



AIIC's first sign-language member: Maya de Wit

Mark the date: 1 April 2014, AIIC welcomes its first sign-language conference interpreter, interviewed here in the association's blog.

Aude-Valérie MONFORT, Sign Language Network.
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To become a sign-language interpreter, Maya studied in the United States (Minneapolis) and in the Netherlands (Utrecht). After graduating in 2003, she worked increasingly in international settings and gained expertise in different academic fields such as education, linguistics, IT and deafblindness. Maya also works as a trainer in Europe and beyond.

Very committed to the development of the sign-language interpreter profession, she worked as a policy maker in the Dutch Association of Sign Language Interpreters (NBTG) and within the European Forum of Sign Language Interpreters ([efsl](#)) of which she was president from 2006 until 2012. Maya was also a board member of European Legal Interpreters and Translators Association ([EULITA](#)). She is currently a member of the [WFD](#) and [WASLI](#) task force for International Sign interpreters.

Maya is also involved in several research topics, such as the quality of sign-language interpreters, and one her most well known publications is Sign Language Interpreting in Europe, 2012 edition, which is updated and published every four years.

More recently, Maya contributed to the AIIC Sign Language Network activities and helped develop the guidelines for both [conference interpreters](#) and [sound engineers](#) when spoken- and sign-language interpreters work together in the same team.

Aude-Valérie Monfort (AVM): *Maya, first of all, why did you want to join AIIC, the only global association of conference interpreters?*

Maya de Wit (MdW): The profession of spoken-language interpreters and sign-language interpreters is in essence the same. We are both interpreting between one language and another; only the modalities, auditory and visual, are different. The emergence of sign-language interpreters as a profession is different from that of spoken-language interpreters. The first sign-language interpreters were mostly children of deaf parents who grew up bilingual in spoken and signed language. In the last three to four decades, the development of the profession of sign-language interpreters has undergone a rapid development. This is due to the increased awareness of people and governments to make society, be it in employment, education or community settings, accessible to deaf sign-language users through professional interpreting services. The need for professional sign-language interpreters resulted in the establishment of college and university based educational

programmes for sign language interpreters. Currently there are over 60 programmes in Europe.

As a result of the increased participation in society of deaf sign-language users through interpreting services, spoken- and sign-language interpreters are more frequently working together. AIIC is the internationally recognised and established organisation representing conference interpreters globally. I think it is important that we exchange our expertise and to support each other in the provision of professional conference interpreting services, sharing the same standards. In addition, sign-language interpreters are still often viewed as assistants instead of as professional service providers. By joining AIIC I hope that the general awareness of sign-language interpreting as a true service profession will also be raised.

AVM: *In many countries, the certification of interpreters (sign or spoken) is an issue because of the lack of formal training. For some years, several national sign-language interpreters' associations have been working on developing formal training for interpreter trainers and establishing standards of education for sign-language interpreters. Another option to ensure quality in interpreting services is to set up an accreditation system. AIIC's accreditation is based on experience (a minimum of working days) and sponsorship (members who vouch for the candidate's professional competence and abidance by the accepted professional ethics). You are now yourself a member of AIIC. How did you find the admission procedure to join?*

MdW: The number and level of formal training programmes for sign-language interpreters has increased over the years. In addition to formal programmes, more European countries are now establishing an independent registration body, where sign-language interpreters are registered and where they need to obey the regulations and rules of the registry in order to stay registered. These rules and regulations differ per country, due to the historical development of the profession and the services in that country. Personally, I believe that a professional in any profession should complete an education in the field of that profession. In my more than 20 years of experience in working with interpreter colleagues from across the world, I can see a major benefit in working with those who have completed an interpreter education. The training provides the common basis and understanding to work from and to collaborate as a team. I also believe in continuing education to learn and develop my skills and knowledge through professional development courses and studies. The working experience of an interpreter is of course of crucial importance and is necessary in order to gain accreditation for interpreting at conference level. A combination of educational accomplishments and work experience would be in my view ideal.



Being the first sign-language interpreter going through the full admission procedure has been challenging and fun, and not just for me. I could not have done it without the support you and the members of the AIIC Sign Language Network gave me, as well as that of my international colleagues who encouraged me to see the process through. Now that I have the experience of completing the process, I hope many more sign-language interpreters will follow.

AVM: *Spoken-language conference interpreters are either freelancers or staff members of an institution. In the former case, they are usually recruited directly by their clients or by a consultant interpreter or an agency. They negotiate their fees and other terms and conditions individually. I know that in some countries SLI recruitment or employment follows a different procedure. For example, in Germany senior SLIs are organised as an agency and employ other SLIs; SLIs are recruited and paid directly by social services and the fees are established according to a standard scale applied at regional or national level. Can you tell us how*

sign-language conference interpreters are organised in other countries and how they obtain assignments?

MdW: The sign-language interpreters working at conferences and how this is organised vary per European country. In many European countries the fees are set for sign-language interpreters working in employment, education, community or the justice system. When working at conferences it depends on who the requesting or the paying party of the sign-language interpreting services is. Still, fees may always be negotiable if this is what the interpreter wants and the client is willing. For example, a certain fee can be set because the government provides the payment for the interpreting services, but when a special skill, such as a third language, is required the interpreter can ask the client for an additional payment. When working internationally, across borders, most of the time the organisers of the events are the paying party and the fees are not fixed. For a complete overview of each European country and how payment and fees are organised, I like to refer to my publication [Sign Language Interpreting in Europe, 2012 edition](#).

AVM: *As a professional body, AIIC promotes standards of quality and ethics in the profession and represents the interests of its practitioners, staff and freelance conference interpreters. It sets various recommendations concerning the working conditions that high-quality interpreting requires. For example, one technical requirement is the sound quality in the booth. Spoken-language conference interpreters do not like background noise or interference as they cause disturbance and hinder their work. What are the main disruptions that hamper sign-language interpreters in their work?*

MdW: When working at conferences there are several items to consider that might influence the sign language interpreter at work. For example, sign-language interpreters often work on stage, facing the audience, in a conference setting. In a regular conference setting the sound monitors are facing the audience, and sending the audio signals in the direction of the audience. As a result the sign-language interpreter cannot hear the sound very well. To solve this, we ask the technicians to install an extra audio monitor facing the interpreter. Another important element is the lighting. The deaf sign-language user must be able to see us clearly, just as we need to see the deaf persons. This means that the room must be lit and not be darkened, and we cannot sit or stand too far away from the deaf participants. In the recently development AIIC guidelines there is an overview of these elements to keep in mind when working with sign-language interpreters.

AVM: *The ideal speaker for a sign-language interpreter: what are her or his characteristics?*

MdW: I do not think there is much difference between an ideal speaker (or signer) for spoken or sign-language interpreters. Preparation materials and information are always a key element to make the whole interpreting process run more smoothly. The speaker should not read the paper from written text, and hence speak too fast. One difference is that as sign-language interpreters our backs are mostly facing the presentation screen. When a speaker points at specific items on the screen, we are unable to see what the speaker is pointing at, especially if the speaker refers to the items as 'this' or 'that', rather than naming the elements. In these situations we always need a team member to support us to clarify in the interpreting process what the speaker is referring to.

AVM: *We already mentioned the training of interpreters in general. Spoken-language interpreters have their specific set of recommendations for working in a booth: for example, do not rustle paper or fill your glass (or blow your nose...) when the mic is on; use perfume or aftershave sparingly; ensure that you have full visibility of the speaker. What are the dos and don'ts for SLIs?*

MdW: Sign-language interpreters have indeed similar recommendations in order to hear the audio well and have full visibility. One other important element is that we are not sitting in a booth but are always fully visible and present to the whole audience. This means that we have to be extra alert in

our professional attitude and dress code. We need to wear solid-coloured tops so the background to our hands is not tiring on the eyes. Because we are in the same room as the participants, non-deaf participants also often approach us with questions about sign language or deaf culture, for example. In those instances it is important that we interpret the questions to the deaf participant(s) and do not answer the questions ourselves.

We also remind the participants in, for example, discussion sessions that they will need to take turns in speaking, because otherwise we are unable to interpret the messages. In addition, hearing participants should not stand, sit or move in between the interpreter and the deaf clients, because the deaf clients will then be unable to see the interpretation.

AVM: *Because simultaneous interpreting is extremely strenuous and requires high concentration, interpreters can only work for approximately 30 minutes at a time. Therefore they usually interpret in a team of two or three colleagues per language combination. When several languages are required at a meeting, there may be several teams of interpreters working together. For an optimum outcome, close and harmonious cooperation is necessary prior to and during the meeting. When SLIs work together, when and how do they cooperate? And when they work in a mixed team of spoken- and sign-language interpreters, what do they expect from their spoken-language colleagues more particularly?*

MdW: Sign-language interpreters at conferences indeed also work in teams. We usually work for a maximum of 15 to 20 minutes. During the interpretation there is active support from the other team member at all times. The team interpreter checks and confirms the interpretation, feeds omissions, for example due to inaudibility, provides additional information which cannot be seen by the active interpreter, and so on. The teamwork is quite intense and close-knit. When working with spoken-language interpreters we very much appreciate an exchange on who is interpreting which speaker in which language, familiarising ourselves with the type of voice, and also exchanging terminology and culturally appropriate interpretations. Especially when we are not facing the speakers in a panel discussion, it is helpful if the spoken-language interpreters identify who is speaking. This assists us in providing a correct interpretation.

AVM: *At the launch of the efsli publication Learning Outcomes for Graduates of a Three Year Sign Language Interpreting Training Programme last December at the European Parliament in Brussels, I had a conversation with you, the Executive Director of the European Union of the Deaf, Mark Wheatley, and another AIIC colleague engaged in sign-language issues, Dounya François. As I do not 'speak' any sign language myself, you had to interpret between Mark Wheatley and me. You used International Sign. Dounya talked to Mark using the Belgian French sign language. During the conference Mark had addressed the public using International Sign. Being British, I assume his mother 'tongue' is British sign language. I became suddenly aware of the fact that deaf people can also be polyglot, that is, really fluent in several languages and have the flexibility to switch easily from one language to another. Can you tell us about your own language skills acquisition? What is the best way to learn a sign language? Are there major differences to learning a spoken foreign language?*

MdW: I first learned American Sign Language when interning at the school for the blind in Baltimore, in the United States. There were also deafblind children and they used American Sign Language. Deafblind persons who are fully blind can feel the signs by holding the hands of the signer. I then enrolled in 1991 in the American Sign Language interpreter training programme at St Kates, which was at that time in Minneapolis. After moving back to the Netherlands, where I have lived most of my life, I worked as an ASL interpreter for many years throughout Europe. In 2003 I received my BA in Dutch Sign Language interpreting and in



2011 I completed my MA at the first European Master in Sign Language Interpreting study programme ([EUMASLI](#)). Next to speaking English and German fluently, I acquired International Sign through my presidency at efsli and my participation at international events with deaf sign-language users from across the world. The best way to learn a sign language is first to start with a local course and learn the national sign language of the country you live in. As it is with spoken languages, the older you are, the more challenging it can be to learn a new language. Learning sign language is like learning a new spoken language, only you will also need the visual and spatial capacities of your brain to acquire a sign language. Each sign language has its own grammar, syntax and vocabulary, so you are learning a fully-fledged language.



***AVM:** There are almost one million deaf people in Europe for whom the spoken language of their country or region remains a foreign or second language. We understand the challenge deaf persons have in educational, social and work environments, as the vast majority of non-deaf Europeans do not have signing skills. In this context, the European Union of the Deaf conducted a survey and published a report in 2013 that gives an overview on the implementation in EU Member States of the areas of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities ([UNCRPD](#)) relevant to deaf-related issues. At present, a joint EU and EUD project called [INSIGN](#) aims at improving communication between deaf and hard of hearing persons and the EU institutions. At international gatherings, the trend remains, however, to provide interpretation in [International Sign](#) (IS). IS is not a fully fledged language but a combination of national signs and highly iconic signs that can be easily understood. It has been developed over the years by deaf people from various communities who meet at international events and need to communicate with one another. Considering the fact that there is often more than one sign language per spoken-language equivalent (for example, French/Belgian/French Swiss/Quebec sign language for French; British/American/Australian/Welsh/Scottish/Irish... Sign language for English) would it be convenient and possible for non-signers to learn one single sign language, that is, International Sign, to be able to communicate with deaf participants all over the world?*

MdW: International Sign is not a full language that has been recognised as such. To an outsider, to all learn International Sign seems like the logical way to proceed. But as we are all humans, we use the language that is around us, or the closest to us and the most convenient to use. Just as Dutch people prefer to use Dutch as their everyday language and not English, for example, deaf Dutch people prefer to use Dutch sign language and not International Sign. International Sign does not have any native speakers and is mostly used at international events to communicate across language borders. A deaf person who has never seen International Sign before also has difficulty understanding it. It takes time and regular use to acquire International Sign, but it is a mere communication tool for specific settings. It can never replace a national sign language.

AVM: Thank you, Maya, and welcome to AIIC!

MdW: Thank you, Aude-Valérie, for your questions and your support through the years.

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