

## **‘International Collaboration in Setting Public Service Interpreting Equivalencies’**

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### **Abstract**

This paper recognises the need for qualified public service interpreters the world over and resulting from this the need to establish workable equivalencies across languages and cultures for -

- selection
- training (knowledge and interpreting skills)
- assessment
- working arrangements for interpreters
- codes of conduct
- continuing professional development (CDP)
- transnational mobility

This paper sets out how representatives from countries with different languages and legal and social structures may work together to achieve these essentials by identifying a common core, involving training organisations, course providers and representatives of the legal, public health and social agencies.

The need for equivalencies arises from legal cases frequently involving the legal agencies of more than one country which should be able to expect professional consistency in the interpreting services used.

## **‘International Collaboration in Setting Public Service Interpreting Equivalencies’**

In the UK we have come a long way from the days when each legal agency, each public service provider, secured the services of foreign language speakers as best they could. The overriding, often the only criterion, was competence in the other language whereas competence in the language of the host country, in our case English, was taken for granted. The need for transfer skills was not even understood. This was often confirmed in job adverts for community interpreters where knowledge of the other language was the only essential requirement for the job of interpreter.

Fortunately, there has been growing awareness that here is a virtually global problem requiring solutions in many countries including Australia, Canada, the USA and the EU. As a result, community or public service interpreting has in recent years been given the prominence it deserves, certainly during the 1990s though in the UK the first project that sought to tackle these issues systematically and developed a model, goes back to the 1980s and the Institute of Linguists. Some fifteen years later we have in the UK a qualification for public service interpreters in four different options (English and Scottish legal, local government and health care), based on about 25 courses annually which run in different parts of the country and cover about 30 languages. The training leads to the Diploma in Public Service Interpreting, the only recognised qualification for this purpose

in the UK.

All qualified public service interpreters are encouraged to join the National Register of Public Service Interpreters which the Institute of Linguists operates on behalf of the Home Office (the UK Ministry of the Interior). By subscribing to the National Register, the public service providers gain instant access to all qualified registered interpreters. Meantime the legal agencies concerned have made an Agreement <sup>(1)</sup> that by the end of the year 2001, they will wherever possible use the National Register for all their requirements of interpreters in criminal cases in England and Wales.

It could be argued that this tremendous step forward has, at least for legal interpreting in criminal cases, completed our task apart from training more interpreters, monitoring and refining the Diploma in Public Service Interpreting, making courses available in yet more rare languages and persuading more public service providers to use the National Register. However, this particular solution applies only in the UK.

Meantime, with growing awareness of the problem of communication across languages and cultures, most countries have identified their own needs, priorities and possible solutions to cope with them. The result internationally is a patchwork of different priorities and levels of training, different contents and duration of courses leading to different standards. The common need for effective and reliable communication across languages and cultures is today met by a variety of solutions in different countries.

To start with there are some fundamental differences of structure and organisation. Some countries have separate standards for police and court interpreting as against other forms of public service interpreting. This is often considered as community interpreting which could be carried out by less or even unqualified individuals, often friends and relatives of the client even though as in legal cases lives may be at risk. In some countries the overriding criterion is the legal context bringing together the otherwise quite different skills required for translation and interpreting, as for example the National Association of Judicial Interpreters and Translators in the USA. In Austria and Germany, legal interpreting is organised separately from other forms of community or public service interpreting. In Britain our National Register covers all forms of public service interpreting. <sup>(2)</sup>

The need for stocktaking across borders, for exchanging ideas and pooling resources where possible, has been recognised and has been taken up by conferences such as the Critical Link I in June 1995. Community interpreting was also a theme at the F.I.T. World Congresses at Brighton, UK in 1993 and Melbourne, Australia, in 1996.

What has been absent to this day, at least in our part of the world, has been an organised collaboration across more than one border and more than one language combination to create comparable standards of competence and practice. Such collaboration is in our view hugely desirable. But how should it be brought about? What are the essential aspects for the establishment of equivalencies, in particular for the setting of joint standards? We have identified six areas:

- selection of potential interpreters
- training (knowledge and interpreting skills)
- assessment
- working arrangements for interpreters
- professional conduct
- continuous professional development

Public service providers should be in a position where they can expect the same standards of

interpreting from within or across national borders. They therefore need to be consulted and actively involved in these six areas (from selection to continuing professional development).

### *Selection*

The educational institutions that provide training courses for interpreters must have a major say in the selection of the interpreters who are going to be their students. But selection also needs to be closely linked to training and assessment (will the trainees be able to deliver at the end of their course?), as much as the code of conduct (do trainees have the right attitude to questions of confidentiality? Do they have the right degree of empathy towards sensitive issues and the strength of character to cope with harrowing cases?). Are these selection criteria perceived to be the same in other/all countries? Exchange of views and discussion of selection criteria could result in a set of essential common core criteria leaving room for additional requirements that may vary between countries.

Selection is also determined by the length of the intended course and needs to take account of the degree of competence in the two languages that course participants have. The course participants are, as a rule, expected to be fully competent in both languages. Courses concentrate in the main on imparting and practising transfer skills though some language enhancement is also involved. It follows that considering and agreeing core selection criteria across borders will have an impact on the type of student selected and length and content of courses.

### *Training*

This is possible a more tangible area of collaboration across borders in that curriculum design is accessible to our counterparts in other countries. Better still, courses could be designed jointly though probably in outline rather than in detail.

This could be handled in joint discussion in which all the parts of a course required for the training of interpreters in a particular field, for example legal, are jointly evaluated. However, even if there is agreement on, for example, the need for specialised terminology and knowledge of structures and procedures, systems and terminology to describe them vary. What is the equivalent to an English Crown Court in the Netherlands? How does the German Amtsgericht compare with the English Magistrates Court?

Apart from specialist knowledge, there is the question of competence in the languages concerned and the transfer skills required for interpreting. There is agreement in general terms on what is required, although what precise linguistic means are needed is a matter for each country to determine separately. What does require detailed definition and agreement is the standard that is to be reached across languages and borders.

Fortunately, in the UK the Languages Lead Body has done just that. It has defined the linguistic activities involved at different levels in the four language skills and in addition in professional interpreting and translation. The standards set for interpreting (at professional level 5) could well be used as a guide and pattern for any language combination though each would want to adjust them to their particular needs. There are detailed descriptions of competence levels, range of language and performance criteria.

The Institute of Linguists aims to collaborate with a number of other EU countries in establishing equivalencies in this field. The National Language Standards for interpreters should

provide a valuable base as we shall not have to re-invent the wheel.

Seeking to establish equivalent standards of training will also require discussion on how interpreting skills are taught. This may be particularly valuable as interpreter training consists in the main of practice sessions supported usually by very little theory. Are there better/other ways of imparting and acquiring interpreting skills? Important aspects here are the starting level, the length of courses and the expected outcome. Should the entrance level be standardised across languages? Should it be defined and tested? Will what works best for us, work for others? Will it work equally well? How do we cater for rare languages? Are there ways of pooling resources across borders to create viable courses for such languages?

### *Assessment*

Again the National Language Standards (in the UK) give clear indications of criteria for various levels of assessment of competence although for public service interpreting we have only ever considered the fully professional level 5. This has sometimes been queried. It will be interesting to compare the need for particular levels of competence as it is perceived in other countries as well as the need for particular skills. Our own Diploma in Public Service Interpreting covers consecutive and whispered simultaneous interpreting, sight translation and written translation both ways. Here again, equivalencies need to be established. Legal practices in different countries may require some different skills or can core skills be assessed across borders and to the same standard?

It is possible now to use distance learning (with practice weekends, of course) and this could open the way for joint training courses across borders, potentially on a broad-based scale. For example such courses in French and English or English and Spanish, if based on distance learning, might cover some, though not all, the needs of the trainee interpreters in any two countries. Such courses, if fine-tuned, could introduce interpreters to the legal system of the two countries, their practices and structures bearing in mind, that as a rule, in most legal cases at present, the interpreter deals with the system of one country only. Nonetheless the need for identical core content might be identified in the two languages, to be assessed to the same standard.

Distance learning and the Internet might also be explored for the creation of short courses and individual packages, for example for rare languages. They could be used by individual interpreters if they are going to be involved in work across borders and systems.

In all the above aspects of establishing equivalencies, the involvement of the public service providers is likely to highlight essential differences in the practices that apply in different countries which must be taken account of when establishing equivalencies.

In particular, in creating a realistic content for the training, public service personnel have a vital contribution to make to ensure that course content and training reflect the public services in real life. They can provide authentic registers and terminology and realistic descriptions of structures and procedures.

Public service personnel should, therefore, be involved in any discussion on selection, course design and assessment across borders. One preliminary issue here would be how to determine the kind and level of service provider personnel best suited. For example in the health care context should hospital managers and other administrators be equally involved as medical staff?

### *Working arrangements*

Working arrangements are the responsibility of the service providers in consultation with the interpreters (which is not always in place). They cover working conditions, rest periods etc, but at least equally important, the safety of the interpreter in certain cases, detailed briefing by the service provider as well as debriefing and for particularly harrowing cases post-traumatic stress counselling. An exchange of information on current practices in different countries and agreement on essential common core elements and best practice, would benefit interpreters all round.

### *Codes of conduct*

Public service personnel also have an important role to play in reaching a common agreement across frontiers on codes of conduct. It is important that such codes are agreed by all parties concerned. Above all the public service interpreter profession itself must agree on its own code which needs to be binding for all professionals in a given context, be this a relevant professional body or, as for example in Britain, the National Register of Public Service Interpreting.

Such codes might readily be agreed across borders as the essentials of professional conduct arise from the profession itself. However, where culture- or language-specific differences exist, they should be made clear and fully understood by the professionals from another country when involved in work where a different code applies.

There is every reason to assume that such code of conduct could be agreed and applied across borders, eventually (in our case) by all EU member countries. It might also be possible for F.I.T. to consider such a core code across the whole globe as the code enshrines immutable ethical principles.

### *Continuing Professional Development*

By contrast C.P.D. is dependent on local conditions. It may include:

- reading the professional press
- using the Internet for professional information
- attending lectures, talks or workshops
- visiting libraries or consulting software for terminology or vocabulary
- researching and producing papers and articles for publication.

C.P.D. therefore, depends in each country on the quality and availability of relevant literature, journals, reference material, lectures, practice sessions, refresher courses and what C.P.D. would be provided by the public services, colleges and the interpreter profession itself. In addition, ease of access to any of these activities is important for the individual interpreter. It varies, of course, widely in different countries and local regions. Nonetheless across-border partnerships can raise awareness and assist individuals in determining and selecting for themselves viable and useful C.P.D. packages. Common minimum C.P.D. activities could be agreed across countries as constituting essential requirements. Also, C.P.D. might encourage the development of informal links for joint schemes across languages and borders.

This paper is intended as a trigger for discussion and exchange of views and may possibly open up avenues towards across-border collaboration schemes. Establishing equivalencies is in itself likely to help raise standards by reviewing the various schemes and highlighting strengths and weaknesses, comparing them with those of other countries and, hopefully, resulting in best practices

being identified and adopted by all partners, based on the joint creation of training material, guidelines and curriculum design.

### *Transnational Mobility*

One final point for consideration - working across languages and cultures or languages and national borders also requires an open mind and a welcoming attitude to other ways of doing things and to working on the other side of the border as may be required. This touches on transnational mobility and raises the question whether in addition to the six areas in which equivalencies might be established, a transnational mobility element should be included as a new dimension both for national training programmes and translingual - transcultural training schemes for interpreters. This element would -

- be identified by essential skills, knowledge and experience in support of transnational mobility
- be used to endorse training programmes that have taken account of the need for transnational mobility
- provide the basis for recognition across borders, for example EU-wide

The essential component of the transnational element would be -

10. Language competence (in at least two languages)
11. Knowledge of cultural differences and working practices and recognition of their importance
12. Firsthand experience and application of 1 and 2 above

In the UK a proposal has been put forward to add a transnational mobility element to the National Language Standards.<sup>(3)</sup>

The transnational element could provide added value to any level of competence or qualification which interpreters currently have or seek to acquire, be it within the EU, Canada, the USA or other large multi-lingual multi-cultural or multi-national areas.

## References

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