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# Making It Work: Applying AIIIC Professional Standards to Conference Signed Language Interpreters

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## Abstract

Conference interpreters, signed and spoken, work in a wide range of high-level settings, from international summits with (non)governmental bodies to politically-oriented networking events. Considering that such settings require advanced expertise of the interpreters, it is surprising that there is still a lack of awareness among clients and interpreters of the fundamental professional standards of conference signed language interpreters. This article discusses the need to educate and raise awareness among signed language interpreters and their clients regarding the rights to demand, respectively, good working conditions and linguistic access.

Keywords: conference interpreting, signed language interpreters, professional standards, working conditions

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# Making It Work: Applying AIIC Professional Standards to Conference Signed Language Interpreters

## 1. Introduction

The International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC) established the AIIC Sign Language Network (SLN) in 2008 (Monfort & de Wit, 2012). The aim of SLN was to provide support to signed language interpreters working in conference settings, and to work towards them becoming members of AIIC. At their Assembly in 2012, the AIIC membership agreed that signed language interpreters could join as members. Being the first signed language interpreter to become a member of AIIC and then serving as SLN coordinator since 2015, I have been heavily involved in the further development of the SLN. In my role I am actively lobbying for signed language interpreters to enjoy rights and working conditions equal to those conferred on conference interpreters of spoken languages. As part of this effort, I am working with SLN members to increase awareness among hiring parties and the signed and spoken language interpreting community on how signed language interpreters work.

International conferences and high-level meetings require interpreters with relevant expertise and skill levels. Many opportunities exist for spoken language interpreting students in Europe to obtain these advanced skills in conference interpreting, from weeklong intensive courses to master's degrees offered at universities. These programs accommodate various language combinations, levels of linguistic competence, previous degrees and interest. However, signed language interpreters have very limited options when it comes to studying conference interpreting. The ninety educational programs currently available in Europe to train signed language interpreters prepare them as general practitioners and not specifically for conference settings (de Wit, 2016). Educational programs for signed language interpreters differ between countries and even within some countries. The majority of the programs teach students to interpret between their national signed and spoken languages. The duration and the structure of the programs do not provide opportunities for students to add additional advanced skills, such as those required by conference interpreting. This has an effect on how signed language interpreters work at conferences. While it is true that signed language interpreters are being educated at a higher level than ever before and that they are increasingly being hired by international organizations, the way they are often contracted indicates that they are insufficiently aware of the professional standards and best practices that are generally applied to spoken language interpreters and that should apply to them as well. As a result, due to a lack of shared knowledge and expertise, spoken and signed language interpreters working at the same conference may carry out their work very differently. If we encourage signed language interpreters to be trained as conference interpreters, they can eventually provide higher quality interpretations, in turn leading to improved accessibility for deaf signers.

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### 2. Defining conference interpreting

Defining conference interpreting is a challenge. Comprised of many differing elements, the field of conference interpreting has eluded capture in one definition. The literature (Dufrou, 2016; Gile, 2005; Setton & Dawrant, 2016) provides various definitions of conference interpreting, all of which are slightly different. The AIIC had debated the topic for years and in July 2018 established a small working group specifically to develop a single definition of the term. Currently AIIC defines conference interpreting as follows:<sup>2</sup>

“Conference interpretation is conveying a message spoken in one language into another. It is practised at international summits, professional seminars, and bilateral or multilateral meetings of heads of State and Government.”

This is just one example of the numerous definitions of conference interpreting that exists. A committee of the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) is also currently working on a new standard for conference interpreting which will include both a definition and a description of the field.

### 3. Demands

Conference settings create complex demands on interpreters due to the participants' multitude of languages, cultures, jargon, and subject matter, often in high-stakes settings (Tiselius, 2013). The conference interpreter must possess a high degree of fluency in multiple languages and cultures, as well as advanced interpreting skills and subject-matter expertise in order to deliver a quality interpretation (Dufrou, 2016; Gile, 2005; Jones, 1998; Leeson, 2005; Setton & Dawrant, 2016).

Unfortunately, it appears that there is a lack of awareness among signed language interpreters and their clients about the fundamental professional standards of conference interpreters (de Wit & Sluis, 2016). These professional standards<sup>3</sup> lay out the expected working conditions and technical requirements for the field, such as: working hours, number of interpreters per team, and travel times. The conference interpreter has the responsibility, in consultation and collaboration with the clients, to ensure that these professional standards are met by the contracting party, which can be either the institution organizing the event or a language agency specializing in conference services. In principle, signed and spoken language interpreters working at conferences should all work and be treated according to the same professional standards.

### 4. Professional representation

AIIC was established in 1953 and developed the first professional standards for conference interpreters. This was partly in response to the experience of interpreters working at the Nuremberg trials.<sup>4</sup> These interpreters had first-hand experience of inadequate working conditions in a high-level conference-type setting which required simultaneous interpretation. Today, AIIC has over 3,000 individual members in 91 countries. The AIIC's professional standards ensure the professional quality of its members; the organization also acts as a trade union.<sup>5</sup>

Until recently, the vast majority of AIIC members were interpreters of spoken languages. To assist and encourage conference signed language interpreters to become members of AIIC, AIIC established the Sign Language Network (SLN). Originally, the SLN had only spoken language interpreters as members, whose aim was

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<sup>2</sup> <https://aiic.net/node/5/conference-interpreting/lang/1>

<sup>3</sup> <https://aiic.net/page/6746>

<sup>4</sup> <https://aiic.net/page/7943>

<sup>5</sup> <https://aiic.net/page/3202>

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to reach out to signed language interpreters and assist them in becoming members of AIIC. As of April 2020, AIIC had eight signed language interpreter members and nine pre-candidates. The 21 spoken language interpreters in the SLN continue to collaborate with signed language interpreter members to raise awareness among signed language interpreters, spoken language interpreters, and users of conference interpreting services (de Wit & Tiselius, 2017).

The AIIC Sign Language Network has developed three sets of guidelines for working with signed language interpreters in conference settings: guidelines for working in a mixed team,<sup>6</sup> guidelines for sound engineers,<sup>7</sup> and guidelines for positioning signed language interpreters in conferences including web-streaming.<sup>8</sup> Helga Stevens, a former deaf member of the European Parliament, used signed language interpreting services extensively in her work. Acknowledging the lack of recognition for the profession of signed language interpreters, she hosted a European conference in the hemicycle of the European Parliament in Brussels in September 2016. She proposed a resolution (2016/2952) for the recognition of signed languages and the signed language interpreter profession in Europe, which was passed in November 2016.

### 5. Signed language interpreters as conference interpreters

Freelance conference interpreters can be contracted directly by institutions and organizations. In spite of the fact that these are often just one-time requests, signed language interpreters report spending a disproportionate amount of time on educating organizations about the logistics and technical requirements of the assignment (de Wit & Sluis, 2016). Further complicating matters is the persistent misconception that signed language interpreters are not conference interpreters providing linguistic access to participants, but a legally-required service providing access for people with disabilities. This differentiation often leads to far-reaching consequences. Unlike their spoken language colleagues, signed language interpreters are often not officially registered for the conference and therefore do not receive equal access to documents, institutional buildings and even remuneration. To address this issue, the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC) adopted a resolution in January 2018 stating that spoken and signed language interpreters working at conferences are all considered conference interpreters.<sup>9</sup> This resolution can be used by interpreters and clients to inform agencies and institutions of the expectation of equal working conditions and remuneration for both signed and spoken language interpreters.

### 6. International agreements

Despite the AIIC resolution, further education is needed among interpreters and their clients regarding their right to demand equal working conditions and linguistic access, as stipulated in formal international agreements. These agreements are negotiated between AIIC and international institutions such as the European Parliament, the European Commission and the United Nations. AIIC is the sole negotiating partner with these institutions and has established separate agreements between AIIC and each institution. These agreements ensure the working conditions and remuneration of conference interpreters who work for the institutions, precluding the need for the individual interpreter to negotiate working conditions and payment. These institutions must already comply with the terms agreed to with AIIC.

Interpreters and clients are often unaware of these existing institutional agreements. As a result, they may agree to terms that are in conflict with them. This may then lead to conflicts with the spoken language interpreters working at the assignment who are benefitting from better pay and working conditions. In addition, if the

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<sup>6</sup> <https://aiic.net/page/6701>

<sup>7</sup> <https://aiic.net/page/6700>

<sup>8</sup> <https://aiic.net/page/7821>

<sup>9</sup> <https://aiic.net/page/8604>

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differences in contractual provisions lead to limited access for signed language interpreters to the documents needed to prepare for the interpretation or to institutional buildings, the end result will be to affect the access of the deaf signers.

## 7. Conclusion

Signed language interpreters have few opportunities to be trained as conference interpreters. This has a major impact on the quality of signed language interpreting services being provided at conferences. To fill this gap, the current European programs for spoken language interpreters in conference interpreting should add their national signed language as one of the working languages in the program, and signed language interpreting programs should offer a post-graduate program in conference interpreting. Signed language interpreting students should be informed of the need for experience and training in order to effectively interpret at conferences. Alternatively, current signed language interpreters with solid experience could consider reaching out to a training in conference interpreting in their country to explore the possibilities of enrolling and adding conference interpreting as a specialization to their current degree.

Moreover, the AIIC institutional agreements, AIIC professional standards, the AIIC SLN guidelines, and the European Parliament resolution (2016/2952) all provide interpreters and clients with an array of tools to request adequate working conditions for conference signed language interpreters. These in turn will lead to better access for deaf and hearing clients. It is the professional responsibility of the interpreters to educate organizations, clients, and colleagues about these standards and agreements in order to see them implemented. Recognizing and applying these professional standards will especially help linguistic minorities, such as persons who use signed languages, in participating fully and equally in high-level meetings. It is our responsibility as conference signed language interpreters to educate ourselves and all other stakeholders regarding these agreements and to encourage colleagues to adopt these professional standards.

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