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## CONFERENCE INTERPRETING IN ITALY: IS THERE STILL A CHANCE FOR ITALIAN NATIVE SPEAKERS?

Conference Interpreter and Lecturer on-contract

**ABSTRACT.** This paper reports a small-scale survey conducted in the first half of 2012 and in early 2014 in connection with conference interpreters' working conditions in Italy. The paper takes stock of the situation in Italy, highlighting that, because of the declining prestige of the profession as well as the harsh economic crisis affecting all working fields in the Bel Paese, many conference interpreters are facing hard times and are already looking beyond their profession. Above all interpreters between 25 and 40 are the most hit by the crisis. They report either the impossibility to enter the labour market as interpreters or a decreasing number of working days per year. Although many professionals guarantee high-quality performances and have done the job for many years now, the small case-study reports that no matter how skilled or experienced interpreters are, as both categories are concerned about the number of working days and conditions, the difficult relationship Italian customers - often due to their insolvency - and, last but not least, about their profession in the long-term. Fresh investments in IT, more stringent policies within Interpreters' Schools (as of the number of CI graduates) and better coordination with the EU as big employer for linguists are seen as some of the most desirable solutions.

**Key words:** *freelance interpreters, employer, working conditions, high-quality performances, need for regulation, EU-coordinated policies, National Register for Interpreters and Translators.*

### 1. Introduction

For most of its recent history, Italy has always been considered as a pro-EU State. Not only was the country among the very first founding members in 1957, but it advocated – and still does it – the importance of being European and speak with one voice rather than with crowds of different voices. In the relatively long history of EC and EU institutions, many Italian interpreters have supported this pan-European attitude and have committed themselves to rendering high-quality interpretation, helping the EU itself to get more integrated and more understandable both to their politicians/representatives and their citizens home. In doing so, they have embraced EU values such as democracy, multilingualism, the right to speak one's language and to read official documents in their own languages and so forth. The introduction of new technologies as well as the coming out of

conference interpreting as an intellectual profession opened up new horizons in the twentieth century, spreading the idea that conference interpreting wasn't only about having a notepad and a pen, but a job with a full potential to be unlocked. For years simultaneous and consecutive interpreting have become a focus of attention<sup>1</sup>, overlooking the many more opportunities behind them: remote interpreting, retour and relay interpreting and, last but not least, computer-aided interpreting. Immediately after the establishment of the EU Joint Interpreting Service, Italian interpreters started to look with increased attention at job opportunities offered by other settings than the national market. The key role played originally by Schools for Interpreters and Translators and subsequently by Faculties of Interpreting and Translation placed within prominent Universities such as Trieste, Forlì and Rome is unquestionable, too. These academic institutions, both public and private, were admitted by national regulations of school and fostered by the European Commission (consider the establishment of the European Master in Conference Interpreting launched all over Europe and in Trieste). The academic context has not only shed light on the importance of acquiring a strong academic background before entering the labor market, but it also strengthened the need for interpreters to comply with a set of rules and good practices governing conference interpreting. The picture portrayed so far looks all too well.

## 2. The crisis of CI in Italy

At this stage – in the mid-nineties – something is going awry. Conference interpreting is there, there are many prominent schools promising to become a good interpreter, but there isn't space for anyone. A year-after-year increasing number of graduates is reported both with first-degree diplomas and master degrees. The Italian market continues not to be regulated by stringent laws and a National Register has not been set up, yet. Many experienced interpreters still look at the EU institutions as their promised land, since job opportunities are lacking in some Italian regions (especially far from Rome and Milan) or too high a number of young interpreters is flooding the Italian market. The picture in the late 90's is all but promising, despite the hope that the EU enlargement can bring unexpected and fresh opportunities. Besides, the creation of a Eurozone is seen as a crucial step towards major integration and to be 100% European and have a say on Europe and its monetary and economic policies. In 2002, Italy actually joins the Euro-currency and in 2003 holds the rotating Presidency under Romano Prodi's Government. Something is still going awry. Despite the hope for a major workflow, only a handful of interpreters are working during official meetings. Many other interpreters are recruited through an Inter-Institutional Test but never sit in a

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<sup>1</sup> Hamidi, M., Pöchhacker, F. 2007, Simultaneous consecutive interpreting: A new Technique Put to the Test in *Meta: Translators' Journal*, vol. 52, n. 2, 2007, p. 276-289.

European Parliament or in a EC booth. In the early 2000s Italy is confronted with a new dilemma: is Italian a working language or just an official one? The history shows that for an Italian politician to join EU meetings, s/he needs to speak English and French. Italian is an asset but not a prerogative. This sad data confirm that, though the EU has always advocated the basic tenet of multilingualism along with the respect for everyone's language and culture, English is by this time standing as the real official and working language every representative and delegate has to master. From this moment on, a new crisis is overwhelming the Italian interpreters: the English [and French] supremacy. Suddenly, the number of Italian interpreters hired during official visits and meeting starts declining and the politicians themselves – with some rare exceptions (PM Berlusconi in 2003) – are made to speak other languages than their own one. There have been quite a few cases where Italian politicians have taken up a definite position regarding their language and Europe, but almost every attempt had a very poor result. What teachings did interpreters draw from Europe and the crisis? Italian interpreters were rather excluded from Europe, both due to the unwillingness and incapacity on the part of their country's representatives to acquire a major role in the international setting. English was the real working language. And the EU enlargement did bring benefits only for those interpreters working with one or more Eastern European languages.

At national level, the situation in the mid 2000s is not better. The National Register has not been introduced yet, Schools and Faculties continue to grow in number and continue to churn out many (too many) graduates with the same language combinations that the Italian and other countries' national markets cannot afford hiring – due to the fact that Italian is not a lingua franca or a language spoken by a demographically relevant community such as the Spanish speaking one.

### **2.1. The big decline after 2007**

Europe, the EU: the big opportunities that Italy should have seized to support its domestic growth and its trade flows continue to report quite a poor success. The worst part is that in 2007 a big international economic and financial crisis – the worst after 1929 crisis – starts spreading all over USA and in quite a few months all over the globe. Since 2007, little has changed. EU countries – including Italy – find themselves trapped in a grip and cannot invest in basic pillars of their societies, let alone conference interpreting. Therefore, one of the huge progresses made in the 20<sup>th</sup> century – perhaps one of the greatest – allowing people from different cultural and language background to speak and to interact one with another, is being put at test by the monolingualism and credit crunch. Apart from Ministers of Finance's meetings and EU Council summits, conference interpreting has been deprived of the original meaning and has turned into a costly and muddled

speech embellishment, that can be easily avoided having all EU politicians speak their Spanglish, Franglish, Itenglish and so on. No matter if and what they understand. Everything has to be laid down in the cause of expenses' reduction, budget cuts and so forth.

In this context, where the Italian State does not provide for a National Registry for Accredited Interpreters and Translators, where Schools and Universities keep churning out fresh graduates with the same [high] skills, the EU institutional market and the domestic markets face the need to reduce expenses and the private Agencies for Interpreters go with the fashion that imposes to cut rates and not to respectably pay interpreters' performances, much has changed for conference interpreters who have not only lost their high status quo but also the possibility to live thanks to their job. The picture that comes out in the early 2010s is quite poor and can only be made better through EU and national interventions as well as with more stringent policies regarding language service providers.

### 3. The study

A small-scale interview was conducted in early 2012 in Italy with the aim to respond to three main questions:

1. How hard has the Italian conference interpreting market been hit by the economic crisis along with the spreading of English as a *lingua franca*?
2. How does the Italian interpreters' community is responding to the crisis affecting their working field?
3. What are the ultimate effects for their profession in the mid-to long term? And are interpreters changing their attitude towards professional interpreting due to low rates and smaller workflow?

In order to answer these questions, interpreters from across the country were interviewed and their answers were processed and compared to present the final results. The interpreters were interviewed also in 2014 to check whether considerable progress or further declining perspectives have meanwhile been tracked.

The interpreters interviewed in 2012 are 20. They come from North, Central Italy. Most of them come from Rome, though their place of birth lies somewhere else. Their age ranges between 25 and 40. Most of the interviewees are female interpreters and only a few of them are male linguists. Unfortunately, not all interpreters contacted via e-mail have been available or willing to respond to

the on-line questionnaire. Obviously, a wider corpus of replies would have triggered off a far more interesting debate on perspectives on the Italian market, but all attempts at research rarely have only strengths; they also have their weaknesses. The relevant data is that do not allegedly outnumber the former.

The research has obtained sufficient input from the interviewees, which have answered to these basic 10 questions:

1. How would you define the Italian conference interpreting market of the 2000s?
2. How has changed your workflow in the recent years?
3. Who is/are your main employer/s?
4. Are you experiencing a decrease of your working days?
5. If so, what are the causes?
6. Is institutional interpreting market changing, too? If so, to what extent?
7. What is your relationship with your customers like? Has it changed over the years?
8. Do you ever happen not to receive settlements after performing your interpreting services?
9. What do you expect from future CI in Italy and Europe?
10. Do you think that the existing Associations in Italy and in Europe could provide a stronger contribution ?

### **3.1 Subjects and material**

Interpreter 1 is an AIIC interpreter working in Rome and boasts a longstanding experience as a freelance conference interpreter both at EU and national governmental institutions. He mainly works with English (B-language) and French. In addition to his career as a professional linguist, he has been lecturing and doing research in the framework of translation and work with corpora in general.

Interpreter 2 is an AIIC interpreter working in the Central Italy area. He mainly works with English and French, though he also has German as C language. In addition to conference interpreting, he is also actively involved in professional translations.

Interpreter 3 is an AITI interpreter and also works in the Central Italy area. She also has got some research interests, that she tries to combine with translation and interpreting.

Interpreter 4 is working in the Central Italian area with English and German. He has been lecturing and working both for private corporations and for governmental institutions.

Interpreter 5 is an AITI member. She has been working mainly with English and German as a liaison interpreter.

Interpreter 6 is an AITI and Assointerpreti member. Her working languages are English and French and is actively involved both in translation and interpreting.

Interpreter 7 is an interpreter from AITI Association. She has been working both in Italy and abroad as a translator and interpreter. Her languages are English, German and French.

Interpreter 8 is from Rome. She is one of the youngest interpreters. She works with English, German and French.

Interpreter 9 is from Rome and works as a freelance interpreter. His languages are English and German.

Interpreter 10 is working in Rome. His languages are English and Spanish.

Interpreters 11, 12, 13, 14, 15 (women) have recently taken their MA degree in CI. Their languages are English and Spanish.

Interpreters 16, 17 and 18 (women) have taken their degree in CI for a couple of years.

Interpreter 19 has been retired but she keeps working as a lecturer on-contract and as a freelance interpreter.

Interpreter 20 (woman) mainly works as a liaison, court and community interpreter.

### **3.2 Responses**

In the following pages are reported answers of the first interviewees' group (interpreters 1-5):

#### **Interpreter 1**

Q1: CI market quite different from the past.

Q2: Workflow is decreasing.

Q3: Institutions, EU Agencies etc.

Q4 : Yes, CI workflow has decreased. I also work in the field of professional translation.

Q5: EU institutions tend to hire interpreters less frequently and try to limit interpreting.

Q6: Institutional market is changing and changes are often linked to the limited number of working languages

Q7: My relationship with customers has not changed over the years. They know my working conditions and accept it.

Q8: No. It never happens.

Q9: I don't know what to expect. I think English will be the dominant language. There will be more work with exotic languages.

Q10: I think national and international institutions are doing much and are trying to raise awareness of the need to respect interpreters' job and status.

### **Interpreter 2**

Q1: CI market very different from the past.

Q2: Workflow has decreased.

Q3: Institutions, Agencies, private contractors.

Q4 : Yes, it is decreasing. Many conferences have been cancelled or put off.

Q5: There are many interpreters on the market, having the same language combinations. Many conferences are held in English and there isn't enough work for everyone.

Q6: Institutional market is changing because in many meetings only English is used and sometimes people can speak English fluently and do not need interpretation.

Q7: My relationship with customers has not changed much. If they hire me, they know what they expect from me and what I expect from them, in terms of fees, document and so forth..

Q8: Sometimes, it happened, but fortunately I experienced it only a couple of times.

Q9: I think interpreting will be less common than in the past, although we cannot say what it will happen in the near future. I think interpreting will be used in official visits, conferences and other contexts where a high level language translation process is needed.

Q10: I think Associations are doing something but it is a long process and you cannot change customers and the market overnight.

### **Interpreter 3**

Q1: CI has changed. Much goes through interpreting and translation today. This is one of the globalization effects.

Q2: Workflow is constant. In some months you work more, in other months you work less frequently.

Q3: Institutions, private agencies, associations, consortiums.

Q4 : Not so much. However, I work both as a translator and a freelancer.

Q5: I think interpreting is not requested every day. It is often linked to special events, political meetings, etc. Interpreting does not take place every day.

Q6: Institutional market is changing because the crisis is a real problem and many meetings are cancelled or take place more seldom

Q7: My relationship with customers has not changed much I selected my customers. We know each other quite well and know what our mutual needs are.

Q8: Sometimes it happens that you have to wait much time before you get your money from agencies or customers. And this is a problem if you are holding a VAT and have to pay taxes.

Q9: I think there will not be many relevant changes. People will continue to rely on interpreters but it will not be as it used to be some forty years go.

Q10: Associations should join their efforts and help interpreters and translators to obtain a national official Register. This would help much and would regulate the market.

### **Interpreter 4**

Q1: CI market is not so different from the past. You have to join an association and meet new colleagues. They usually help increasing your portfolio.

Q2: Workflow is not high as some years ago but it also depends on your language combinations and on the area where you live.

Q3: I work for many agencies at national and international level.

Q4 :In some months of the year, the workflow has decreased. But if you work in fairs or for investors, you work quite a bit in some months of the year.

Q5: I believe that potential customers are reducing the number of interpreters and the possibility to hire them, because they prefer having the whole work done in English by participants themselves.

Q6: Institutional market is changing because there are less trade and exchange with some countries and many more new contacts with new players.

Q7: My relationship with customers is not changing. Sometimes they ask me to apply some discount rates and I see whether this may be possible. I have been working with the same people for many years now.

Q8: It happens but you have to select your customers thoroughly and try to understand who they are.

Q9: I think there will be some sectors that will offer more job opportunities just like the renewable energies or something like that. But, interpreters will have always to keep updated.

Q10: I think the role played by Associations of Translators and Interpreters is crucial because they can support and represent us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century market. We should have the possibility to always be represented by one of these Associations, even when problems with customers occur (payments, litigations etc).

### **Interpreter 6**

CI is a professional sector facing a tough time. Interpreters are sometimes underpaid or they are offered miserable working conditions. This also happens because interpreters take in offers and sell their services at a very cheap price.

In general, I work as a liaison interpreter. I couldn't live only on interpreting. For this reason, I also do translations and teach languages. I believe that our job should be regulated at national and international level. We should have a Register and some representatives that work with others in other EU countries to have rules applied.

### **Interpreter 7**

I started working some years ago. The market was living better times than now. I could work as an interpreter and as a journalist. It was nice and exciting. Now, I changed a bit my lifestyle and don't travel much. I am working mostly as a translator and sometimes as an interpreter. I think in Italy fees are a bit lower than in other countries and the situation is getting worse because many potential customers exploit our work and try not to pay adequate fees. They say that because of the crisis, they cannot offer much. Honestly, I believe that this is only an excuse to be able to save money on translation or interpreting and make their income higher.

### **Interpreter 8**

Q1: Since I took my degree in CI, I haven't worked so much. In some years, I could also translate up to ten/twelve conferences a year, but in 2013 and 2014 I am not having many working days.

Q2: Definitely, it is decreasing.

Q3: I don't have many clients. I work as a freelancer, from economics to social issues.

Q4 : The major problems I experience are lower budgets for interpretation and the pressure to apply lower and lower fees. That's why I often prefer not to take on conferences.

Q5: Many interpreters – also the most skilled and experienced – accept to work for cheap fares and contribute to this difficult situation.

Q6: I don't work for EU institution. As far as I know, only a few interpreters are working with Italian there. They are among the few interpreters working quite often. The other don't have many chances in the domestic market.

Q7: My relationship with customers has not changed. I prefer having only those customers who really appreciate my work and do not quarrel or complain when I send bills to them.

Q8: It happened and it was really sad. I don't want to work for people who will take profit from my work.

Q9: I really don't know. I am quite confident about the future. But, all interpreters should join and start obliging customers to accept their working conditions and fees. Unfortunately, if this will not happen, many interpreters will be jobless.

Q10: I think I will soon become member of one of these associations. They represent the only strength we have today to have our job respected.

### **Interpreter 9**

I started to work as an interpreter in the '90s and I have to say that the market was quite active. I could work many times a month both as a translator and as an interpreter. I had many clients and I have been working with them since then. Unfortunately, many of these clients have gone bust or changed their core business. That's why I am doing many jobs at the same time. I can also remember that I had the chance to travel much. Now it only happens a few times a year. Anyway, I really like this job because it provides you with the opportunity to meet with people from different cultures and languages. I don't have exotic languages, but if I had had Arabic or Chinese, perhaps I would be working much more than this. In the future, I think interpreters will have to learn many more languages in order to have many clients. Actually, some new countries are becoming stronger and stronger. Interpreters should learn their languages in order to increase their workflow. I also think EU can still be a good chance for young interpreters.

### **Interpreter 10**

I mainly work with institutions. I believe that you have to be in the right circle or club. If you have many colleagues and they are working quite often for institutions, you can happen to work much. I didn't see my workflow decrease much, although I am not working always the same number of days each month. In the summertime, I generally don't work much. I also translate and provide some language consultancy service. As a matter of fact, I don't believe interpreters can just work within conferences nowadays, unless they have six or seven languages and are ready to travel much. As far as I am concerned, I am quite satisfied, because I can do many things together without leaving my personal interests apart. I wouldn't like to work 24/7. I don't know how the future CI market will look like. I only hope I can continue doing my job. I am confident there will be a better regulation for our job in the future.

### **Interpreters 11 – 15**

These interpreters – aged 25-30 - have only recently received their MA in CI. Therefore, each of them did not fill in the questionnaire but they reported the following remarks: apart from stage opportunities offered by their Italian University, they have had difficulties entering the market.

They reported to have sent hundreds of CVs to different companies and agencies located in Italy and abroad, but only a very few responses were received. They believe that there is a glut of interpreting offers but they always pertain to the same language combinations (e.g. English, French and Spanish). Slightly different – in their opinion – is the translation market, that seems to be a little more flexible and open to take in more translators. The problem is that they have received a background training in CI, which obviously not the same as professional translating; they don't know how to use CAT tools (computer-aided translation tools) and, basically, translation fees are quite low. As far as future perspectives are concerned, they hope that something is going to change and that many skilled interpreters will help them come in the CI market. They find it a bit frustrating to study many years and concentrate their efforts on learning a job, that seems quite impossible to be done.

### **Interpreters 16-18**

These three women are aged 26/32. They have received their MA in CI in Italy and have been working in the translating and interpreting sector for about 2/3 years now. This group of interpreters describes their work as interpreters and linguists as a bit frustrating. They cannot live on their job, because they are assigned only a few interpreting assignments a year and this does not allow them to live on interpreting. For these reasons, all three interpreters have to combine interpreting with translating, tour guiding and hostess services. They don't look at CI confidently because they consider it more and more difficult to enter the market, which is already “overstocked” with English and French interpreters. Besides, they are a little bit cynical when they look at Europe. The establishment of the EC has always been looked in Italy as the Promised Land for conference interpreters and the fact that young interpreters do not currently find a freelance or full-time position in this institutional market makes them feel frustrated about Europe, in general. As concerns future perspectives for conference interpreting, they sincerely hope for a better regulated market. In fact, many people were and are working in the CI and translation sector without meeting the prescribed requirements, lowering fees and humbling the whole interpreting community. The fact that a National Register is still lacking after many struggles by National Associations to have it established, is not helping, too. It seems that the market has fallen a prey to the highest bidder and there is no way to get out of the current crisis.

### **Interpreter 19**

Q1: Conference interpreting has changes and changes were unavoidable. Everything changes and it is plain that CI as it is now cannot be the same as in the 50's and 60's. Back then, people had obviously more job opportunities because only a few people could other languages than Italian. For this reason, if you could speak decently two or three languages, you were absolutely on the good path to become an interpreter. Many interpreters, traditionally, came from families where their member were diplomats and used to travel all over the world. Therefore, their kids had additional chances to learn some other languages, as they grew up. This was another asset. I believe we cannot compare different historic periods. It would be a bit naïve. As far as I am concerned, I see that young interpreters have sometimes advance knowledge of languages, cultural and social affairs. They can make use of these cutting edge technologies and this helps them much. On the other way, having all these tools that replace a little bit human skills is being detrimental to CI.

Q2: As far as my workflow is concerned, I think it has decreased because I am not willing to travel as much as I used to do in the past. Anyway, if you are a good interpreter and you have more a couple of B languages, chances are there for you to work quite well.

Q3: I have worked mainly for EU institutions, but very often for UN Agencies, too.

Q4 : In the recent months, I have happened to receive some interpreting assignments, but one week before the conference, they called me and told the conference wouldn't take place. I think this has also to do with the tough crisis we are facing and with the budget cuts in several EU countries and in their own public administrations.

Q5: EU institutions tend to hire interpreters that are less than 65. That's why I am not working much. Generally speaking, it has become quite difficult to be hired as a staff or freelance interpreter. I know quite a bit of people that have failed the inter-institutional test, though they have been working as freelance interpreters for many years and in official contexts.

Q6: Institutional market is changing because it is adjusting to the current political scenario. Although EU is made up of 28 countries, is unlikely to use each and every language, because this would account for very high costs and would be against the austerity policies that the EU itself is pursuing. This is obviously having some tough consequences for interpreters of other languages than English, French or German.

Q7: Generally speaking, I have never had problems with my customers. Once they accepted my budget, they never complain about it and don't ask for discount on interpreting..

Q8: No. It happens that I have to wait for some months before they pay my fees.

Q9: I think English will continue to be the lingua franca, although some other languages such as Chinese or Arabic will be used much. In connection with CI, I can say goods interpreters won't have much problems in getting a good, well-paid assignment, though CI is not as common as some decades ago.

Q10: I think national and international associations such as AIIC are undertaking many initiatives to support the interpreters' community. I believe that interpreters should act first hand and try to arrange some cross-border meeting to make their voice hears and to try to get to an internationally recognized legislation regarding language services.

## **Interpreter 20**

This interpreter gave a brief interview and said that she has always tried to do many things in her life. She liked CI but also translating, travelling, touring, writing. She found it nice to be able to do many things at the same time. Interpreting gave her the possibility to travel much and to meet people from different continents and different social backgrounds. Translating provided her with the opportunity to concentrate more deeply on something and to create a product that lasts longer than just an interpreting shift. Writing was something she took care of when she felt like producing something on her own.

Basically, she has worked as a liaison interpreter, because CI is a bit stressful and does not get along with her personality. Anyway, she has worked much as a consecutive interpreter, above all in trade deals, in business talks or in court hearings. She likes the job and she would be again an interpreter and translator, if she should decide again what to do in her future. She is well aware that the crisis is there and that for many young interpreters, it will be harder and harder to find their own place in a market which is becoming confused, odd and with its eyes only on low fees. Maybe, quality is no longer important to clients.

### **3.3 Data analysis**

This research work was conducted between early 2012 and early 2014. The people interviewed have all joined the research of their own will. As it can be seen, some interpreters have filled in the questionnaire, others have shortly talked about their experiences in CI. Obviously, if more data had been available and funds had been allocated to conduct a more consistent research work, this would

have been done. With these technical tools (laptop, e-mail, etc.) and a few funds available, the scope of the present work cannot but be limited.

However, some interesting data emerge from this short questionnaire. The questionnaire is made up of 10 questions and interpreters were all asked not to skip any questions. Generally, it happens that interpreters do not have much time to respond to any questionnaire they receive on a monthly basis. Therefore, it would have been too redundant to arrange a long questionnaire without targeted questions. Besides, interpreters would have given – perhaps – too vague answers. In this questionnaire, the focus was on working conditions, workflow, relationship with employers and on the impact the crisis had on interpreters' workflow.

### **3.3.1 Results**

#### **Interpreters**

##### *1. Crisis, workflow and fees*

According to all interviewees, the economic and financial crisis spreading all over the globe has affected the CI market. There are basically two perspectives: on the one hand, interpreters between 50 and 65 including retired conference interpreters claim that, if one has had clients for many years and they have always appreciated your work and its high quality, this means that they will keep hiring you, without putting any pressure on your fees or salary. To tell the truth, most of these interpreters mainly count EU or UN or Governmental institutions among their customers. For this reason, they receive higher fees and are not worried about their future as much as younger freelance interpreter.

Most of the interviewees are freelance, not staff interpreters. This is an important remark, as it shows that staff interpreters account only for a very small number of interpreters. Basically, the ones that suffer the most from the consequences of CI “decline” are freelance interpreters.

Interpreters between 40 and 50 are halfway. They have already a handful of clients, though they have to have more than one job. They work mainly as conference interpreters and translators and some of them is also lecturing at private or public universities in Italy. This is one of the most striking differences: older interpreters keep interpreting and hold their clients. They often don't need to work as translators and they prefer lecturing at university. The second generation (interpreters between 40 and 50) are somehow forced to perform both activities. The latter interviewees apparently don't work more than 20 or 30 days a year as conference interpreters and, therefore, cannot afford leaving translating and lecturing apart.

A *trait d'union* between all these interpreters is virtually represented by their relationship with clients and their fees. None of them claims to be forced to reduce their fees, when interpreting or translating and the crisis has not changed neither their fees nor their relationship with clients.

A very worrying scenario is depicted for younger interpreters (we'll call them "the third generation"). These people between 25 and 35 feel like being excluded from the CI market and claim that the crisis was a final blow to them, because as fees suddenly went down and clients were only hiring those [younger and sometimes less skilled] interpreter, they found themselves cut off CI and had to fall back on other jobs requiring language skills such as reception clerk or hostess.

## 2. *Employers, domestic and institutional market*

One of the main differences highlighted is that the three groups have quite different employees. Older interpreters (between 50 and 70) are those working under more favorable conditions. Their employing agencies or institutions are well-know; they have been doing their job for many years now. Other interpreters do not often work for these institutions, both because they haven't taken or passed the inter-institutional test for conference interpreters, and because they have started their professional activities in other areas. They have meanwhile a husband or a wife, they have set up a private agency or started teaching at University. The youngest interpreters feel closer to EU, as they studied between 90s and 2000s but they are – unless the opposite is proved – totally excluded from EU institutions. They can only work on their domestic market and try to select those clients that offer better working conditions and higher fees. Obviously, as their working days range between 10 and 20, they cannot live on interpreting.

As a rule, working on national market is not as easy as it may look. Clients are assigning interpreting tasks to those linguists, showing off high skills and willing to apply special discounts on the [already] agreed fees. As interpreters applying for an assignment are currently quite a lot, it happens that cities as Milan and Rome – that host most international events and call for language services – are turning into places overstaffed with conference interpreters. And what's more, they all have the same language combinations.

Unfortunately, Italian universities have been offering for too many years now the same curricula and language combinations, thereby contributing to overstaff the local market with "English and another Western European language" interpreters. In the end, this has made CI a very competitive field.

All three generations share their belief that the lack of a National Register is extremely harmful to CI market, as everyone is bearing – charging very low fees – and working conditions are not

respected. Therefore, it can happen that you're called upon to interpret seven hours during a conference without having any booth mate.

### *3. The market is changing. Future perspectives*

When asked about how the market is changing, most of young interpreters replied that they cannot see some big changes in their future professional activities. They believe that austerity measures have hit hard our Eurozone economies and that no room is left for conferences in cultural and or scientific matters. Actually, Italy is spending fewer and fewer on education, R&D and on promoting Italian culture and language abroad. This leads to automatically believe that the country will not invest much in its resources and perhaps will not strive hard for attracting foreign investors. If this is the case, this will surely land a fatal blow to CI market, that might be almost wiped out by the next wave of financial crisis combined with European Union-led austerity measures. All in all, young interpreters believe their MA in CI can help them to find a job – they speak more than one language and can also work in tourism or marketing industries – but not in CI. On the other hand, older interpreters think that EU and its institutions will overcome this period of tough crisis and will offer young interpreters from Italy and from somewhere else more job opportunities. They also believe that interpreters will have to acquire some knowledge about exotic languages and have to get specializations in one or more domains. Besides, mixing together translating and interpreting can be a good solution. They didn't need to spend hours or weeks translating, as they had quite a bit of interpreting assignments but younger interpreters will need to.

### *4. Uncertainties and the role played by Associations*

Other reasons for young interpreters' uncertainties lie in the growing concern for the decreasing number of working days and the attitude of employers, including private-own agencies offering language services. Both older and young interpreters complain about long-term payments and delays. In few words, this accounts for one of the main reasons why working as a conference interpreter in the current Italian market poses many challenges rather than opportunities. Last but not least, the fact that interpreters receive fewer assignment along with continuous delays of payment make it all the more difficult. While more experience interpreters are quite sure that will receive their money, younger interpreters are sometimes facing insolvent agencies or clients who defer payments and try to have the work done for free.

In this scenario, all interviewees share the view that national and international associations for interpreters and translators should do more to raise awareness of interpreting and translating and their difficulties as high demanding intellectual jobs. These Associations should also rely on more interpreters willing to join together and fight the common cause. In addition to this, most interpreters believe that, if a National Register is, even Associations will play a limited role, as they are only empowered to submit draft bills but cannot obviously implement them on their own. In order for this to happen, Associations should get closer to the Italian politics, which plays a capital role in the Bel Paese, and try have it or its own political representatives cast light on interpreters and

linguists' needs. This does not prove to be easy but since other professions have already succeeded in getting politics to have stakes in their domains (notaries, lawyers, physician, accountants and so on), this may be the only viable solution if interpreting and translating are to have a future.

## Conclusions

The study here reported has briefly showed the current status of CI in Italy. For doing this, an interview has been conducted and 20 people have filled in a questionnaire between early 2012 and 2014. Their answers were analyzed and compared with other skilled interpreters. In the first attempt to compare conference interpreters' performances, very interesting and relevant data already came out. Basically, since the late 90s conference interpreting has been declining and oddly enough the decline has been starker since the Eurozone and the Eurocurrency. The same EU that gave many job opportunities to conference interpreters of the "first generation" is now turning into a stronghold that younger interpreters are unlikely to storm. The reasons why all this is happening are manifold: countries are spending less on education, cultural exchanges, study visits, conferences, R&D. The threat hanging over whatever the State tries to do is represented by budget cuts and wage restraints. In this framework, interpreters and translators are among those professionals being harshly hit by the economic and financial crisis. Besides, other reasons lie behind this decline: most interpreters continue to be trained in English and other Western European languages. This means that the Italian CI market is overstaffed with young interpreters having the same language combinations. Last but not least, young interpreters feel they are not protected enough against those agencies and private-owned organizations that defer payments or try to bear. As Italy is still lacking a legislation governing translators' and conference interpreters' work, this represents an additional challenge to their job. They work more rarely, they work under worse conditions and very often they are not paid. As a matter of fact, all this has a negative impact on linguists' life and on their lifestyle and their outlook on future. Many young interpreters – along with those between 40 and 50 – are doing many jobs to make ends meet and claim that they will continue to do so, as Italy and Europe itself are not offering alternative solutions. Whilst more skilled interpreters have many clients and very often work for high-level national and international institutions, younger interpreters are excluded from the market and have to be content with very little.

So, is CI in Italy still offering good job opportunities? Obviously, not. But there is much more than that. The tough scenario young interpreters are facing is not only relevant to their country. Many young people from all over Europe are suffering from the consequences of this harsh crisis, but the Italian case is all the more worrying, as Italian Universities took profit of CI studies' appeal to young linguists. They abolished – in some cases – the *numerus clausus* and offered the same study programs – with the same language combinations. The Italian Government, on its own, has never implemented the several draft bills that Linguists' Associations have proposed since the 1970s. All these factors have unavoidably led to the current chaotic situation where the market cannot hire thousands of conference interpreters (mostly with Italian as an A-language) and many people have turned themselves into language services' providers, in order to exploit younger interpreters and translators. What is the alternative to this trend point downward?

The best case scenario is that Universities change their policies regarding entrance examinations and their study programs, adjusting and meeting the needs of modern CI. Furthermore, the Italian Government should say clearly what intellectual professions can be legally admitted and protected by national authorities. Establishing a National Register may be the *optimum*.

The worst case scenario is that Universities keep offering the same programs with the same language combinations. Anyway, this wouldn't last longer than five to ten years, as young interpreters passing information about their poor career perspectives by word-of-mouth can work better than optimistic Universities websites. Besides, if Associations do not conduct more aggressive policies, urging the Government in Rome to have a National Register and more stringent policies on language service providers, CI will not have a much longer life.

So far, the destiny of CI is in the hands of those providing CI, but this is also a business of the Italian Governments and its Universities. Only time will tell what Italy will choose.

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