

“Where is Interpreting heading and how can training courses keep up?”

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There are numerous interpreter training courses – more than 60 post graduate courses in Europe alone. However, they are unevenly distributed in geographical terms (it seems to be a matter of famine or feast) and the training they provide is also quite uneven in terms of standards and matching professional needs. How can and should these courses develop over the coming years?

One of the main concerns of interpreting courses is to ensure that the training provided really does prepare graduates for the interpreting market. Graduates have to be ready to work immediately in a proficient and professional way. Thus, course content is usually organised with a view to matching skills learnt with skills needed on the market.

However, this objective is being challenged by some emerging trends. This presentation considers the major changes shaping the interpreting market and the consequences for training.

Interpreting courses provide professional training. As such, their success or failure can presumably be measured by the future achievements on the interpreting market of their graduates. Yet, following a survey of recruiters, Durand claims that recruiters note a growing gap between their expectations and the graduates of training courses.

“...un écart tendait à se creuser dangereusement entre la demande des employeurs et l’offre d’interprètes produite par les filières d’enseignement » (La Relève, p3).

It is also to be noted that there are numerous applicants for interpreting posts, yet some posts are not filled. Many applicants fail free lance tests, although for these there is no fixed number of posts or quota system. Pass rates at the European Commission are about 20%. This would tend to indicate a gap between training and recruitment requirements.

Are courses managing to keep up with new trends, such as the increasing use of English or new technologies?

Increasingly, in our visual world the spoken word is supplemented by visual tools. Such changes are clearly relevant to interpreters, as they alter meeting dynamics, but also shape the content and tone of communication. More obvious changes – often predicted, but still relatively infrequent – would include video-conferencing, remote interpreting or telephone conferencing with interpretation.

These trends mean that interpreters will probably have to become more flexible and more engaged in “life long learning”. How are training courses adapting and helping the interpreters of the future? How can they provide students with the tools – language enhancement reflexes, a open-minded, flexible approach to background knowledge, as much exposure as possible to a range of authentic conference situations and material – to negotiate coming changes successfully.

Language issues:

The predominance of English in conferences and of course in the world at large is probably the single most significant issue for interpreting today. For instance, at OECD or NATO

(organisations with two official languages), English is used by nearly all speakers, with the exception of the French delegation. This inevitably colours attitudes towards interpreting and interpreters. It is not unusual for speakers to apologise for speaking a language other than English. The danger is that interpretation come to be seen as a nuisance or a source of embarrassment rather than a useful service.

International conference attendance has become for many participants a matter of routine. Most people can get by in English and many participants speak several languages fairly proficiently. Interpreters are less likely to be admired for their language skills and they are less indispensable than in the past, unless they can demonstrate that they really can make a difference by providing fast, accurate and clear interpretation at all times

“...l’interprétation est de plus en plus vue comme un luxe offert aux auditeurs pour leur confort afin de leur épargner la fatigue occasionnée par l’écoute prolongée d’une langue étrangère, comprise certes, mais au prix d’un certain effort. Or ce confort n’est apporté que par une interprétation qui présente la qualité que l’on attend d’un produit de luxe. »
(K. Déjean, 2005, p41)

Another consequence of the use of English as the predominant language in meetings is that increasingly interpreters are having to grapple with a **wide range of accents and expression modes** in that language. It has been postulated that a new “international English” emerging and, if this is so, it might require different listening and analysis skills to those called for when interpreting speeches delivered mainly by native speakers. In any event, courses must be careful to ensure that students are exposed to as much diversity as possible in terms of speech types and speakers in English. Clearly, their understanding of that language has to be as robust as possible. The following teaching tools have proven useful : Innovative language enhancement classes that focus on speech-giving conventions, student exchanges, invitations to outside speakers from various backgrounds.

Most markets are becoming increasingly **two-way** – the national language plus English, with a corresponding assumption that interpreters will cover both those directions, ie provide a **retour** into their B language. Clearly, this needs to be taken into account by trainers and affects every facet of training, right back to the initial selection process.

Another consequence of the predominance of English could well be a **reduction** over the longer term in overall demand for interpreting. In the future interpreters may have to supplement their earnings with income from other related activities.

However, it must be stressed that this prediction is not confirmed by planned future needs in International Organisations (IOs). Upcoming wave of retirements and maintenance of current language regimes for the time being actually mean that most are predicting an increase in needs and some fear severe shortages of interpreters. This is particularly the case for new languages at the EU and for the English booth generally. But recruiters also predict other needs in major languages, for instance French, German and Italian at the EU, Chinese at the UN or Portuguese in the Canadian Parliament.

More than 30% of permanent interpreters in the French and German booths at Commission are over 50 and nearly 40% at the European Parliament. Dutch at EP 57% over 50!

“Des pénuries semblent se manifester dans pratiquement toutes les langues, notamment aux Nations Unies...” (La Relève : étude prospective, C. Durand, p4)

The reported analysis of recruiters is that courses do not respond fast enough to changing language combination requirements. This is probably not due to a failure by trainers to

identify new needs, but rather to an inevitable mismatch between these needs and the training capabilities of Universities. Setting up a course for short term needs is costly and requires scarce human resources. Also numbers of suitable candidates with such languages are small. This is the consequence of education policy decisions taken by the national authorities (less emphasis on language learning in schools, for instance) and sociological factors (image and prestige of language professions) which are beyond the influence of interpreter training proper. There are also uncertainties about International Organisations' decisions on future language regimes. For instance, following EU enlargement, future developments and language requirements in the European Institutions (which is a major recruiter for many language combinations) are not entirely clear. These Institutions still uphold the principle of multilingualism, but there is increasing flexibility, with interpreting often provided only on request.

Finally, I.O.s are only one outlet for graduates. The private market is also a major source of employment and these trends are harder to predict.

Interpreter training courses face something of a predicament. They are expected to be flexible about language combinations on offer, but they face budgetary and human resource constraints. And they have to work within institutional frameworks that are not designed for rapid change. Courses cannot expand indefinitely the range of combinations. Institutional factors mean that once a combination is available it may be hard to remove it.

The Changing Status of Interpreting

More people are now exposed to interpreting at some stage. Interpreting has become a fairly banal feature of international conferences.

Interpreting requires a very high level of language proficiency, but also many other competencies, such as speed of analysis, steady nerves, broad general knowledge. Interpreters are called upon to transmit the views of leading decision-makers and experts whose ideas are often decisive, original and complex. Interpreters must convey these ideas in full, without simplification, to other leaders or experts. Unlike community interpreting, the conference interpreter is an intermediary between peers who address each other through the interpreter, but without adjusting or diluting their meaning. This implies that conference interpreters need sound general knowledge, intellectual maturity and intuition. It will be apparent from the above description that this is a tall order. And indeed, one of the problems encountered by training courses everywhere is precisely the difficulty of finding suitable candidates.

Therefore, any loss of status would be alarming.

Yet, interpreters are not optimistic. Seleskovitch, writing about the possibility of selecting the very best students and training them in a crash course, states:

“Given the rather low social standing of interpretation, it is hardly to be expected that highly gifted, bilingual if not trilingual young people endowed with a vast culture would choose interpreting as a vocation when more prestigious professions are within their reach.”

(Seleskovitch, 1999, p61).

Interpreters themselves seem to think that the profession has lost prestige. However, this is not new, as seen from the disparaging comments made by consecutive interpreters about the consequences of simultaneous when this mode was first introduced (Baigorri Jalon, 1999).

Today fears focus on the feminisation of the profession. For instance, only one quarter of members of the French region of AIIC are men. Lim writes: “One of the main areas of concern is that the number of male students compared to that of female students is very small. The status of interpreters cannot be enhanced if the only people involved in the profession are women.” (Lim, 1995, 183).

Recruitment has changed. Whereas in the past, interpreting students tended to come from families with high social status (diplomats, children of managers in multinational corporations). They now come from a wider variety of social backgrounds, due to more widespread access to travel and more opportunities to live and work abroad.

In an informal survey of colleagues, some fifty practicing conference interpreters were asked to answer the following questions:

- do you think status of interpreters has changed over the last twenty years? If so, in what way?
- Would you recommend interpreting as a career to younger acquaintances?

The results were overwhelmingly pessimistic (¹). Interpreters deplored the profession’s declining prestige and would not encourage young people in this career choice. However, younger colleagues were far more sanguine and reported fairly high job satisfaction.

Undoubtedly, interpreting has become more commonplace and more banal. The widespread use of English and of remote interpreting also change the perception of the profession and indeed the role of interpreters. Does this necessarily entail a loss of status and prestige such that quality of intake on courses will inevitably suffer?

There are a number of factors that indicate that the pervading gloom is somewhat overdone. The relative optimism of younger interpreters is worth noting. Levels of pay have held up fairly well. Interpreters have managed to retain high grades in international organisations. Interpreting posts are still ranked as equivalent to grade A managerial posts.

Above all, interpreting is still an attractive career choice with courses able to select from a large numbers of candidates with good academic qualifications and interesting backgrounds. The contribution of interpreter training courses can only be one of a number of factors in maintaining the status of the profession. However, they certainly do have a role to play in this respect, by keeping to high professional and ethical standards and by working closely with professional bodies and recruiters to ensure satisfactory working conditions. The quote above from Déjean suggests that if standards are maintained and, when appropriate, improved, interpreting can be positioned as a premium commodity.

Technology

A IAMLADP report from I.O.s identifies a number of mismatches between training and actual requirements. One of these relates to graduates’ experience with and understanding of new technologies, such as video conferencing.

New technologies permeate interpreting at a number of levels, the most easily-overlooked of which is probably preparation. Ready access to Internet has changed conference preparation and background knowledge acquisition completely. Whereas in the past interpreters would spend hours tracking down information and found it particularly difficult to obtain up-to-date

¹ Informal survey by Donovan, 2006. Results unpublished.

facts, they are now confronted with a surfeit of data. The difficulty lies not in access, but in sorting through the sheer mass of information. Courses must adjust to this change. They must draw students' attention to the intrinsic bias of Internet sources, to the advantages and (especially) the limits of on-line glossaries and to the importance of personal input. Despite these caveats, Internet is of course a useful ally in teaching interpretation. Students can use on-line resources for language enhancement purposes, to download speeches on a huge range of subjects, to prepare class topics.

Other technology-driven changes are viewed with more wariness, in particular the possible move towards more remote interpreting. This seems a very likely development for reasons of cost (saving on travelling expenses) and space (particularly given the number of booths required at the European Institutions). There are also environmental considerations, with growing concern about air travel, as evidenced in a recent advertisement (France Telecom, April 2006) which reads "remplacer une réunion par une visioconférence, c'est aussi protéger un iceberg".

By and large the profession remains unconvinced. Initially, suspicions seemed well-founded, as relatively poor quality of transmission made the interpreting task more stressful. (Mouzourakis, 1996). Now, reservations seem to be based mainly on fears that interpreters will be ejected from meetings and relegated to airless backrooms. There is a general sense that the profession must be vigilant.

This mirrors early attitudes to simultaneous interpreting which was met with hostility and suspicion on the part of many interpreters. Consecutive interpreters were highly visible in meetings and had close contacts with the conference participants. They understandably feared that the new method would place them "entirely in the background as mere cogs in a machine", as described by Baigorri Jalon, quoting a contemporary report (Baigorri, 1999, 30). This attitude persisted for some time and long after simultaneous had become the standard mode of interpretation, it was considered as less reliable and natural. Seleskovitch and Lederer give a critical assessment of SI, as an unnatural process, "exercice contre nature" (Seleskovitch and Lederer, 2002, 132).

A similar pattern of rejection, fear and distrust can be seen over a possible shift from simultaneous to remote interpretation.

Be that as it may, students need to be prepared for video conferencing and remote interpreting. Indeed, it is only if they have had some experience with these modes of interpretation and have engaged in a thoughtful exchange about their relative merits and drawbacks with trainers and classmates that they will be able to respond appropriately to requests – realistic or otherwise – to work with them later as professional interpreters. Moreover, video-conferencing could become a valuable teaching tool to share scarce trainers and speakers across training Institutions.

General Conclusions:

Given the rapid pace of change, it is more important than ever that courses be run and taught by practicing professionals who are in touch with the profession. If possible, the teaching team should be made up of practicing interpreters with a wide range of experience on different markets. However, this is only valuable if they get together regularly to pool views and discuss emerging trends and their significance for training.

On a broader level, there is a need for more cooperation : cooperation between training Institutions, whether it be to share information, for instance about language combinations, and to pool resources, but also between training Institutions and recruiters and with national education authorities.

Trainers must be open-minded, prepared to take advantage of new technologies and innovative methods, but they must also be uncompromising in their defence of high standards of professional performance.

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