Professionalizing Public Service Translation and Interpreting in Spain

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to describe the situation of Public Service Translation and Interpreting in Spain in general and the FITISPos[1] (Alcalá University, Madrid) research and training programme in particular. The philosophy of the said programme is that to professionalize Public Translation and Interpreting it is necessary and fundamental to create links, first between the existing reality and the desired change through research; second, between training centres and target institutions through consciousness raising campaigns and contact; and finally between the training programme and the existing institutional reality through on-site training and internships.

Résumé

L'objectif de ce rapport est de décrire la situation de la traduction et de l'interprétariat dans les services publiques en Espagne en général, ainsi que le programme de formation et de recherche du groupe FITISPos (Université d'Alcalá, Madrid) en particulier. La philosophie de ce programme est qu'il faut créer et consolider trois liens fondamentaux pour professionnaliser l'activité : 1) entre la réalité et le changement désiré, à travers la recherche, 2) entre les centres de formation et les institutions publiques, à travers des campagnes de sensibilisation et du contact continu, 3) entre le programme de formation et la réalité des contextes institutionnels, à travers les stages.

Introduction

Public Service Interpreting and Translation (henceforth PSIT) in Spain is still far from the desired status and situation and far behind the professionalization level and service quality in pioneering countries like Sweden and Australia. When attending to foreigners whose communicative competence in Spanish is very low, public institutions still readily consent and resort to the user's family or friends or to NGO volunteers, who very often lack an optimal communicative competence in one of the interaction languages and/or appropriate training in the field of PSIT. Like in many other countries (Pöchhacker, 2004), Spanish public institutions are not able or not willing to provide funds for the training and hiring of PSIT professionals. In addition to that (or probably as a consequence) there have been practically no initiatives

taken by the academic institutions in the form of specific training. The undergraduate seminars and postgraduate specialization course offered by the University of Alcalá since 2001 and described in the present paper is one of the few initiatives taken. Other institutions offering occasionally courses the postgraduate community interpreting course at the University of La Laguna (Luis Estévez and Toledano Buendía, 2002) and the doctoral programme offered by Angela Collado at the University of Granada.

The training program at the University of Alcalá, together with the research activity of the training and research group (FITISPos) and our awareness raising campaigns and cooperation with the Spanish public services, is intended to be an effective initiative to workfor the creation of a viable professional context for PSIT. Being aware of the fact that to reach that, it is necessary to create nationally standardized and consistent training programs (both for community interpreters and translators and public service employees), code of conduct, employment strategies, deployment and quality control (Corsellis, 2002), the FITISPos group have set out not only to offer a training programme, but also (before, during and after that) to carry out relevant research, establish communication and cooperation links with local and national public institutions, and actively campaign to involve academics, working professionals and semi-professionals and institutional decision makers in a PSIT professionalizing process that does not appear to be easy.

1. Research background

Since 1999, the FITISPos research and training team have carried out several research projects into communication between the institutional staff (doctors, nurses, social workers, etc.) and foreign users. To mention just a few:

- *Estudio preliminar de la demanda de traductores e intérpretes en el área geográfica de la universidad de Alcalá y de las características de la actividad traductora* (1999-2000): A study about Public Service Translation/Interpreting needs in the region of Alcalá de Henares (Spain) and neighbouring towns.
- *Estudio para determinar la relación de las variables tipo, calidad, coste y tiempo invertido en la comunicación con la población extranjera en los servicios públicos* (2001-2002): A study of type, quality, cost and time variables in institutional communication with foreigners.
- *Investigación sobre la calidad de la comunicación con población extranjera en el Hospital Universitario de Guadalajara* (2003-2004): A study of the quality of communication between healthcare staff and foreign users at the Guadalajara Hospital.
- *La mediación intercultural en la atención sanitaria a población extranjera. Análisis de la problemática comunicativa interlingüística y propuestas de formacion en el Hospital Ramón y Cajal de Madrid* (2004- 2005) A study of the quality of communication between healthcare staff and foreign users at one of the biggest hospitals in Madrid city as well as the development of training proposals.
- *La mediación intercultural en la atención sanitaria a la población inmigrante. Análisis de la problemática comunicativa interlingüística y propuestas de formación (2004-2006).* A study of the quality of communication between healthcare staff and foreign users, and the development of training proposals.

The findings of these studies were quite significant concerning the frequency of contact between institutional staff and foreigners, the existing reality of "natural interpreting" (to use Pöchhacker's term for interpreting by relatives, friends or accompanying persons in general), the staff's perceptions of quality of communication with foreigners and their suggested solutions for communication problems.

First, more than 93% of healthcare staff surveyed have had contact with foreign users of health services (Valero, 2003). This was expected and by no means surprising given the relatively high number of non-Spanish-speaking immigrants, asylum seekers and tourists (in addition to "leisure residents", mainly German and British senior citizens in the Southern and Eastern coasts) who have migrated to or come to stay for a short or long time in the Spanish territory, especially in the late 1980's and the beginning of the 1990's. Second, the studies showed that most immigrants using public services resort to relatives, neighbours or acquaintances for linguistic assistance or simply trust their body language, which means that the institutional communication involving them as one of the participants is likely to fail, break down, give rise to miscommunication or simply turn out to be difficult for the parties involved. Third, and to prove right the latter prediction, 75% of the surveyed staff consider that communication with users through relatives or friends acting as "interpreters" involves a lot of misunderstanding, conflict and miscommunication. Finally, when it comes to solutions, 87% of the staff consider that providing written information in the immigrant's mother tongue would improve communication and understanding, and most of them think that a professional translation/interpreting service is the best way to bridge the communication gap (Valero, 2001, 2004).

2. Awareness-raising and training actions

Given the research findings above, the FITISPos team understood that to make a real contribution to improving the PSIT situation in Madrid in particular and Spain in general it was necessary to go a step (or many steps) further and undertake both a training action and an awareness raising campaign to involve institutional staff and representatives in the change and improvement process. The team, therefore, undertook two parallel courses of action:

2.1. Raising awareness among institutional staff and authorities

Convinced that introducing a change in the PSIT situation indispensably required the intervention of decision makers and the cooperation of institutional staff, the FITISPos team initiated contact with local, regional and national authorities to draw their attention to the urgent need for professional PSIT services, to make our research findings accessible to them and to suggest action to be taken to improve the situation. Thus, the team started an intense mailing campaign, invited institutional representatives to the PSIT events organized by the Alcalá University (e.g. the First International Conference on Public Service Translation and Interpreting held in 2002), and organized lectures and workshops for institutional civil servants (e.g. a course offered to the Ministry of the Interior staff specialized in immigration and asylum, in November 2003; several courses on interlinguistic mediation offered at EMSI, *Escuela de Mediadores Sociales para la Inmigración*, Madrid; some woekshops and seminar at national conferences (Expolingua Madrid 2002, Salamanca 2003). In addition to this, some public service staff members have been invited to join the research team for further research projects (e.g. the research carried out in the hospitals mentioned above). Another way of raising consciousness and involving institutions has been on-site training (students serving as trainee PSIT translators/interpreters in public institutions for a 50-hour period), which will be dealt with below.

2.2.   *Designing a PSIT training course*

To try to meet the training needs in the PSIT field and contribute to its professionalization in Spain, a PSIT Specialization Course has been designed and has been running since the academic year 2001-2002. The course was designed in a way that it would cater for both undergraduate students (or candidates without university-level education) and graduate ones: while only the latter can enrol in the whole (Postgraduate) Specialization Course, the former can enrol separately in one or more of the three Modules it consists of:
1.   Interlinguistic Communication: Introduction to Public Service Translation and Interpreting, (4 ECTS, aprox 100 hours)
2.   Healthcare Translation and Interpreting (4.5, aprox 120 hours)
3.   Legal and Administrative Translation and Interpreting (6 ECTS, aprox 180 hours).

In addition to the three Modules above, the students opting for the Specialization Course in Public Service Translation and Interpreting (20 ECTS, aprox. 500 hours) have a fourth Module, namely On-Site Training (mainly at healthcare centres, social services, schools and town halls). The student's tasks during this practical module include translation, interpreting, cultural counselling and learning about institutional procedures, always supervised by a tutor.

The decision to offer the training Modules (either altogether or separately) to both categories of training candidates was motivated by our intention to provide appropriate PSIT training to both candidates with academic qualifications, who most often lacked relevant PSIT experience, and those without high academic qualifications who did have some experience in the field. In other words, the intention of the training team has been to build on the assets of both groups and not to discriminate against either.

Taking into consideration the Spanish official statistics on immigrant linguistic and cultural communities, it was found out that the PSIT languages most needed in the local and national context were Arabic, English, Romanian, Russian, and Chinese (See http://www.opi.upco.es, web page of the *Observatorio Permanente de la Inmigración, Ministerio de Trabajo y Asuntos Sociales*). Accordingly, the course has been offered in Spanish plus one of the above languages. However, because of lack of demand on students' part for the other combinations, the course has been studied only in its Arabic, English and Romanian options, but being the other options always opened.

Since the beginning, the training programme has followed a teaching methodology that combined a theoretical background (an introduction to translation and interpreting in general, PSIT in particular, and intercultural communication), practical classroom training (role play or simulation of institutional context, written translation tasks and translation analysis, development of specific oral and writing skills, case study with audiovisual material) and on-site training. The main skills that have been focused on and given most attention have been text and discourse comprehension, text and discourse summarizing, note-taking techniques in different contexts, rephrasing, body language awareness, and effective handling of terminology according to the Public Service User and the institutional context.

2.3.   *On-site training: a combination of training and awareness raising*

As it was mentioned above, the Specialization Course includes a final Module that consists in practical training in public institutions with which the FITISPos group or the Alcalá University as a whole has signed an agreement so that the PSIT students can spend a 50-hour internship period translating authentic documents and interpreting in real PSIT encounters.

This part of the training programme serves two objectives at the same time: on the one hand, it provides the students with a valuable opportunity to put their theoretical and practical training into practice, to test the principles and guidelines of the code of conduct, or effective

intercultural communication against the reality of real-time institutional encounters, and to learn about institutional procedures and discourse through observation, contact and interaction with the staff and the users. On the other hand, the presence of PSIT trainees in public institutions raises the awareness of the staff and decision makers of the importance of the role of professional translators and interpreters for communication between institutional staff and users who do not use the mainstream or the institutional language (not only immigrants and asylum seekers coming from non-Hispanic countries, but also European residents and tourists, Spanish citizens whose mother tongue is a regional language and sign language users).

3. Pending actions on the route to professionalization

Obviously, research, training and awareness raising are not enough for the professionalization of translation and interpreting services in the public services of a country. There are pending issues that need to be dealt with mainly by the public service authorities, such as establishing or recognising a national register of PS translators and interpreters, establishing and enforcing quality and assessment standards, providing funds for in-service training for public service staff on intercultural communication and working with interpreters, providing reasonable working conditions for professional PS translators and interpreters, etc.

Other pending issues that the academic community has to deal with are the following:

- Cooperation among Spanish universities and academic institutions in general in order to create a common and unified core syllabus for PSIT training,
- Designing other training programmes in other regions of the country, especially those that have a high percentage of population likely to need PSIT services (Madrid, Barcelona, Almería, Canary Islands, etc.),
- Drawing up a common code of conduct and assessing authorities on quality standards and coordinating with them on continuous quality assessment.

The FITISPos group continues working on them.

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[1]   FITISPos = *Grupo de Formación e Investigación en Traducción e Interpretación en los Servicios Públicos,*University of Alcalá, Spain. http://www.uah.es/otrosweb/traduccion; traduccion.sspp@uah.es.