



# Public service interpreting today: Critical Link 8

A conference interpreter shares her experience at a major gathering of social and public service interpreters.

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Published: August 16, 2016 Last updated: September 1, 2016

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## Critical Link 8

Edinburgh

Heriot Watt University

June 29 – July 1, 2016

With hundreds of presentations in multiple rooms, plus poster exhibits and a great networking opportunity, Critical Link 8 was, like its predecessors, a highlight on the public service interpreting calendar.

Choosing which talk to attend was not an easy matter and this is just a summary of the very few I made it to.

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## The situation today

I started out listening to **Paula Gentile (University of Trieste, Italy)** explain the results of a survey to which some of you may have contributed. Its aim was to take a snapshot of the present situation of PSI, its status and the process of professionalization. In fact a double survey was launched in 2014 and 2015 looking at public service interpreters (PSIs) on the one hand and conference interpreters (CIs) on the other, taking into account education, remuneration, use of mass media, status and prestige, etc.

It turns out that PSIs are generally younger than CIs, but still are mostly female. Fewer PSIs have Masters degrees in interpreting, but many CIs also turn to public service interpreting which is seen to be more 'social'. I suspect that's also because there has been a downturn on the conference interpretation market and less demand for multilingual teams in tough economic times. Court and police interpreters generally thought they had more status than health service interpreters, although in Canada and Norway there seemed to be more status in health and social service interpreting. And, no real surprise: the men had more self-confidence than the women! Asked whether they would recommend the profession to their children, more PSIs said 'yes' where the CIs said 'no'.

PSIs saw their role as 'facilitators of communication', few as 'cultural mediators' – and few thought of themselves as 'invisible' actors in communication. Whilst remuneration remains pretty low

everywhere, it nevertheless appears that younger interpreters have a more positive view of the profession than older ones. And the majority thought that professional associations should play a more active role to improve the status (and therefore the working conditions, pay, etc.) of PSIs.

So, pending an in-depth socio-economic study of new developments on the labour market, it seems the girls need to buck up their self-confidence and everyone needs to lend a hand to the associations who are desperately trying to professionalise PSI.

## **The practitioners point of view**

Following Paula's presentation came **a panel with Angela Sasso** (President of Critical Link International, Canada), **Paula Gentile** (University of Trieste, Italy), **Maria Aguilar Solano** (Pompeu Fabra University, Barcelona, Spain) and others, looking at the state of the field in PSI from the practitioners' point of view.

**Paula** detailed her earlier findings: the men tending towards legal and police interpreting and the women to healthcare, with young women working in asylum and social services. Since many cannot make a living working solely in these fields, PSI is not a full-time occupation and many also work as translators, teachers or lecturers. Few work as volunteers, but when they do it's often in health care and usually in non-regulated countries. Only in Norway did interpreters say they were adequately paid. But the majority of respondents thought the profession was moving in the right direction, that more interpreters would be needed, and therefore visibility would increase along with professionalisation, leading to better pay and working conditions.

One word I found missing was 'solidarity', without which it's difficult to create a profession based on common rules, ethics, etc. But maybe I'm being old-fashioned.

**Angela** reminded us that one big difference across countries – not only in PSI – is the question of regulation and certification by an official body through legislation and professional memberships, where Canada has made great strides. We then heard interesting examples, e.g. from the Cairo Community Interpreting Project born of the needs of migrants, asylum-seekers and refugees, where UNHCR and NGOs only use (self-)trained interpreters from the 'Persons of Concern', i.e. refugee/migrant community, who obtain a 'blue card' as interpreters and where elsewhere pools of interpreters are being created. But we also heard the disturbing news of increased threats to interpreters from their own community in Egypt, and the arrest, detention and deportation of some from migrant communities in SE Asia.

## **Certification**

Next up came **the International Network for Language Certification for Interpreters (INLCI)** presented by **Keith Moffit** (Chartered Institute of Linguists, UK), **Pascal Rillof** (Flanders Integration Agency, Belgium), **Leonardo Doria da Souza** (IMDI, Norway), and **Elizabeth Abraham** (Critical Link International, Canada). This was announced as "*a new, collaborative network at international level which has as its focus the recognition, accreditation and/or certification of translators and interpreters*", and its purpose as being "*to create an informal network of specialists from language certification organisations (and related assessment fields) to work together on development and to resolve issues common in the field*". The abstract pointed out that "*alongside practical collaboration there may be opportunities for joint research, shared standard setting, bidding for funding or other activities where economies of scale are critical*". The idea had been launched as an informal task force at the **ENPSIT (European Network of Public Service Interpreters and Translators)** meeting in Paris in 2015.

After a general introduction by Elizabeth Abraham, **Keith Moffit** talked briefly about the chaos created in the UK by the government decision to outsource court and legal interpreting to a private company and explained the role of the Chartered Institute of Linguists (CIL), which is not a trade union but a body striving to increase quality in the sector and to lobby and advise government. It has its own standards on education, training, quality (best practice) and complaints process. The National Register of PSIs in the UK had been a subsidiary of CIL but privatisation had set it aside.

**Leonardo da Souza** explained that IMDI is a government service dealing with asylum and related issues, and that Norway has a national register of interpreters with 4-5 levels. In 2019 Norway is to promulgate an 'Interpreting Act' on access to the profession.

**Pascal Rilof** said that the Flanders Integration Agency has existed since 2003 providing training, standards and tests for interpreters. The Belgian (Flemish) government is responsible for integration and promulgated a law on integration and interpretation in 2013 stipulating that certified interpreters must be used unless none were available. Four government agencies are concerned with the provision of interpreters and have access to the registry and information about the interpreters. They also exchange assessors with the Dutch, e.g. for less-common languages. He emphasised that his own network, ENPSIT, supported this new INLCI network.

At an earlier ENPSIT meeting we heard that it was not entirely in agreement with the recent guidelines on PSI produced by ISO, so this new network could be a move to 'correct' what are seen as the failings of the ISO negotiations. There did, however, seem to be some dissension about putting all PSI branches together; the AIIC Court and Legal Committee prefers their area of concern to remain apart from the general accreditation procedure, and we shouldn't forget the strides made by EULITA in this field in Europe. INCLI had put forward an idea to use the European Social Fund for the creation of a project to harmonise PSI testing and accreditation in the EU but it had not been carried forward.

Whilst the idea of pooling knowledge is always good, national accreditation seems necessary before international accreditation can ensue - and whilst regional endeavours move on if some basic differences can be solved, it will no doubt take some time to work out an international solution. Who would supervise it, provide funding, test the interpreters, etc? A mammoth task which AIIC looked into a few years ago for conference interpreting but decided not to pursue.

## **Voluntary and non-professional interpreting**

Another interesting joint presentation concerned the exploration of "**the macro-social context of voluntary and non-professional interpreting: alternative approaches?**" headed by **Maria Aguilar Solano** (Pompeu Fabra University, Spain) and **R.Lazaro** (University of Alcalà, Spain), with **Heidi Salaets** (Belgium), **Bernd Meyer** (Germany), **Michal Schuster** (Israel), **Robert Pollard** (USA), **Yvonne Fowler** (UK) and **Katherine Allen** (USA).

As the abstract stated: "*These often untrained practitioners are often viewed as 'intruders' who endanger the status of the profession. The lack of financial investment on professional interpreting services, the nature of certain public sectors (i.e. healthcare sector) where there is an immediate demand for linguistic mediation, or the lack of national standards regarding the provision of public service interpreting, among others, continue to encourage these social practices despite the alleged 'poor' quality of the interpreting services provided by these interpreters (Meyer 2012; Meyer et al; 2010) ... However, research on voluntary and non-professional interpreting cannot be approached from such a simplistic point of view ... their essential contribution to society as providers of an otherwise disregarded service, their eventual acquisition of professional traits through practice (Valero-Garcés 2006) ... make voluntary and non-professional interpreting a rich area for*

*investigation.* ”

**Katherine Allen** spoke of ‘just-in-time’ training (a concept taken from military protocols) to provide help in global health and natural disasters where interpretation is not generally built into the scenario. A 4-hour training could be given for the provider and the interpreters, as was the case for the US Military Global Health Response or the Medical Mission to Indigenous Regions of Mexico. She spoke of laminated pocket guides (which reminded me of our own [AIIC Field Guide for Interpreters in Conflict Zones](#)), and the need always for a coordinator of language services.

We heard of a volunteer service of interpreters in Israeli hospitals, where one wondered whether perhaps a non-professional yet not totally ‘volunteer’ service couldn’t be provided. No clear distinction was made between ‘volunteer’ and ‘non-professional’ in this debate, although it was pointed out that professional interpreters might sometimes offer their services free of charge, i.e. as a volunteer, and that non-professionals were not always ‘volunteers’ but simply found themselves fulfilling an immediate need, e.g. as children interpreting for their parents or refugees interpreting for their co-refugees.

**Yvonne Fowler** opened with a quotation from Brian Harris about whether to try to professionalise everyone or not – and reminded us that many applicants who had failed to obtain the Diploma in Public Service Interpreting in the UK were nevertheless practicing. What should we do about them? Her conclusion was that it’s nevertheless possible to provide some training, whether to volunteers working in the Bosnian war or language students sent out from universities to work. Often, she noted, there was not a lot of difference between ‘professionals’ and ‘non-professionals’ (perhaps depending on the definition?). Experience would help them and training for specific fields could be successful but needed to emphasise that the interpreters must recognise their limitations. Or, as we say in AIIC, even a professional should decline an assignment for which they know they are not qualified.

## **Conflict and Migration**

My last visit was to a panel on “**Conflict and Migration – Times of Turmoil: Being Heard**”, with **Rohini Sharma Joshi** in the chair (Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Manager at Trust Housing Association, UK), Det. Chief Inspector **John Peaston** (Police Scotland), **Jim Laird** (Refugee Integration Coordinator, Human Trafficking Lead, Inverclyde Health and Social Care Partnership), Chief Inspector **Martin Gallagher** (Police Scotland), **Elodie Mignard** (Refugee Service Manager, Scottish Refugee Council), **Elahe Zial** (SRC volunteer), and **Maya Hess** (Red T, USA).

Detective Chief Inspector **John Peaston** was deployed in 2004 to Iraq to help develop the Iraqi police service on the basis of his experience in serious crime, counter terrorism, etc. He spoke of the initial difficulty he faced to find and select interpreters whose linguistic, cultural and religious backgrounds differed from his own. Some had worked for the military and basic assessments had been made there, but assessing skills and quality was difficult – especially since his own broad Scottish accent had caused one of the first candidates to flee in horror. Perhaps I should point out here that some of the international audience in Edinburgh obviously had the same difficulty in understanding these panelists, most of whom were from Scotland. Even I had to listen very hard!

In the context of a resurgence of tribal identity, he underscored that everyone is under stress and – as we all know – introducing a humorous note through interpretation to try to relieve that tension was a very difficult undertaking!

**Jim Laird** has many years of experience in working with refugees, asylum seekers and human trafficking victims, and spoke of his positive experience working with interpreters. He also stressed, however, the difficulty of finding interpreters with the right languages in Scotland, despite the fact

that more than 90 different nationalities are represented in Glasgow. In 1999 he had been advised to take his own interpreter to Kosovo where he needed to move around the country. In Afghanistan he found that the interpreters spoke good English, but it was not always easy to find female interpreters who were needed to accompany women to medical visits where the men were not allowed. And, as a member of a Council of Europe delegation on human trafficking, he recalled the surprise of one interpreter at finding himself interpreting between the delegation and the President of Afghanistan. Yes, sometimes interpreters get more than they bargained for.

Chief Inspector **Martin Gallagher**, perhaps somewhat diplomatically, spoke of poor interpreting up until 2000, after which interpreting was outsourced to a private contractor and improved (not quite the same story we've heard about from colleagues!). But he did provide a couple of examples of situations where the presence of interpreters was vital either to obtain a confession to a crime or to explain to a foreign family the sad circumstances of the death of their child. As he said, the police have coping mechanisms for stress and trauma, but the interpreters do not. He was particularly concerned that interpreters working with unaccompanied child refugees should be reassured and informed of the implications of their work.

**Elodie Mignard's** role is to ensure refugees' access to quality services and enable them to fulfill their potential. Something to rejoice about in Europe today! She stressed the need for refugees to know and exercise their rights – including the right to an interpreter – which meant that it was also necessary for her and her colleagues to learn how to work with interpreters. She noted that although some refugees have the potential to work as interpreters, their English is often insufficient and they need support and training. Very significantly she also mentioned that refugee interpreters are not always trusted by their community, and this was one good reason for sometimes using telephone interpreting, where neither the interpreter nor the client would know each other's identity – a sobering thought, especially for those of us brought up on the ethic that we should make no personal gain from our work. But 'power' – even linguistic power – can corrupt.

**Elahe Zial** confirmed the problem of being torn between communities, which she experienced when she started working as an interpreter and was pressured by her own community to provide information to which she was privileged through her work.

The final speaker was **Maya Hess** of Red T, speaking as the voice of interpreters in conflict areas waiting for visas to escape persecution as 'traitors' in their homeland, threatened with death and living in hiding, or making their way with other refugees to an uncertain future in Europe or elsewhere. We had given a joint presentation on this subject at an earlier panel and AIIC members will be aware of our cooperation with Maya and with other international language associations to try to help these interpreters.

## **Working together**

It takes time to create a profession. PSI is relatively new but growing rapidly on markets which are still often disorganised and underfunded. It is important that meetings like this one bring practitioners together; it was perhaps easier for conference interpreters, always working in teams at large international gatherings, to meet, get to know each other and organise. Gradually, however, PSI associations have been formed and initiatives taken which will hopefully bring recognition, status, and better working conditions and pay. That was, at least, what the participants at CL8 were striving for.

Linda FITCHETT. "Public service interpreting today: Critical Link 8". *aiic.net*. August 16, 2016. Accessed February 21, 2020. <<https://aiic.net/p/7733>>.