

Quality in Interpreting: the Service Providers Responsibility

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Abstract

In November 2005, Middlesex University (London) undertook a joint project with the London Borough of Haringey Interpreting and Translation Service (LBH T & I Service) to carry out a quality assessment of its panel of free-lance interpreters. The objective was to evaluate the implementation by the LBH T & I service's free-lance interpreters of professional interpreting skills and behaviours.

This paper will use the findings of the programme as the basis for an examination of the demands made upon these interpreters and for a consideration of the role of interpreting service providers in matters of training and professionalism. The paper will consider the following questions:

How is quality in interpreting defined by service end users, interpreting service providers and practitioners, and are these definitions contradictory?

What contribution can a service provider like the LBH T & I Service make to quality standards in interpreting?

Given the nature of a free-lance panel of interpreters, how effective can initiatives such as that of the LBH T & I Service be?

Can conflicting expectations of the role of the interpreter between end users and the interpreting profession itself be effectively resolved?

Résumé

In October and November of 2005, Middlesex University (London) was engaged by the Translation and Interpreting Service of the London Borough of Haringey to carry out quality assessment and in-service training of its panel of interpreters and translators. Building on an

earlier programme, this second project was motivated by concerns raised by interpreting service users about interpreters' behaviour and understanding of their role in the interaction. Our brief was to look into this and design follow up training as necessary.

Having lead both projects on behalf of the University gave me a privileged insight into this little researched area of interpreting in the UK. Particularly in the second assessment, I found myself confronted with some startling data that lead me to think further about both the role of the service provider in ensuring quality and about the peculiarities of the task faced by this panel of interpreters.

First of all, some contextual information about the London Borough of Haringey and its panel of interpreter/translators. LB Haringey is a large metropolitan borough in the North of London. It is just under 30 kms² with an estimated population of 224,500 (as at 2005) and a population density of 7,587 persons per km². According to the Commission for Racial Equality website,

“Haringey ranks as London's fourth-most diverse borough, based on the Office for National Statistics' diversity index. Some idea of how varied its ethnic make-up is can be gained from the fact that almost half of all pupils in Haringey schools speak English as an additional language.”

It goes on to say that

“The largest ethnic minority group within Haringey is Black, this group forms 20% of the total population (43,000 people), one of the highest concentrations of black people anywhere in London. There are roughly equal numbers of Black Caribbean and Black Africans; about 20,000 each. Within these groups are very high numbers of people of

particular national origins; for example, there are 2,500 people from the Democratic Republic of Congo alone.

White British people are an ethnic minority within Haringey, forming just 45% of the population. The Other White groups form about a third of all white people in the borough - more than 44,000 people. A high proportion of these are of Greek, Turkish or Cypriot descent. The borough is home to as many as 40,000 Turkish speakers, centered on the Green Lanes area near Tottenham. Nearly 15,000 people were born in either Cyprus or Turkey.”¹

This diverse ethnic and linguistic constituency is provided with interpretation and translation services by the LB Haringey Translation & Interpreting Unit using a panel of 175 active interpreters.

It is important to note, however, that in the UK context in the sector broadly referred to as Local Government, unlike the Criminal Justice system, there is no explicit arrangement to use only interpreters assessed and qualified to the national professional entry-level standard. Although lip service is paid to this as a measure of quality, in reality, many boroughs use interpreters trained to lower standards, or sometimes not trained at all. The task of ensuring standards of quality is left to the end user and their feedback; the implicit notion is that if all appears to be well, then all can be assumed to be well.

We assessed a sample of 48 interpreters from the panel. These interpreters were asked to participate in a role-play, based on an interview between a Primary School Head Teacher and an irate parent. On completion of the role-play, an assessment sheet was filled out based on

observations made by myself as the English Language interlocutor/assessor and feedback from the OL language interlocutor.

From the results of the assessment process, two features rapidly became evident: the first was that there was a wide range of behaviours on the part of the interpreters in coordinating the interaction between the two interlocutors and expressing their role in the same. The activities of dealing with interjections, misunderstandings, cultural references, ‘chunking’ of a speaker’s discourse and asking for clarification, for example, were dealt with in widely differing ways. These ranged from a dominant ‘gate-keeper’ like role, attempting to control the flow of information and interjecting regularly with explanations and observations, to one of complete passivity in the face of the communicative challenges encountered.

The second feature was the distribution of these behaviours. They ranged from what I will term ‘pre-professional behaviours’ (those interpreter behaviours suggestive of limited training and/or limited understanding of professional norms) to professional interpreter behaviours indicating a clear understanding of professional norms. Notable was the distribution across the range: with one exception, of the 48 interpreters assessed, all were bunched towards the ‘pre-professional’ end of the range. Overall, the sample was remarkable for its lack of understanding or use of professional public service interpreter norms in terms of their coordination activities and their understanding of role.

Given the training backgrounds of the interpreters assessed this feature is perhaps not surprising; very few had undergone any consistent training or assessment up to professional benchmark level. However, a further feature came to light later, in the following two day training session to which all of the assessed samples were invited. In these sessions, it became evident from what they said that the attendees were much better versed in the professional norms of

interpreter behaviour I had been hoping to find than their actual performance in the assessments suggested. Without exception, they stated that they understood the importance of using direct speech, of dealing with interjections or clarifications appropriately, and that they understood their role as a 'neutral and impartial' conduit for information². In short, as a group they resembled individuals who had learned to recite a 'professional catechism'; however, on digging deeper into their understanding of these professional norms it was evident they had no real insight into why they were important, nor any consistent intention to employ them. In many cases, they reported that they found them 'unrealistic', 'silly', 'inappropriate' or a positive hindrance to communication. Significantly, they also reported the expectations of the service provider using the interpreter as a major block to employing these albeit incompletely understood professional behaviours. They reported also a common experience of being allocated a role in the interaction by the service provider that they suspected was not entirely 'professional' but felt powerless to renegotiate or challenge.

Reflecting on the process as a whole, I can summarise my conclusions and their significance for quality standards as follows:

- The sample of interpreters presented a training background consisting of a range of more or less *ad hoc* training inputs: short courses and in-service one day workshops, lower level interpreting courses, partially completed training programmes
- This had lead to a superficial recognition of the basic tenets of interpreter role and skills, including an awareness of a code of conduct. This had not, however, been internalised to any significant degree and appeared to have little influence on actual interpreting performance

- The role of the interpreter was perceived as being dictated by the institutional service provider and responsibility for what was vaguely perceived as ‘non-professional’ interpreter behaviour was entirely delegated to them. (The fact that the investment in assessment and follow up training was initially triggered by complaints about the professional behaviour of the interpreters by these same service providers, however, suggests a more complex process at work here and one that merits further research)
- There appeared to be no common understanding of what might constitute standards of quality in interpreter performance, either among the interpreters themselves, or anecdotally, from the service providers using the interpreting service. Exactly what made for a successful interpreted interaction seemed to be a matter of negotiation between the service provider and each individual interpreter, usually on a case by case basis

I believe the implications of the above for quality standards in interpreting are enormous. Evidently, all three parties in this particular ‘triadic’ relationship, the interpreter, the T & I Service and the local authority service provider end user were working with different implicit understandings of what constitutes professional interpreting and an acceptable level of quality. While the norms of interpreter role, linguistic behaviour and professional interaction expected by the T & I Service were broadly in line with those laid down by the profession as a whole³, the panel itself, however, demonstrated at best an equivocal commitment to these professional norms. Their understanding of what constituted a ‘good’ interpretation was still based, in reality, on their own subjective assessments of what they thought was required. The institutional end users appeared to be working to a different agenda again, sometimes varying radically from council officer to officer. Data on exactly what they consider to

constitute high quality of interpretation was unfortunately not available, but the concerns raised suggest it did not chime with that of the interpreting panel.

It flows from this that a first step towards ensuring a minimum level of professional interpretation quality in this field of public life would be clear consensus among the three parties in the triad as to what constitute quality. It seems self-evident that until the T & I service, the interpreting panel and the institutional end-user are all working to the same set of norms, ensuring a benchmark quality standard of interpreting with any consistency is going to be unattainable.

The question then arises as to who needs to act first to attain this consensus. I would suggest that it is the service providers themselves, (defined as the local authority of which any individual T & I service is an agency), who have to take the lead in this matter. These larger institutional service providers need to do following:

- move the provision of quality interpreting higher up the agenda of priorities in the overall range of their activities. It seems that often, much is publicly stated about the importance of ensuring access to services across barriers of language and culture but in practice the arrangements made lack stipulations regarding basic standards of training and quality
- commit to a higher bar in terms of what is acceptable in terms of training and qualifications. As noted, the Criminal Justice System has a national agreement⁴ to use only qualified and assessed interpreters from a central national register wherever possible. This is not however the case outside of interpreting in that sector. Introducing a similar requirement or even a commitment to move towards such a

requirement by a future date, would, I believe, kick start a movement towards higher quality standards

- undertake the task of ensuring that best practice guidelines and real understanding of the professional role of the interpreter are disseminated and implemented through the different front line agencies of the public authority as a whole. It should no longer be the case that institutional end-users of interpreters have only vaguely formed ideas of what the interpreter should and should not do, how they operate and what constitutes professional or non-professional behaviour.

The cooperation between Middlesex University and the London Borough of Haringey shows one possible route by which this upgrade of quality standards could be achieved. Lateral links between T & I services and local educational institutions offering training towards the professional benchmark examinations hold out the possibility of collaboration on full pre-service and in-service training programmes. In the case of LB Haringey, from the local authority it required only a committed service manager to take the initiative and approach the University. However, the eventual fate of this collaboration underlines the need for a consistent commitment at the highest level for this process to start and be sustained. Senior officers move on or are redeployed, and like any programme that depends primarily on the motivation of a single individual, the programme often founders when that individual moves on. This is the unfortunate fate of collaborations with both LB Haringey and LB Enfield; although evaluated by the clients who bought in the University's expertise as successful and worthy of repetition, with the change of post-holder, the initiatives have stalled.

This is particularly unfortunate for two reasons. One is the high degree of need for a ‘root and branch’ upgrade of the interpreting services provided in this field of activity. Another, however, lies in the peculiarity of this particular area of interpreting activity. It struck me that this panel of interpreters, more so than their colleagues working primarily in the Health or Legal systems, were confronted on a daily basis with unusually wide range of interpreting contexts and demands. A legal interpreter can predict with some certainty the nature of the environments s/he will be working in. The lower and higher courts or the Police station are a reasonably well-defined context, as are the linguistic challenges they present. However, an average working day for a local authority interpreter might involve for example interpreting at a mental health assessment, a home visit with social services, a benefit fraud interview under caution, a parent-teacher interview and/or interpreting at a public meeting. In short, they face a higher degree of diversity of contexts and the often radically different interactional demands of these contexts. All this calls for the highest degree of professional insight and flexibility on the part of the practitioners involved. Yet, local authority interpreting in the UK context is an area receives the least attention, either academically in terms of research or in terms of investment in training and development. I believe it is high time that this ‘dark area’ of public service interpreting received the attention it deserves and the professional prioritisation it requires from the local authorities. Only this will drive up the prevailing standards of interpreting practice found therein.

¹ www.cre.gov.uk/diversity/map/london/haringey.html.

² The Conduit Model of interpreting as a paradigm of interpreter behaviour has of course been called into question by research into the interpreted interaction. See Wadensjö et al.

³ It is notable in this respect that the head of the T & I service was not herself a translator or interpreter. Her understanding of these norms was therefore based on received wisdom rather than personal experience.

⁴ National Agreement On Arrangements For The Use Of Interpreters, Translators And Language Service Professionals In Investigations And Proceedings Within The Criminal Justice System, As Revised 2007
<http://police.homeoffice.gov.uk/news-and-publications/publication/operational-policing/national-agreement-interpret.pdf>