



# A learning experience

Exchanging views, role playing and networking, there was plenty to keep delegates busy at ITI's annual conference at Winchester, says **Emma Scattergood**



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Historic Winchester, where better to bring together the great thinkers of our industry for the annual ITI conference? Capital of King Alfred's Wessex, home to Jane Austen and inspiration to poets and novelists both past and present, Winchester is a beautiful setting in which to reflect and look ahead – not that delegates had time to dally as this was an action-packed two-day programme which kept everyone busy.

Even at 2am on the Saturday morning the hall was filled with translators and interpreters. Alright, most were driven downstairs by the fire alarm in the University halls of residence rather than a desire to keep working through the night, but at least it proved the members were ready for action!

The theme of this year's conference, *Working in the Community*, and its inevitable slant towards the role of the interpreter, perhaps kept some translators away, but it didn't prevent members travelling from as far as Germany and Sardinia to attend, and all of those

who did were enthusiastic and positive about the experience:

Beate Knights, a German translator from Norfolk, was particularly impressed: 'It has been extremely well-organised, professional and interesting this year – I've enjoyed it even more than previous conferences.'

Another delegate, Cate Avery, from Henley on Thames, was impressed by the question sessions and the liveliness of the debates in each workshop. 'Perhaps it is because there are fewer delegates this year, and there has been time for more questions.'

Michael Friedli, a Dutch, French and Spanish translator from Romsey echoed the opinions of many when he cited his reasons for attending: 'The agenda may be leaning heavily towards Public Service, but the

**With such a packed programme, it wasn't possible to take in all the sights**

workshops are interesting and it's a good opportunity to network with anyone in the business.'

Cate agreed: 'Coming to the conference definitely generates work, as people are able to put a face to the name.'

A workshop that got many thinking was that run by Dr Ellen Ruth Moerman, an expert in Legal Translation and Interpreting who was called to the Bar in 1998 and has published articles on professional issues for FIT, YTY, NGTV and the Bar. 'Negotiation: Saying Yes, Saying No!' raised issues such as the importance of agreeing the terms of contracts, the use of legal rights to negotiate your commercial position and the legal value of the email.

Ellen even tried to create actors of ITI members by cajoling them into role playing interpreter/translator and client/agency. This was great fun (as well as educational!) for those watching, but their humour was soon cut short when they were called up to take the next roles! The session inevitably became a forum for debate on the common problems faced by members – the hot topics being, predictably perhaps, how much you should or can charge for your time, and the benefits (and disadvantages) of working for an agency.

## Disparity of pay

A highlight for many were the two sessions delivered by Michael Benis. Michael has been a full-time translator and interpreter since 1984 and is also the chairman of Sussex Interpreting Services. Helen Fish, a translator from Southampton, found him inspirational: 'His talk on marketing quality was very human, and he's such a witty and entertaining speaker, he brought his ideas on marketing to life.'

Michael also examined the fact that there is an enormous disparity between the rates charged by different translators and interpreters, and emphasised the importance of identifying your unique selling point and then maintaining your marketing

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efforts in order to achieve constant business success. In a second session Michael was joined by Aaron Evans, manager of Sussex Interpreting Services, to discuss how the Service has risen to the typical challenges of the sector and developed a model for the effective provision of community interpreting services.

Michael was blunt in his delivery of one message – the ITI has done nothing to help community interpreters. As Alan Wheatley said afterwards: ‘This is a wake-up call. ITI has never been better placed to create opportunities, and they must start with some basic dialogue.’

### Lack of professionalism

Alan added, ‘what was also interesting was the contrast between the workings of the SIS and the experiences of Jaimin Patel from London Borough of Newham, who spoke later on providing community language services and how the public sector needs to improve services for non-English speakers.’

In this session, Jaimin also identified a lack of professionalism amongst interpreters and suggested that the ITI should be seen as a consultant rather than a provider. There’s clearly plenty for the ITI to think about...

With two days of seminars, many running two at a time, the conference provided a varied and busy weekend. In fact the only criticisms were that it wasn’t possible to squeeze in a tour of Winchester or to attend every workshop.

Other sessions included Stella Craigie’s (Senior Lecturer in Translation at the University of Westminster) experiences of students and interpreting in Italy; Yahia Rezgui on telephone interpreting and the benefits of Language Line; Nicky Clegg (Chair of the board of directors of the NRPSI) on the nature of Public Sector work; Danielle D’Hayer on Interpreting in a Medical Environment; and Chris Ball from NUPIT on why translators and interpreters need a union.

For many people though, the seminars are only a small part of the conference. The chance to come together, make new friends (and useful contacts), see old faces and discuss common problems informally was just as important. The dinner on Saturday night in the University Shakespeare dining room was enjoyed by over 40 guests – not least

## A DELEGATE’S VIEW

*Catriona Lischka recounts the most interesting topics for her:*

Community interpreters are poorly paid and receive virtually no support, yet they can have a huge impact on the life of the person for whom the service is being provided. For example, lack of English-language skills could result in lack of awareness of the options available to one in terms of social services etc. (eg asylum-seekers), misdiagnosis by a GP or, in one case mentioned, sanctioning under the Mental Health Act and consequent loss of legal rights. The following is a summary of some of the points which I found particularly interesting:

- The average monthly earnings of interpreters employed by Sussex Interpreting Services is £350!
- Local dialects can pose a problem for interpreters of Italian in particular, as there are a number of regional dialects in Italy that are confined to very small geographic areas
- Interpreters may be exposed to very harrowing stories, eg accounts of torture experienced by asylum-seekers, yet there is little provision in the way of counselling to help them, and they cannot seek counselling elsewhere this would be a breach of confidentiality.
- The provision of interpreting services by GP’s is very poor. For example, a study carried out by the former Birmingham Health Authority found it was customary among the majority of GPs in that region not to provide any interpreters on cost grounds, and if patients wanted an

interpreter they were expected to pay for themselves.

■ Apparently there was a case of a Spanish patient in Scotland whose GP baulked at paying £38 for an interpreter, but this proved a costly mistake when the Health Authority concerned subsequently had to pay £250,000 damages following misdiagnosis.

The session I enjoyed most was an interactive workshop run by Ellen Moerman on contracts and negotiating skills. After a brief introduction to the legal aspects of entering into a contract, a number of scenarios were acted out in pairs, with one person acting as the translator and their partner the client (agency, solicitor etc). These covered situations such as the source document which arrives late, the job that fails to materialise after the translator has been ‘booked’ for a two-week job, the client who claims to be justified in withholding payment due to some unspecified problem with the translation, the translator who is pressed to accept a job when the subject-matter is not known. One useful point to emerge was the fact that if a job turns out not to be as described to you (eg it is longer than originally stated or the subject is not as originally advised), then this is a case of misrepresentation which invalidates the original agreement and the translator has every right to refuse to continue with the job on the agreed terms. Similarly, if the client fails to perform a material stipulation (eg the text to be translated arrives late), then this is a breach of contract.



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**The Conference booklet covered the schedule and the best places to visit in Winchester**

Diana Wallis MEP, the Institute President, who had flown direct to the conference that morning from conducting European Parliament work in Brussels, yet still had the energy to provide everyone with a few after-dinner anecdotes on life as an MEP.

Diana took some time out to talk to the *bulletin* and expressed her enthusiasm for the conference: ‘It has been an excellent opportunity for networking’, she said, ‘And a chance to find out what’s on people’s minds.’ She also touched on the workshop chaired by Renata Korpak, Yvonne Fowler (the DPSI coordinator of East Birmingham University) and Helen Watts from Praxis on the relevance,

quality and future of the Diploma in Public Service Interpreting and the National Register, which everyone had anticipated to be a lively debate. ‘It was a useful exchange of good practice,’ she conceded. ‘There obviously is some diversity and discrepancy in terms of the courses, and what is clear is that there should be some sort of standards board.’

As the weekend and seminars drew to a close, the rooms were filled with members exchanging cards, telephone numbers and email addresses, and making plans to follow up ideas, discussions and opportunities. A sign of a successful conference, I’d say... □