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### **The Selection and Training of Interpreters in the Community at the Catholic University, São Paulo (PUC-SP)**

The profession of a community interpreter as a formal occupation, unlike in other countries where it exists, though in an embryonic state, does not exist in Brazil. Community interpreting of a kind takes place in the court setting, where, according to the Brazilian law, whenever one of the parties in a legal suit, be it of a civil, labor or criminal nature, is a non-fluent speaker of Portuguese, he/she must be translated by a sworn or official translator when appearing in court either to be questioned by the judge, or to make his/her statement. On very rare occasions, where an official interpreter cannot be designated, the judge may appoint an *ad hoc* interpreter.

In all other instances, the interpreting that takes place in medical, legal and social settings is performed by amateurs, that is, representatives of the community of friends or family members “who speak the language” and unofficially play the role of the community interpreter, sometimes providing a disservice instead of a service, depending on the outcome.

In the case of English speaking individuals, at least in São Paulo, a cosmopolitan city of about 12 million people, known as the heart of Brazil and its industrial center, where English is the language of business and therefore, widely spoken, usually it is not difficult to find someone to informally mediate the communication with the native Brazilians, speakers of Portuguese. However, this is not true in the remote regions of Brazil.

In many of our middle and upper class neighborhood hospitals, for instance, the communication of English speaking patients is, in general, made with the help of the medical staff (physicians and nurses) or administrative employees or even with the assistance of the volunteer staff, when applicable, consisting basically of upper-class women involved in charity work, who frequently travel abroad and have a working knowledge of English.

In other settings, such as at the women's and men's prisons, where about 70% of foreign prisoners are arrested on drug trafficking charges, the communication process is facilitated by other foreign prisoners who usually speak both English and Portuguese. And in great many cases, apparently there seems to be no need of an interpreter for daily exchanges, since they manage to communicate, albeit precariously, considering that when they are first arrested, they remain in the police departments for some time, where they have the opportunity to learn some Portuguese. According to official sources, these prisoners, accused of drug dealing, are in many cases highly educated and sometimes speak several languages, and therefore manage to learn the Portuguese very quickly. Many foreign prisoners are also Spanish speakers, and can be easily understood by native Portuguese speakers.

The problem seems to be worse when other languages, such as Chinese, for example, are involved. In these cases, the respective Consulate is urged to help in both the prison and the police station. In view of this, some European Consulates have already adopted the practice to provide interpreters to their countrymen in these circumstances.

In the social services, the figure of the interpreter practically does not exist. Brazil lags behind most countries in the world in terms of social welfare policies even for native Brazilians, let alone foreigners. Where a need may arise, communication is likely to be conducted in an informal and disorganized manner.

Perhaps, rather than speaking of community interpreters as such, we should think of interpreters involved in the community, their work and training not being restricted to simultaneous booth work. Nowhere should this be more so than the Catholic University São Paulo (PUC), one of the homes of the Brazilian Liberation Theology, which has a strong tradition of working for and with poorer communities.

Up until now, real interpreter training in São Paulo has been haphazard, and the only serious course has been at a well-known private English language school. It is hoped that the PUC Interpretation course "Interpreter in the English Language", set up in March 1999, specifically designed to train interpreters, thus breaking the tradition of combining Translation and Interpretation Courses, will now play a leading role in the training of interpreters in Brazil. The fact that this course is part of a University environment and is one of only two interpreters' programs having Portuguese as its primary language in the world, places it in an advantageous position and opens up countless opportunities to broaden its horizons of community interpreting opportunities.

This course was conceived as a "double-faced" course, in that it is a major for those students taking a BA in English at PUC in the final year, and therefore part

of the university curriculum, as well as for those who finished their BA in English Course in other universities. At the same time, it is a "Sequential Course" for those students with degrees in other areas, such as law, medicine, architecture, biology etc. The advantage of this system is that relatively homogeneous classes in terms of language skills can be formed, though with a wealth of different backgrounds, making the learning process a very enriching and positive experience.

The students (approximately 20) up until now have been selected on the basis of documentary evidence and a screening interview to assess their linguistic competence, general knowledge and aptitude for interpreting. However, starting next semester we will introduce an eliminatory aptitude test according to the recommendations of AIIC and in line with the methods adopted by other well-regarded European interpreter training institutions, followed by an interview by a Board of Examiners. The selected students are then submitted to an intensive training of one or two years, depending on the student's prior experience in the area. In the first year, the course tries to enhance their linguistic knowledge with courses on lexical expansion and oral comprehension, and through the exploration of social, political, medical, legal and economic issues.

After this basic training, the students are then exposed to and trained in the various types of interpretation: sight translation, consecutive and simultaneous interpretation. The practical classes are given in the language laboratory, as well as in the booths, simulating a real-life type of situation as much as possible. They receive training in note-taking techniques used in consecutive interpretation, and are also exposed to live lectures on different topics. Physicians may be invited to talk about diabetes or other health conditions, for practice purposes, and be interpreted by the students themselves. Speech therapists, psychologists and professional interpreters may also be invited to talk to the students about topics relevant to their profession, the difficulties encountered, coping skills, and problems faced by the interpreters with their voices, concentration, memory, etc. We also offer elective courses designed to perfect the students' possible weaknesses, such as a pronunciation course for interpreters or alternative courses such as physical and mental integration where the interpreter-to be learns relaxation, concentration and memorization techniques and body awareness.

The aims of the course, however, go beyond the simple training of interpreters to mediate the communication in business events and conferences and participate in the global economic and scientific development. They also attempt to raise the students' awareness of the problems affecting society and to the need to actively take part and help, with their interpreting services, both the internal and external communities, encouraging them to play a full role in community life.

In the internal sphere, as a result of an agreement with the International Relations Department of the university, they have been and will continue to be called on to act as interpreters for guest speakers of the various departments of the university, actively participating in academic life. Last month, for instance, they were called to do the consecutive interpretation of a guest speaker invited by the Religious Science Department in an event organized for the students, teachers and the public in general.

Externally, they have also provided interpreting services to International Organs. As a matter of fact, they participated as interpreters, in an event on drugs held in April last year, accompanied a group of U.S. businessmen on a visit organized by the Commercial American Consulate and a UN Group on a visit to several entities here in Brazil, including prisons.

Although at this point, all of these interpretation assignments taken on by the PUC students have been on a voluntary basis, as part of their training, and therefore unpaid, we believe that this may be the initial seed that can be sowed and grow in the future. We hope that the PUC course may be a benchmark and help change the *status quo* of the community interpreting from an unimportant and amateur activity to a profession, setting the standards and expanding the sphere of action of the community interpreter. By doing this, public service interpreting, where the interpreters play a role in ensuring access to non-fluent speakers of the official language of the country to public services, may be introduced. Also the community interpreters may also act as mediators of groups with social, religious, environmental and other legitimate concerns.

In our view, in order for the profession of community interpreter to be recognized among clients and the public, we must first create the need for the community interpreters' action, prove its usefulness in the social relations and advertise (disseminate) its benefits among the people in general. For instance, although apparently there is no need for an interpreter in the prison setting, we learned that in many cases the intervention of the interpreter would be crucial and offer a fair and more humane treatment to foreigners and prevent considerable suffering and distress, such as the case of a British female prisoner who was having a miscarriage and bleeding enormously and could not say what was happening because she could not speak Portuguese and only much later was taken to the hospital and given assistance. The public institutions must first realize and become convinced of the benefits of having community interpreters working with them before they decide to hire these professionals in vital institutional settings.

The PUC course may represent a breakthrough in the Interpreting Profession in Brazil. Through its service to the community, hopefully it will unveil new job

opportunities for interpreters, including less traditional modes of interpreting, such as telephone interpreting. Although based on our tradition in Brazil, we think it is unlikely that the profession of community interpreter will emerge /, we anticipate the emergence of a hybrid type of conference/community interpreter working in both areas, at times for business entities and at other times with residents of the community, helping them in their social and personal needs and even acting as their advocates, leaving the court interpreting facet of community interpreting as an exclusive domain of sworn or official translators and interpreters. We hope this “community service” can be extended to the society as a whole, in the near future.

Concluding, we would like to mention that are about to enter into an agreement with the University Pastoral Service existing at PUC-SP to jointly offer community interpreting services not only to our University but also to the other Pastoral Services in São Paulo and Prison Pastoral Services as well. These services would be considerably useful in situations such as one last year when a Delegation from Belgium was taken to visit a number of slums and shanty towns in São Paulo. In the words of Márcio Anatoli Sousa Romeiro, the coordinator of the Pastoral Service, the visit would have been much more profitable if they had a liaison interpreter mediating the communication. This agreement comes as a very promising opportunity to expand the range of activities of community interpreting at PUC in São Paulo, which, we hope, will provide a lead for Brazil as a whole.