

‘Profession’ is a Cultural Concept: Training new arrivals

JAN CAMBRIDGE
Institute of Linguists, United Kingdom

Abstract:

Public service interpreting is different in significant ways from other branches of the interpreting profession. Factors related to the type of discourse involved, and the interpreter’s footing within the triad, place pressures on her which can lead to serious errors in output. Interpreters entering this branch of the profession need to be made aware during their training of, for example: 1) Interlocutor roles, as they affect the Impartial Model of interpreting; 2) Issues of ‘face’, and how they can damage interpreter performance; 3) The questioning strategies built into the very specialised form of transactional discourse used in western medicine, and the public services in general; in both the intercultural and the inter-disciplinary sense. 4) The importance of paying attention to register, especially with emotional language. As the British Immigration Authorities increase the training and accreditation of their panel of interpreters these issues have to be communicated in a very short space of time to a very large number of interpreters. The ideas inculcated in native-born British people about what professionalism means, must be communicated across the barriers of language and culture. Some of the trainee interpreters are completely new to interpreting. Others have been working in immigration for some time. Almost all come from cultural backgrounds outside Britain, and many have not been in the country for very long.

Scope and aims of interpreter training for IND / IAA¹

In recent time, the British Immigration Authorities have found it necessary to up skill their interpreter panels. Part of the continuum of change, for public service interpreting in the UK, is that the various public service institutions move at their own pace towards addressing issues of quality control in interpreting. Representatives of the Home Office (our Ministry of Justice) have long been members of the Legal Services Advisory Group, to whom our National Register owes such a debt of gratitude for its hard work in developing the NRPSI². Their decision to insist on some level of training for interpreters on their panel is relatively recent.

Put very simply – since I cannot speak for the immigration authorities, but only as someone involved in delivering training – their interpreters are assessed at level 4, which is the same level as the DPSI³. This assessment, however, only covers immigration work, and does not include

any sight translation or translation element. This is why these interpreters are listed in the Limited Assessment category of the Register. Once they have passed that assessment they are offered domain-specific professional briefing and encouraged to take a DPSI course at their own expense.

This training consists of a 2-day briefing seminar, which covers all the major issues that are taught in a well-constructed DPSI course. I have been involved in delivering these briefings for 3 or 4 years now, and have delivered them to a hundred or so interpreters. Many of them are completely new both to the United Kingdom and to interpreting. Many others have been living in UK and engaged in interpreting for the Home Office for some time. Some have a very high level of education in their home countries, some do not. A few are British natives, like myself.

Training issues

1. The idea of profession

Such a short course can throw certain training issues into sharp relief. If you ask a class whether they see themselves as professionals, they will usually say that they do. Ask what the words 'profession' and 'professional' mean to them, and you'll hear replies like "you can charge more", "service with a smile", "something you do for a living". Ask for ideas about what occupations count as professions, and the list will be likely to include doctors, plumbers, dentists, hairdressers, lawyers, builders and so on (though, oddly, it rarely includes police officers). More or less anyone who is perceived as having received work-related training is seen as a professional. If we are trying to engender a commitment to professional good conduct, in British society's understanding of that phrase (and we are), then it becomes necessary to teach these ideas as a discrete part of the course. Clearly, in a full Diploma course the matter can be dealt with in a more diffuse manner, infusing every class at some level. But in two days, there is no time for subtlety.

So, here's a quick look at some definitions:

"Profession" and "Professional"

Extracted from *Collins Concise Dictionary*

Profession:

- An occupation requiring special training in the liberal arts or sciences esp. one of the three learned professions, law, theology or medicine.
- The body of people in such an occupation.
- An avowal or declaration.

Professional:

- Engaging in an activity as a means of livelihood.
 - A person who belongs to one of the professions.
 - A person who engages for his livelihood in some activity also pursued by amateurs.
 - A person who engages in an activity with great competence.
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“Profession” and “Professional”

Extracted from Spanish Royal Academy’s *Diccionario de la Lengua Española* - (My translation)

Profession: (DRAE)

- Act and effect of professing
- Employment, faculty or office which a person has and exercises for payment.

Professional:

- Said of a person who carries out any activity, including illegal ones, from which he makes a living.
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There’s a progression of ideas, from the idea of the professional bricklayer who earns his living doing something that he’s very skilful at, to the idea of the legal or healthcare professional – or interpreting professional – who signs up to high standards of qualification and codes of conduct in order to protect the vulnerable end user and, coincidentally, the professional group as a whole. We see that, in Spanish, even engaging in illegal activity, if we earn our living by it, is included in ways of being a professional. I’d say that’s true in English as well: “professional car thief”, “professional debtor”, “professional conman”. So there is some disparity between the ideas included in the concept of “a profession” and the general acceptance of the meaning of “being a professional”. Which is why I think the definition included in the Aequitas report is useful, and I always give it as a handout to my students.

A profession is defined as a group of people who share a common expertise and ‘profess’ to a code of ethics and conduct, which is in the interest of their clients, colleagues and body of knowledge and which goes beyond the self-interest of the individual practitioner.

Aequitas. Access to Justice across Language and Culture in the EU, p.147

2. The impartial model – implementation at the sharp end

I’m sure you’re all very familiar with the Impartial Model of Interpreting (see below) In this model the interpreter’s role is to act as ‘alter ego’ or ‘the other self’ for each speaker in turn. Her purpose is to try to put the two main interlocutors on the same footing as they would be on if they shared a language. The intention is to have the same effect on a listener as the speaker intended.

The impartial model of interpreting

Interpreters

- Do not give personal advice or opinions
 - Do not add or omit parts of the message
 - Do maintain strict confidentiality
 - Do abide by a strict code of ethics and good practice
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What does it take to do all that? First of all, in British public service settings at any rate, the common occupational discourse style is transaction. But here the power dynamic is inverted and the conversation is supplier-led, not client-led. For the service provider this is the stuff of everyday life and they have probably stopped noticing it, if they ever thought about it at all. Tompenaars⁴ describes culture as being like an onion and says that the “core beliefs” that drive our reactions to the world are those at the very centre of the onion. They are not external factors such as dress,

architecture or folklore; they are not deeper attitudes such as our laws or courtesy behaviours. They are more fundamental than that.

The Solutions to three universal problems that mankind faces distinguish one culture from another. The problems – peoples' shared relationships to time, nature and other human beings – are shared by mankind. Their solutions are not.

Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, *Riding the Waves of Culture*, p 28

Many British public service users find this difficult to cope with; clients from other cultural backgrounds need to have the Rules of Engagement in these conversations made explicit to them at the outset, especially in an asylum application interview, where the client may feel out of control and very scared. Interpreters must always be alert to the possibility of misunderstandings arising from the very questioning strategies engendered by this discourse style.

2.1. Face

Explaining the idea of 'face', and therefore the implications of 'losing face', starts from the work of such sociolinguists as Brown and Levinson⁵. They wrote that courtesy behaviour (which is designed to protect each other's face) is a universal, but that its manifestation is not. 'Face' represents our sense of self-worth, autonomy, freedom from imposition, and of being respected; threats to 'face', in British culture, include such activities as asking for very personal information ("how much do you earn/ drink / weigh?") giving direct instructions ("sit down there") making direct criticism ("I don't think you did a good job there").

If an interpreter is failing to maintain their professional distance, and stay in role within the interpreting triad, it is just as likely that their own 'face' will be threatened as either of the main interlocutors' face will. These are precisely the circumstances in which messages can be changed or parts of them left out, in a – probably inadvertent – attempt to protect the individual and collective face of interpreter and client.

Supposing a doctor says to his patient: "tell me Mrs. Fulana, have you taken any medicine from the chemists for this stomach complaint?" And supposing Mrs Fulana replies, "No. I went to the shaman before I left my country but what he gave me didn't work so I've come to see you." If the interpreter is taking part as a full interlocutor in her own right, she may feel that the doctor will think her people simple and will either laugh at them or be angry. So she might say: "No. This is the first time I've been to the doctor". This might be true, but it's not what the lady said. Not "alter ego". And not only that, now we have a patient who is taking a herbal preparation of some kind, the doctor doesn't know that, and is about to prescribe a drug.

2.2. Emotion

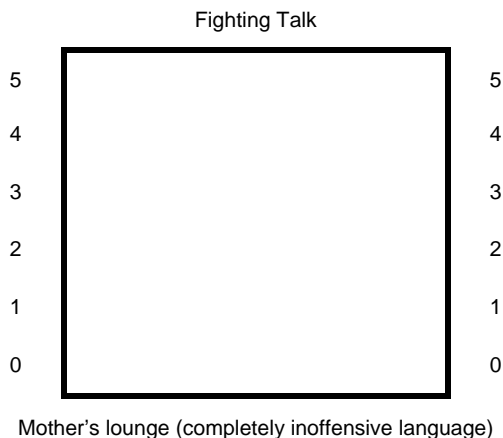
The interpreter's face, and ability to act as alter ego come under even greater strain unless they've been prepared in class to handle emotion. I mean other people's emotion and the ways they choose to express it. In any public service setting, where our non-English speaking client is likely to be feeling vulnerable, the emotional content of a message is an especially important component of it. Any doctor, police officer or other member of a caring profession will want to be made aware of this. In immigration settings it often occurs as part of reported speech.

- **Immigration officer to asylum seeker:** “What was it that finally drove you to leave your country?”
- **Asylum seeker:** “Four men came to where I worked. They dragged me into the street, and beat me and humiliated me. They said terrible things to me.”
- **Immigration officer:** “What did they say”.
- **Interpreter (for asylum seeker):** They said I'm horrible person and my mother isn't married.

No they didn't. They did not say that. And that does not convey the level of threat and intimidation involved. It is not faithful to the principle of same effect. It isn't good interpreting. But very many of the interpreters I work with will say, “but I was brought up in a good home, and I never use language like that. I couldn't!”

But they are not your words. As the interpreter you are the relay. I always say to them – this is a rude profession. That doesn't make you a bad person. But if you can't say “penis” and “discharge” in the same sentence without bursting into tears you're in the wrong job. So new interpreters need equipment; they need linguistic resources with which to confront these situations. So we do swearing lessons. Now, there is a grammar to swearing. I'm sure you knew that. And therefore there is an approach to its transfer that can help you to develop a small reserve of expressions in your other language, or both your languages, so that you are able to deliver the full emotional content. I call it the Rudeness Register, or Insult Index. It's a framework to enable new interpreters to think about the problem.

3. Rudeness Register



Semantic Equivalence – Emotional Weight – Pragmatic Function

There are 3 elements of any emotional utterance that you could try to match: 1) semantic equivalence, 2) emotional weight and 3) pragmatic function. In other words how rude is it?, (emotional weight); this is vitally important. And what sort of phrase is it? Is it an exclamation, a descriptor, or name-calling? For example, I called a taxi one day, in Madrid. The young man approached my suitcase to put it in the boot, and I warned him that the case was heavy. He didn't take me seriously and tried to pick it up. The actual weight of the case caused him to exclaim,

¡coño, qué maleta! which I would set at level one on the rudeness register (for Spain, though not, perhaps for Latin America). An equivalent (British) English exclamation might be, “Bloody hell!” If, however, we look for semantic equivalence then the English word is “cunt”, which is a) name calling, and b) off the scale of rudeness, at the fighting talk end. The moral of the story is, that if that phrase were interpreted using semantic equivalence as a guide, the taxi driver could find himself in a fight he didn’t deserve and wasn’t expecting. The only two variables worth trying to match here are the second two.

4. Register: perceptions of intelligence and education (persona)

There is an aspect of getting the register right that has particular relevance for immigration work. It can be a huge challenge, but we have to try our best and if all else fails us we must intervene and make the point as a cultural issue. Let us imagine that you, the reader, are an immigration officer interviewing an asylum seeker. And let’s say that this man comes from the place ‘where God lost his hat’. In other words it’s so far away from anywhere, that even God can’t remember where he left it. So, this man is a normally intelligent and competent individual but not accustomed to leaving his home town, or to living in big cities. His language is unsophisticated and not formally educated. If I express everything he says to you in grammatically perfect, erudite and sophisticated English with complex constructions - who will you think you’re talking to? How will you perceive this person? Maybe you’ll think he’s a university professor or someone high up in government. And maybe that will mean that you will disbelieve his claim to have been deceived in some way that you think only a fool would fall for. If I had been true to the register of his speech, you might well have believed him, having formed a more realistic impression of ‘persona’.

The whole tone of the way this man speaks is forming a part of your opinion of him and his credibility, all the way through the conversation. First impressions are very hard to undo. The reverse is true as well. The erudite and sophisticated asylum seeker, using elegantly turned language who is rendered into English by someone whose English is not good, will inevitably be seen to some extent as less intelligent than they are. It is one of the major frustrations of operating in a second language to feel that one is not expressing oneself at one’s true intellectual level. That can be tiring and tiresome. In this setting that can also do real harm.

Conclusion:

The most effective way for an interpreter to serve either or both of their clients is to remain at a professional distance from both parties and enable the service provider to do their job well, eliciting the needs of their client as they are trained to do. They will find it much easier to maintain their own equilibrium and enable each of the main interlocutors to speak with their own voice. It is not the interpreter’s role to make value judgements about the content of other people’s messages or the words they choose to convey them. It is the interpreter’s role to convey the whole of the message, emotion and all, fully and faithfully in the style of the original.

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- 1 Immigration and Nationality Directorate and Immigration Appellate Authority, respectively
 - 2 National Register of Public Service Interpreters
 - 3 Diploma in Public Service Interpreting
 - 4 Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, "Riding the Waves of Culture", p 28)
 - 5 Brown and Levinson, 1978. "Some Universals in Language Usage" in E. N. Goody, (Ed) in Questions and Politeness, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.