down and people can easily come to an agreement. And that is what happened in our group. The result: a standard that will hopefully be published early in 2014 and another very important one in the making.

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**Recommended citation format:**