

Alexandra Panagakou

Outline of a new skill profile for interpreters as language professionals in the EU

Dear Mr President of EFNIL, Mr Van Hoorde,
Dear members of EFNIL,
Dear Mr Tender of the Estonian Language Institute,
Ladies and gentlemen,

I would like to start off by thanking you personally and on behalf of my Director General, Ms Florika Fink Hooijer, for inviting DG Interpretation, DG SCIC, to address this conference. SCIC participates regularly in your conferences. I am particularly happy to be here to give a presentation on the topic of Languages and Economy but even more importantly I look forward to listening to you and taking part in the discussions because I think that these exchanges are very useful. I have the honour to be accompanied by my colleague, Ms Merje Laht, the Head of the Estonian unit in DG SCIC and we are at your disposal for any questions in the discussions and at other opportunities during the conference.

Before I begin, I would like to underline that, rather than being a finished, definitive position, my presentation on new skills for interpreters at European Union Institutions is practically work in progress. It is, therefore, my personal opinion and does not represent the official position of DG SCIC. Secondly, I would like you to understand the perspective from which I am talking. I am not going to do a presentation as an academic or a researcher. I will rather explain my view as a manager of interpreters, a recruiter of interpreters, an employer of interpreters. To narrow down this perspective even more, please note that I will concentrate on new skills for **conference interpreters** in the multilingual environment in the EU and Europe although I will touch upon other interpretation settings, such as public service and legal interpreting.

I consider that the question of the evolution of the skills of language professionals is an important element in the discussion of the relationship between languages and economy. Interpreters' skills are very important for DG SCIC because – like our sister DG, DG Translation, whose representatives you heard before – our *raison d'être* is excellence in the service we provide. The EU is unique among international organisations (think about the UN, NATO, IMF etc) in recruiting language professionals for all EU languages as all 24 official languages of EU Member States are also official languages of the EU.¹ We are

¹ Art. 22 of the Charter of the Fundamental Rights of the EU, Articles 20 and 24 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the EU, Council Regulation 1/1958.

accountable to European taxpayers, who actually fund us, to provide excellent interpretation services for the European Commission. It is DG SCIC's interpreters who work at all the meetings the Commission runs as the executive body of the EU (in order, for instance, to agree on how to implement EU legislation or to check whether European funds were well used). DG SCIC's interpreters also interpret at the meetings of the Council of Ministers (one of the two legislators in the EU) and so contribute to the creation of EU laws which apply to our daily lives as EU citizens, but also at the meetings of the European Council (when you see the leaders and Heads of State meeting in Brussels, a historic meeting is actually taking place next week as you know) it's my colleagues, DG SCIC's interpreters, who provide the interpretation. In fact, Merje will be in the booth there next week.

Secondly, I consider that the discussion about new skills is necessary because the interpreters' working environment, the meetings where we work, are changing. Mr Kelam has just described a meeting where 40 speeches were given in different languages in the space of two hours! This is a new way of taking the floor and speaking at a meeting or a conference. As meetings change, our customers' expectations of what interpreters should do are also changing. As I said, we are committed to excellence. So, we have the obligation to provide excellence in the challenging new professional environment as well.

Referring to new skills as a concept does not mean that what we have traditionally used as the basis of our recruitment process is not necessary any more. Far from it. Interpreters always need to be able to interpret the message, the meaning, the ideas of the speaker from a number of languages (in a system with 24 official languages) into what we call, technically, their active language, which is usually their mother tongue. For instance, when I worked as an interpreter full time I worked from seven languages into Greek. Interpreters need to analyse the message fast, find ways to synthesise, anticipate, adapt to the register, have excellent communication skills and finally transmit what the speaker wants to say. They need to know their languages at a very high level and – crucially – to understand the culture in which they operate but also the culture in which their clients function. It is a kind of multiple localisation, as they operate in more than one cultural environment, each with its own rules and systems, and they need to move smoothly from one to the other and facilitate communication and understanding.

As employers, we select and recruit on the basis of this skill set. We developed it organically over the years but we have managed to stabilise and standardise it. This is why interpretation skills can be taught and improved – not only with experience but also through teaching. We also have advanced systems of life-long learning – necessary in a system of 24 official languages – so that our interpreters can extend their language combinations.

However, what we discover is that already within this important skill set, there are gaps between what the economy – employers and clients – expect and what

young language graduates/professionals supply, such as gaps in their knowledge of passive languages at the required level, in their use of the active language and in general culture. I consider that it is in our common interest to understand why these gaps exist and what can be done so that young language professionals are closer to the level demanded by the economy. Possible paths to explore include methods to strengthen the correct use of the mother tongue, enhancing the study of foreign languages to deepen knowledge by integrating cultural elements and, possibly, some specialised study in the foreign language, such as in economics, law, or administrative procedures etc. Our young recruits should have a good understanding of how language is used at various registers. In other words, we have to ensure that when training for the profession they are aware of and are ready to deal with the communicative power of language.

Going a step further, I would like to address how the new skill set, which is outlined on the horizon, is generated by changes in the working environment. We are all, interpreters included, moving into a globalised world where – at least as far as international conferences are concerned – there is a trend for English to dominate as a *lingua franca*. The issue will not disappear after Brexit as English will remain an official EU language. This does not make interpretation superfluous, quite the opposite. For various reasons, both practical and more theoretical in nature, such as the need for excellent communication but also accessibility for all citizens regardless of their linguistic skills in foreign languages, transparency and – finally and importantly in the political context, democratic legitimacy – interpretation is necessary. But the economy asks for what I call “polyvalent interpreters”. This is a general term – and a loan from French – to mean interpreters who can interpret equally well into a second active language, into their “retour” language, as we say in the professional jargon. To paraphrase Umberto Eco, if translation is the language of Europe, then the European language of interpretation is the “retour”. Depending on the market where an interpreter operates, this “retour” language should be one of the so-called widely spoken languages, such as English, French, German or Spanish. But it can be – and should be – the language of the country when an interpreter works locally. This is an important – I would even say indispensable – requirement for interpretation in other settings, apart from conferences. In Public Service Interpreting, at the courts for legal interpreting and in health care, interpreters usually provide bidirectional interpreting between languages A and B. These are forms of interpreting which are becoming increasingly professionalised and where training at universities which train interpreters is starting to boom. The way in which these language professionals study their two languages before they become interpreters and bring them to the required level is, in my opinion, an important area of research.

Still, in the area of conference interpreting, we would also need more interpreters with a good second active language. This is a kind of revolution in the EU Institutions which have operated on the basis of working into the mother tongue.

But market needs have changed. So, here again at the time of professional training, the study of the best “passive” language should be different, deeper and enhanced, so as to allow the interpreter to be able to use it actively. Undoubtedly, this requires a lot of work and experience as well as linguistic and cultural immersion.

To move to the outer circle of the new skill set, I would extend the polyvalence of conference interpreters to other non-linguistic skills. It is clear that interpreters need to be able to work with technology. Ever since the first simultaneous interpretation equipment was installed, interpretation has been dependent on the technology used. However, now, interpreters need to adapt to technological change in real time as it is now disrupting traditional delivery models of conference interpreting in many different ways (e.g. speech recognition, distance interpreting). Language professionals have to be ready to deal with this disruption. They need to use technology as an ally to improve their skills and concentrate on providing the added value in communication and real understanding expected from the interpreter.

Moreover, interpreters need to be trained in and develop what is often characterised as soft skills: flexibility, customer-orientation, teamwork. In addition (and in particular for freelance interpreters), entrepreneurial skills (branding, marketing, accounting) are required and absolutely necessary. These skills have usually been left to be acquired through professional experience. Interpreters and their recruiters (at least at the institutional level) have focused on the linguistic and interpreting skills. I think that this should change and professional training should provide at least the basics in these other skills.

Naturally, the EU Institutions should do their own homework and adapt their selection of interpreters to the new skills they need. We are not there yet. This work is a common endeavour (of professionals, trainers and employers) to ensure the future of the profession by considering the needs of the economy. Languages are a vital component of our social and economic life and language professionals should be enabled to offer excellent professional services to our citizens.

Bibliographical information

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