

# The Status of Conference Interpreters: A Global Survey into the Profession

PAOLA GENTILE  
Università di Trieste  
paola.gentile@phd.units.it

## ABSTRACT

The study of status has so far received scant attention as a research topic in Interpreting Studies. Although several authors refer to conference interpreting as “one of the fairest and loftiest occupations in the world” (Herbert, 1952: 3), no empirical investigation has been carried out so far to assess the validity of the myths attached to the profession. Even though the majority of studies have focused almost exclusively on the status of translators, an empirical study carried out by Dam and Zethsen (2013) revealed that conference interpreters do not place themselves at the top of the status continuum, which means that conference interpreters’ considerations on status do not correspond to the assumptions found in literature about the high standing of the interpreting profession. This paper illustrates the findings of a global survey addressed to conference interpreters worldwide, filled out by 803 respondents, whose objective was to assess how conference interpreters perceive their occupational status and how they believe that conference interpreting is regarded in society. The theoretical framework draws insights from Social Theory and the Sociology of the Professions, which seek to shed light both on interpreters’ self-perception of their work and on how the profession is socially represented.

## KEYWORDS

status, prestige, conference interpreters, questionnaire, Sociology.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The interpreter's professional status can be said to be one of the least debated issues in interpreting research; despite growing awareness of the need for professionalisation, status has hardly been considered as a research subject in its own right. Yet, investigating status may contribute to understanding issues concerning codes of ethics, new developments in the T&I market and public opinions about the interpreting profession, not to mention the interpreter's roles and responsibilities. It is only within the last few years that this topic has begun to receive the attention it deserves, although most studies have focused almost exclusively on translators' occupational status, their objective being that of assessing to what extent hypotheses on the low status of translators are perceived to be true (Katan, 2011; Sela-Sheffy and Shlesinger, 2011; Pym, 2012; Dam and Zethsen, 2013). Empirical data gathered from recent studies have clearly shown that "translation is not a high-status profession" (Dam and Zethsen, 2011: 984), and that translators often consider themselves as unappreciated and almost powerless professionals; when asked to compare translation and interpreting, translators believe that interpreters are better regarded (Katan, 2011: 78).

Conversely, conference interpreting has always enjoyed higher status, due to the supposed appeal of interpreters' lifestyles (Dam and Zethsen, 2013). According to the ideal picture of conference interpreting portrayed in scholarly literature, few professions can be as fascinating as interpreting; interpreters have the immense opportunity to combine their passion for foreign languages and cultures with the privilege of witnessing historical events, working in glamorous venues and meeting the most important personalities of the political and social sphere. The status and prestige of the interpreting profession has been greatly enhanced by these myths, whose validity has never been empirically demonstrated, especially because the allure interpreters enjoyed in the 1950s is not the same as the prestige interpreters have in contemporary society, whose labour market is riddled with paradoxes and inconsistencies. Some of the sociological complexities regarding status were addressed by one of the first attempts to study conference interpreters' occupational status empirically, carried out by Dam and Zethsen (2013). Their objective was to study the self-perceived occupational status of EU Danish staff interpreters and translators through an on-line survey; their main hypothesis was that interpreters would position themselves at the top of the status continuum, whereas translators would place themselves at a lower level. Data gathered from their questionnaires confirmed their hypothesis only partially, and this was a surprising outcome which begged for further research. The

aim of the present paper is to analyse conference interpreters' self-perception of their occupational status at a global level, as no empirical study focusing exclusively on the interpreting profession has been carried out to date. The first section of this paper is dedicated to the theoretical framework, which sits at the intersection between Interpreting Studies, Social Theory and the Sociology of the Professions, all of which contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the issues concerning the state of the interpreting profession. Section 3 and 4 focus more in detail on methodology, which consists of an on-line survey completed by 803 conference interpreters worldwide, whose outcome, which is part of an on-going Ph.D. project, will shed some light on the factors that might influence views of conference interpreters' status and may provide researchers with insight into the public perceptions of one of the most fascinating and, at the same time, understudied professions of all time.

## 2. THE INTERPRETER'S STATUS: A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Status is central both to social structure and social interaction, though it is far from being an unambiguous concept. Like role, it is a fluctuating notion, which can either be framed in Durkheim's functionalist theories of socio-economic stratification (Dingwall, 2012) or in theories focusing on moral values, which are detached from economic power (Lane, 2000). Although the notions of status and prestige are often used interchangeably, in Sociology they are studied separately, as they fall into two completely different categories: status is determined by institutional and economic parameters, whereas prestige is influenced by social and symbolically functional codes. In this study, status and prestige will be analysed respectively according to the socio-economic and the lay approach: the first sets out to determine whether conference interpreting could be defined as a profession according to socio-economic parameters, whereas the second method aims at assessing the degree of prestige enjoyed by the interpreting profession by focusing on common-sense perceptions that the general population has of it. Although Dam and Zethsen (2013) argue that the concept of prestige is related to the enjoyment of power and wealth, sociologist Stolley (2005: 44) maintains that moral evaluations of a profession are not always related to the above-mentioned parameters. Teachers, for instance, may not have much economic power but enjoy a great deal of social prestige, whereas politicians may be very rich and powerful but are not always held in high moral esteem. In order to make a clear distinction between these two concepts, a snapshot of the central notions of status and prestige will be provided as a model of analysis.

## 2.1. THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC APPROACH

Although constant reference will be made in this paper to the concept of status, it should be pointed out that this word can either refer to *social status* or to *professional status*, which indicate two separate (but at the same time intertwined) notions. *Social status* corresponds to the position an individual occupies in a social structure. According to the *Sage Dictionary of Sociology* (Bruce & Yearley, 2006: 39), status indicates a specific rank in the society to which a person belongs, which can be both ascribed and achieved: an individual who enjoys ascribed status has made no effort to obtain it, as this kind of status is assigned on the basis of race, sex and date of birth. Conversely, achieved status is reached through choice and merits, and reflects personal skills and abilities (Ferrante, 2014: 93). The Queen of England, for example, enjoys ascribed status, whereas athletes achieve their status through training and personal efforts.<sup>1</sup> According to Anthony Giddens, the notions of social and professional status are linked: in his work *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure and Contradiction in Social Analysis* (1979), he suggested that individuals' identity and roles are shaped by status, which is not just a rank in society, but a combination of social criteria such as, for instance, occupation (*ibid.*: 118).

As occupation is one of the main factors characterising status, *professional status* can be understood as a concept deriving from achieved status; according to the theory of social stratification (Ganzeboom & Treiman, 1996: 201), professional status is attributed on the basis of the type of occupation and the level of education, which are both attained through personal achievements. For example, *medical doctor*, *teacher* and *conference interpreter* are all professional statuses, which give information on the level of academic training, expertise and remuneration of these professionals. Professional status indicates therefore the set of skills which enable a professional to render a service to society, and is determined by classifications such as ISCO (International Standard Classification of Occupations, 2012) and by indexes of Socio-Economic Status (Reynolds & Fletcher-Janzen, 2007), both connoting one's position in the social hierarchy and how the hierarchy is structured. According to these classifications, the main parameters defining professional status are remuneration and education, which are also the main criteria used in the present survey to assess whether interpreting can be considered as a high-status profession.

1 This distinction is also of importance as far as the evolution of the interpreting profession is concerned; the first generation of interpreters were granted the ascribed status of interpreters simply because they were bilingual. From the 1960s onwards, with the spread of interpreting schools, the status of interpreter began to become achieved through an academic career, as the majority of aspiring interpreters were not natural bilinguals. This turning point in the history of the interpreting profession, defined by Baigorri-Jalón (2004) as the passage "from marvel to profession", has had some significant implications for the way society considers interpreting still today.

Along with the institutional parameters determined by the socio-economic approach, the lay analysis takes into account perspectives drawn from the works of Pierre Bourdieu (1991) indicating the symbolic value of a profession, which is not necessarily tied to economic parameters. The main determinants of prestige cannot be objectively pointed out, as prestige does not concern the material rewards provided by a profession, but the moral worthiness of a specific occupation. According to Pierre Bourdieu (1991), status is one of the main factors contributing to the creation of *economic capital*, whereas prestige falls into the domain of *symbolic capital*. The two parameters of education and remuneration surely have an impact on evaluations of prestige, but external and irrational components also play an important role in determining social esteem.

Social psychologist Wertheimer (Luchins & Luchins, 1978) argues that prestige is assigned according to subjective and emotional criteria, as the desire for social recognition is one of the basic, innate characteristics of mankind. According to this view, the concepts of *prestige* and *profession* can be understood as popular symbols: as prestige is a mental construct which indicates the “social beliefs on what the characteristics of a profession ought to be” (Pattison & Pill, 2004: 16), a profession can be understood as the social product of popular representations, which show how lay people morally evaluate the main features of a profession. By way of example, a survey (Harris Interactive 2009) carried out in the US showed that the social prestige of fire-fighters increased substantially after the events of 9/11, demonstrating that, according to American public opinion, a profession that is considered to have a high social value need not be either a high-paying job or an occupation requiring a solid academic background. These findings demonstrate that a profession represents the institutionalisation of altruistic values: medical doctors treat diseases, lawyers and judges make sure that the law is upheld, teachers contribute to the spreading of knowledge and interpreters help people who speak different languages to communicate.

However, too often conference interpreting has been considered as a fascinating but mechanical activity, both by the general public and the academia itself, as the interest in the neurological and cognitive aspects of interpreting developed in the 1970s has demonstrated. A different view of interpreting gained ground only during the *social turn* (Pöchhacker, 2004) in Interpreting Studies. From the 1990s interpreting was no longer regarded as a luxury reserved to an élite of people, as it started to be increasingly defined as a service, which is supposed to meet the needs of the participants in a communicative situation (Viezzi, 2013: 377). This notion suggests that interpreting should not just be regarded as a profession in terms of remuneration, level of education and fame, but also as an expression of the social value of mutual understanding. A sharper focus on the moral characteristics of interpreting may also help to shed light on the social purpose pursued by conference interpreters, which is why the survey proposed in this

study aims at eliciting information on interpreters' views about the social importance of their work.

### 3. THE SURVEY

This study is based on quantitative analysis of an on-line distributed questionnaire. Although face-to-face interviews would have been a more appropriate method for eliciting socio-psychological insights on status and prestige, the quantitative approach was chosen to provide a picture of the interpreting profession as a whole, with a view to laying out the basis for further research. The model of analysis presented in this paper draws inspiration from previous studies carried out on interpreters' and translators' professional status (Katan, 2011; Dam & Zethsen, 2013). Before sending the survey, a pilot study was carried out with the first draft of the questionnaire, which consisted of 39 questions. 13 interpreting professors at IUSLIT Trieste,<sup>2</sup> were invited to complete the questionnaire: 6 of them did so. This small-scale experiment was useful to evaluate feasibility, time, and statistical variability in an attempt to refine, reformulate or remove some questions.

The final version of the survey consisted of 35 questions and it took approximately 10 minutes to complete. The questionnaire was made available at the end of May 2014 and was closed at the end of July 2014. It was electronically based and placed on the online survey portal *SurveyMonkey.com*, where respondents were able to log on from a link provided to them. In addition, 144 comments were posted in the comment box placed at the end of the questionnaire. A total of 860 respondents began the survey and 803 completed it, which demonstrated the effectiveness of the on-line link distribution. The link to the questionnaire was initially sent to 56 professional associations of conference interpreters in 53 countries and also to personal contacts, such as academics and colleagues. In order to reach as many conference interpreters as possible, both staff and free-lance, the link to the questionnaire was also posted on social networks, a method which allowed to gather responses also from free-lance interpreters who do not belong to any professional association. The questionnaire comprised ten sections:

- Demographics (sex, age, country of residence);
- Professional identity (years of experience, professional associations, free-lance or staff, interpreting as a full time profession);
- Opinions on public service interpreting;
- Education and opinions on research in interpreting;
- Remuneration;
- Exposure of the interpreting profession in the media;
- Perceptions of status;

2 Department of Law, Language, Interpreting and Translation Studies, University of Trieste.

- Perceptions of the prestige and the social value of interpreting;
- Perceptions of role;
- Considerations on the future of the interpreting profession.

Although data gathered from this first questionnaire yielded interesting results for all the aforementioned sections, the focus of this paper will be on a comparison between the socio-economic parameters defining conference interpreting as a profession and interpreters' views on the public image of their profession, which constitute the core of the lay approach.

#### 4. RESULTS

In this paragraph, data will be presented according to the following macro-categories: the socio-economic determinants of status and perceptions of prestige. The first category is divided into two sub-categories, concerning: 1) membership of professional associations, autonomy and full-time job; 2) education and remuneration. Descriptive statistics frequencies and percentages were used to analyse data, as they are regarded as a useful method to examine personal information variables. The results were processed using the statistical software SPSS Statistics, whose *crosstabs* function allowed highlighting of the relationships between questions by means of chi-square tests and Cramer's V tests. Chi-square tests showed whether or not there was a relationship between variables (i.e. country of residence and remuneration), but they did not specify how significant this relationship was. Therefore, once statistical significance was established, Cramer's V tests were carried out in order to give additional information on the strength of the association between two variables. The more the result of a Cramer's V was close to 0, the higher was the probability that the two variables were not linked to each other, as its coefficient ranges from 0 (no association) to 1 (perfect association).

##### 4.1. DEMOGRAPHICS

Data collected on gender show an interesting though not surprising aspect of the interpreting profession: out a total of 803 respondents, 75.7% are women. This figure should raise awareness on the topic of the feminisation of the interpreting profession, which has been widely neglected in Interpreting Studies, as well as the sociological and psychological repercussions of the increasing percentage of women in the profession. Although this discussion cannot be held in detail as it is not the main focus of this study, it would be worthwhile to investigate the causes and the consequences of this trend. As for the age of participants in the current sample, 56.2% of respondents fall into the category of 46-65 years of age, whereas 31.1% ticked the box 26-45 years. Only 0.7% of those interviewed

were 18-25, and 11.8% were over 65. Although the majority of professional conference interpreters are between 50 and 60 years of age, it is encouraging to see that roughly 30 per cent of professionals are in their thirties. The low percentage of under-25 respondents is attributable to the fact that respondents in this age group are still receiving training in interpreting, whereas interpreters who are over 65 are probably retired or not working full-time. As far as the country of residence is concerned, although this was meant to be a global survey, data show a strongly Eurocentric perspective, with the European continent accounting for 78.8% of respondents: the most represented country is Italy, which accounts for 16.4% of respondents (N=132), followed by countries hosting the headquarters of international organisations, such as Belgium with 16.3% (N=131) and Switzerland with 7.5% (N=60).

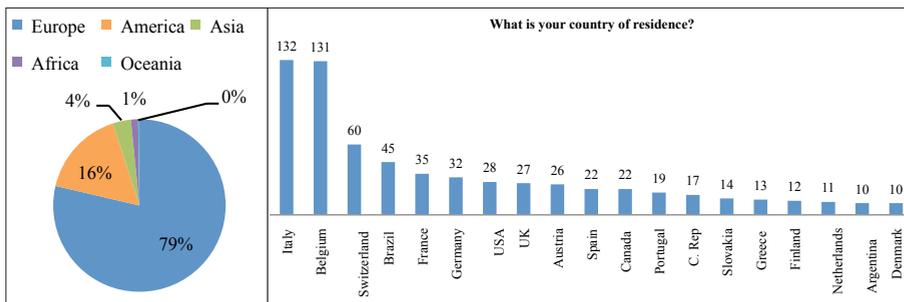


FIGURE 1. Breakdown of respondents according to the continents they reside in  
 FIGURE 2. Breakdown of the most represented countries in the survey

#### 4.2. THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC DETERMINANTS OF STATUS

In this section, data will be analysed according to the objective socio-economic determinants of professional status, which are: 1) membership of professional associations; 2) professional autonomy; 3) full-time job; 4) education; 5) remuneration. The objective is to ascertain whether conference interpreting could be considered as a fully-fledged profession in economic and social terms.

##### 4.2.1. MEMBERSHIP OF PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS, AUTONOMY AND FULL-TIME JOB

In order to evaluate the socio-economic status of the interpreting profession, questions were asked according to some of the parameters which characterise high-status professions: membership of a professional association, autonomy and a full-time job. Professional associations are considered as “forums for the exchange of knowledge and dissemination of new knowledge related to prac-

“Greer, Grover & Fowler, 2007: 17). Therefore, membership of a professional association is an important factor which marks the difference between professionals and amateurs. In designating who is qualified to practise interpreting, professional associations exert control over the possession of specialised skills, therefore guaranteeing trustworthiness and accountability. As the link to the questionnaire was sent to professional associations worldwide, the majority of interpreters interviewed (90.6%) belong to a professional organization, which demonstrates that professional conference interpreters have the opportunity to collaborate and create networks with their peers in order to share and disseminate best practices in the field. As far as autonomy is concerned, 85.5% of respondents work as free-lance interpreters, and this shows that professional conference interpreters have a high degree of control over their job. Autonomy is regarded as a core feature of a profession, because professionals can make independent judgements about their work (Bayles, 1989: 21), a characteristic of established professions such as medicine and law. In addition, 71.3% of respondents declared that interpreting is their full-time profession, which means that, as most conference interpreters work as free-lance, they can make a living by exercising the profession. Most sociologists argue that what distinguishes a profession from an occupation is that professionals harness their skills and expertise in order to perform a full time job. According to sociologist Volti (2011: 158), in the 1950s many occupations (such as medical doctors) achieved professional status because they became full-time jobs, a professional trait which delineated their domain on a particular speciality. Therefore, according to the above-mentioned parameters, conference interpreting can be regarded as an established profession.

#### 4.2.2. EDUCATION AND REMUNERATION

One of the main prerequisites to enter a profession is to have a university degree. Sociologists argue that a professional is “a person who masters and applies a body of knowledge in a specific area of inquiry” (Greer, Grover & Fowler, 2007: 16); in the same way as attorneys master a body of knowledge associated with the practice of law, conference interpreters harness the linguistic skills acquired during their academic career. The sample reported in this paper shows that 61.8% of conference interpreters throughout the world have a degree in translation/interpreting, which testifies to the increasing importance attached to specialised and academic training. However, the remaining 38% is made up of conference interpreters who do not have an MA in translation/interpreting. The figure below provides a breakdown of the level of education of conference interpreters who do not have a degree in interpreting:

### If your answer is NO, which degree do you have?

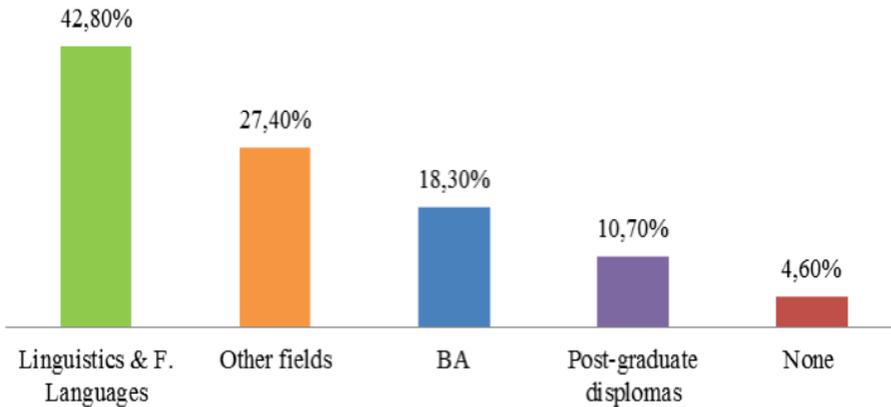


FIGURE 3. Type of degree held by conference interpreters who do not have an MA in translation/interpreting

A considerable number of respondents have a degree in Linguistics and Foreign Languages (42.8%), whereas the other 27.4% have a degree in a subject other than interpreting, such as Law, Business and Administration, Art, Engineering, Dentistry, Economics, Science, etc. Moreover, 18.3% of respondents only have a BA in translation/interpreting or in one of the above subjects, whereas 10.7% have a post-graduate diploma, which is a certificate obtained after a BA and is generally compared to a master's level degree. 4.6% of respondents have no degree at all, which may be due to the fact that in they live in a country which does not offer specialised training in conference interpreting, or could also be attributable to the fact that up until the 1960s there were not many institutions providing academic training in conference interpreting: some respondents declared that they do not have an MA in interpreting simply because it did not exist in the days when they trained. The hypothesis was that older generations (from 56 years of age) do not have a degree in translation/interpreting, whereas younger generations (18-45) do, as a result of the increasing specialised training offered by universities. A chi-square test (sv .000,  $p < 0.05$ ) indeed demonstrated that there is a correlation between age and the possession or non-possession of an MA in T&I, which was also confirmed by a Cramer's V test (.25,  $p < 0.05$ ), employed to test the strength of the association, as shown in the figure below:

CONTINGENCY TABLE: DO YOU HAVE AN MA IN TRANSLATION/INTERPRETING? * WHAT IS YOUR AGE GROUP?									
			What is your age group?					Total	
			18-25	26-35	36-45	46-55	56-65		65+
Do you have an MA in translation/interpreting?	YES	Count	5	83	113	139	111	45	496
		Expected count	3,7	59,9	94,5	144,5	134,7	58,7	496,0
	NO	Count	1	14	40	95	107	50	307
		Expected count	2,3	37,1	58,5	89,5	83,3	36,3	307,0
Total	Count	6	97	153	234	218	95	803	
	Expected count	6,0	97,0	153,0	234,0	218,0	95,0	803,0	

FIGURE 4. Results of a chi-square test comparing the following variables: age and possession of an MA in translation/interpreting

If we look at the *yes* column, we notice that in younger generations (18-45) the number of people who have an MA exceeds the expected count, whereas in older generations (46-65+) fewer people than expected have an MA. The reverse is true for the *no* column: the number of people who do not have an MA in translation and interpreting exceeds the expected count as far as older generations (46-65+) are concerned. On the one hand, these findings empirically confirm the hypothesis that conference interpreting is becoming increasingly prominent in university curricula; on the other, they suggest that there is a huge gap between older and younger generations, which is reflected in considerations on how the status of conference interpreter could be achieved. Older generations, which account for 51.2% of interpreters who do not have an MA in interpreting, are more likely to champion the myth according to which interpreters are “born, not made”, as they learnt to interpret on the spot or through experience. Younger generations, instead, appear to value more the importance of academic education, which contributes to enhancing the belief that interpreters can also be “made”. As for remuneration, considering that the surveyed population is made up of interpreters coming from different countries, a quantitative assessment of remuneration was not feasible. Therefore, respondents were asked to evaluate qualitatively on a scale from 1 (absolutely) to 5 (not at all) whether they considered the financial remuneration of conference interpreters to be adequate or not. The answers are as follows:

### Do you think that a conference interpreter's remuneration is adequate?

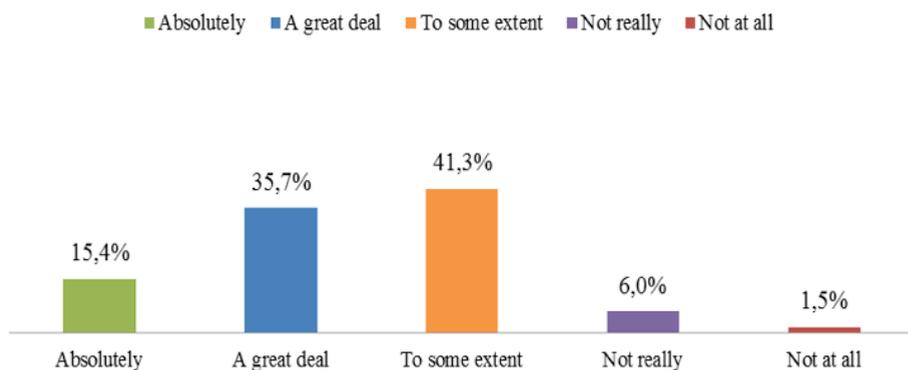


FIGURE 5. Degree of satisfaction with remuneration, as assessed by interpreters themselves

Also in this case, a chi-square test ( $\chi^2 = 0.48, p < 0.05$ ) showed that there is a correlation between the country of origin and evaluations of the adequacy of interpreters' remuneration, and that the pattern is the same for every country. However, a Cramer's V test showed that the association between these two variables ( $.34, p < 0.05$ ), is not very significant, which means that, regardless of the country they live in, conference interpreters are overall fairly well remunerated. In the light of these results, it may be safely argued that conference interpreting is a high-status profession, at least according to the socio-economic parameters, which give information about the desirability of a profession in terms of material rewards.

#### 4.3. PERCEPTIONS OF STATUS AND PRESTIGE

This section analyses conference interpreters' professional status from a subjective perspective. Interpreters' considerations on status and prestige will be compared with their opinions on how society considers the interpreting profession, in order to provide a comprehensive view on how the profession is defined and regarded at a global level.

##### 4.3.1. INTERPRETERS' PERCEPTIONS OF STATUS

Respondents were asked to assess how they think that the general population considers their status. In order to do so, interpreters had to specify in which professional group they believe society places them: four groups of professions were provided, divided into the categories issued by the Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO, 2012), which are calculated by the International Labour Or-

ganisation (ILO). If status and prestige are here to be scrutinised from a personal point of view, we should consider whether there is a discrepancy between the *internal* perception of status, which indicates how interpreters perceive themselves in their own eyes (and how they see themselves compared to other professionals), and the *external* perception of status, which sheds light on how interpreters think they are perceived by society. Responses concerning conference interpreters' internal perception are hereunder illustrated:

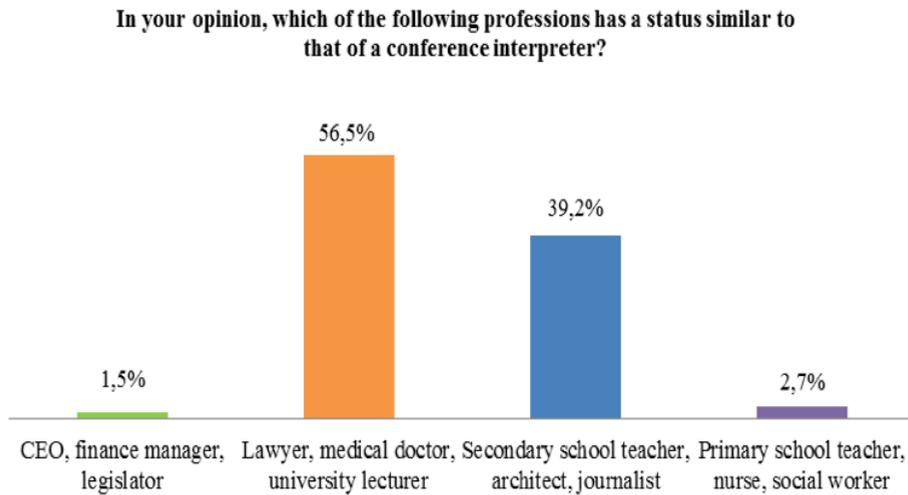


FIGURE 6. Professional status as perceived by conference interpreters

The graph clearly shows that 56.5% of conference interpreters relate their status to that of medical doctors and university lecturers, which indicates that interpreters' self-perception of status is consistent with responses given as regards the objective parameters of education and remuneration. Interpreters thus believe that conference interpreting is a high-status profession, as it is a job requiring a very high level of education and is generally well remunerated, a consideration which is also consistent with assumptions found in literature about conference interpreters, who are positioned by translators at the top of the status continuum (Dam and Zethsen, 2013). However, when asked to evaluate how society regards their status, i.e. their *external* perception, they answered as follows:

**According to the general population, which of the following professions has a status similar to that of a conference interpreter?**

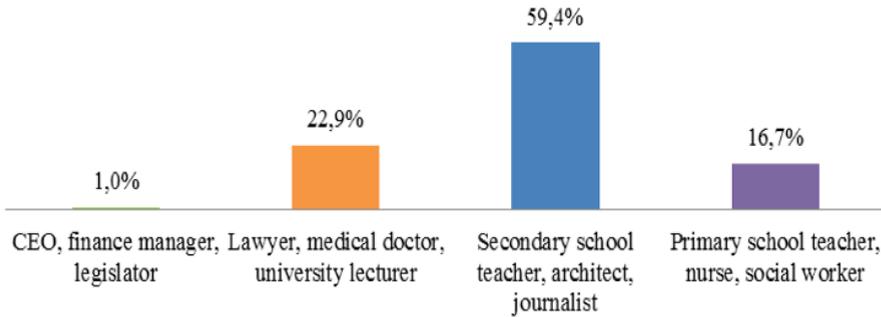


FIGURE 7. Professional status which conference interpreters think people outside the profession attribute to them

These findings demonstrate that there is a high level of status discrepancy in the interpreting profession, which means that interpreters consider themselves as fully-fledged professionals, but they believe that they are not accorded the status they deserve. This pattern is observed across all nations: a chi-square test (sv .000,  $p < 0.05$ ) revealed that in the most represented countries (with a number of responses higher than 20), in which conference interpreting is also well established, the number of responses corresponding to low status (3-4 category, representing secondary school teachers and primary school teachers respectively) were higher compared to those expected, as shown in Figure 8.

A Cramer's V test (.198,  $p < 0.05$ ) also showed that considerations on perceptions of status do not change according to the country of residence: the only exceptions seem to be countries such as Belgium and Switzerland, in which the presence of international organisations allows conference interpreters to enjoy higher status, even though one respondent remarked that:

Interpreters are nowadays often seen as a necessary evil in the EU institutions and sometimes as an unnecessary expense. The constant checking done by delegations in meetings, with nodding and twitching as we work, shows a lack of confidence in our abilities and destroys morale. This is a new phenomenon and is a clear demonstration of our reduced status (Female, Belgium, 26-30 years of experience).

As for countries in which interpreters rely almost exclusively on the private market, data are particularly surprising as far as Italy is concerned: the contingency table reveals that only 19 out of 132 respondents think that society considers conference interpreters as akin to lawyers or medical doctors (the expected count for that value was 30), whereas 37 respondents believe that interpreters are considered on the level of nurses or primary school teachers, which are classified as

CONTINGENCY TABLE: WHAT IS YOUR COUNTRY OF RESIDENCE? \* ACCORDING TO THE GENERAL POPULATION, WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING PROFESSIONS HAS A STATUS SIMILAR TO THAT OF A CONFERENCE INTERPRETER?

			According to the general population, which of the following professions has a status similar to that of a conference interpreter?				Total	
			CEO, finance manager, legislator	Lawyer, medical doctor, university lecturer	Secondary school teacher, architect, journalist	Primary school teacher, nurse, social worker		
What is your country of residence?	Austria	Count	0	3	23	0	26	
		Expected count	,3	6,2	15,1	4,4	26,0	
	Belgium	Count	2	45	66	18	131	
		Expected count	1,4	31,1	76,3	22,2	131,0	
	Brazil	Count	1	9	30	5	45	
		Expected count	,5	10,7	26,2	7,6	45,0	
	Canada	Count	0	5	12	5	22	
		Expected count	,2	5,2	12,8	3,7	22,0	
	France	Count	1	9	20	5	35	
		Expected count	,4	8,3	20,4	5,9	35,0	
	Germany	Count	0	5	25	2	32	
		Expected count	,3	7,6	18,6	5,4	32,0	
	Italy	Count	1	19	75	37	132	
		Expected count	1,4	31,4	76,8	22,4	132,0	
	Spain	Count	0	5	14	3	22	
		Expected count	,2	5,2	12,8	3,7	22,0	
	Switzerland	Count	0	22	31	7	60	
		Expected count	,6	14,3	34,9	10,2	60,0	
	United Kingdom	Count	1	4	11	11	27	
		Expected count	,3	6,4	15,7	4,6	27,0	
	United States of America	Count	0	7	19	2	28	
		Expected count	,3	6,7	16,3	4,8	28,0	
	Total		Count	6	133	326	95	560
			Expected count	6,0	133,0	326,0	95,0	560,0

FIGURE 8. Chi-square test comparing interpreters' status as perceived by the general population and interpreters' country of residence

*semi-professions*, i.e. occupations possessing some features of professional work but requiring less in terms of education, skills and judgement. This data demonstrate that the professional status of conference interpreters is still ambivalent and blurred even in those countries with a long professional tradition in the field, a condition which is consistent with the remarks made by Sela-Sheffy & Shlesinger (2011), who believe that interpreting can be considered more as a semi-profession than a fully-fledged profession. The reason for this definition may be found in a lack of understanding on the part of the general population of what interpreting really is and involves, which drives interpreters themselves to feel considered as an “expensive luxury” (Female, France, 31-35 years of experience) and think that the profession is little understood, because “the public has strange – and quite erroneous – ideas about interpreters: wizards, secretaries, machines, among them” (Female, Peru, 21-25 years of experience). As years have passed, the interpreter’s status and cannot be said to have endured the test of time: many years have gone by since Herbert (1952: 3) described interpreting as “one of the loftiest occupations” a man could perform, and many historical events, as well as changes in the labour market, have occurred since the birth of the profession. As one interpreter remarked: “People would be happy to do without interpreters, mainly because they find them too expensive and also because resorting to English seems to them a better solution” (Female, Belgium, 16-20 years of experience). In the light of these data, it could be safely argued that the perceived status of conference interpreting in society is lower than expected.

#### 4.3.2. INTERPRETERS’ PERCEPTIONS OF PRESTIGE

According to Linda Hargreaves (in Saha & Dworkin, 2009: 217), status is considered as a social rank, whereas prestige is defined as “influence, reputation or popular esteem derived from characteristics, achievements and associations”. Considerations on prestige regard whether society thinks that the interpreting profession is an activity that goes beyond an automatic act of translation, and consequently attributes a value to it. Therefore, respondents were asked to assess whether society considers the interpreting profession as a job which can be regarded as socially and morally valuable to society. The results are summarised in Figure 9.

These findings confirm what was pointed out by Dam and Zethsen (2013) in their study on Danish conference interpreters, in which interpreters’ scores on questions regarding prestige and value to society were surprisingly low, with a minimal difference from translators’ responses. In the present survey, which analyses conference interpreters at a global level, 415 out of 803 respondents believe that society considers interpreting as important only “to some extent”, and 224 respondents believe that the general population “does not really” regard interpreting as a socially valuable job. A chi-square test ( $\chi^2 = .175, p < 0.05$ ) and a Cramer’s V

### Do you think that society considers the interpreter's work as important?

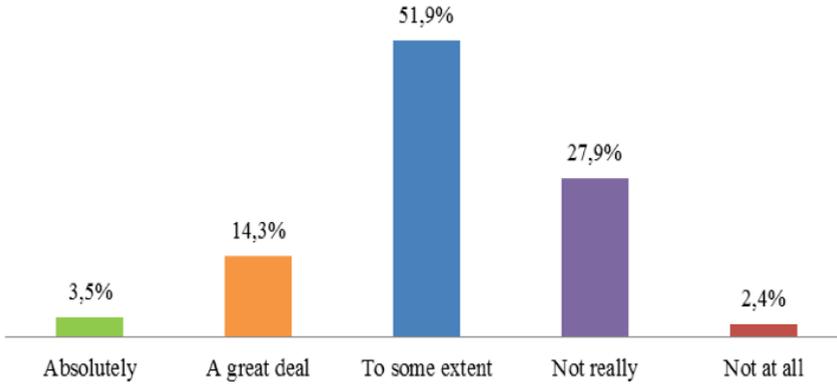


FIGURE 9. Degree of importance that conference interpreters think society attributes to them

test (.303,  $p < 0.05$ ) also revealed that the country of residence was not a significant factor in interpreters' opinions on how society considers their work. This means that, although Ollivier (2000: 2) argues that status could be framed in the post-modern paradigm consisting of a "multiplicity of local status orders", the findings of the present survey show that there are no context-dependent popular evaluations concerning prestige, but that at a global level the interpreting profession seems to be misunderstood and underestimated. One possible explanation for these result patterns is that admiration for conference interpreting has been more attributable to the sense of wonder caused by simultaneous interpreting than to the importance that interpreting (and consequently communication) has for society. The data reported in this paper suggest that conference interpreting has invested only in the enhancement of its appearance rather than the values it represents, such as its role in facilitating dialogue and intercultural communication. This is perhaps one of the reasons why, education and remuneration being equal, interpreting does not enjoy the same societal prestige as established professions such as medical doctor, lawyer or university lecturer, as for society in general the most important trait of a profession is the willingness to serve others altruistically. In this respect, Freidson (1989: 424) emphasised that a profession is distinguished by some as being "dedicated to public service rather than being concerned only with their own economic interest like other occupations". This is why scholars in the field, academics and professional associations should explain to students and lay people that interpreting is not an artistic trick, but a social activity seeking the highest realisation of the common good, which has integration, dialogue, cooperation and mutual understanding as its main pillars: as one interpreter commented on the questionnaire: "if interpreters are not proud of their profession and don't understand and value it, there is no chance others will" (Female, Brazil, 21-25 years of experience).

## 5. CONCLUSION

The objective of this paper was to show the provisional findings of an on-going Ph.D. project whose aim is to shed some light on the perceived status of conference interpreters, an under-studied topic in interpreting research. The theoretical premise underlying this study is that status and prestige are two different sociological concepts which have to be analysed according to two different approaches: the socio-economic and the lay methods of investigation. The first concerns status and provides a series of socio-economic criteria to assess whether interpreting may be considered as a fully established profession (i.e. membership of a professional association, autonomy, full-time job, education and remuneration), whereas the second regards prestige, and provides some insights into the social and popular representations of the interpreting profession. An on-line distributed questionnaire, completed by 803 respondents, confirmed only partially the general belief that conference interpreters are “the stars of the translation professions” (Dam and Zethsen, 2013: 229) and that they enjoy a high status. However, contrasting perceptions of status were found not in the socio-economic criteria defining the profession, but rather in how interpreting is considered by society in general. Although conference interpreters consider themselves as highly-skilled and high-status professionals, globalisation and changes in the T&I market have inevitably tainted popular beliefs about the prestige enjoyed by the interpreting profession. To reverse this trend, a rapprochement between professionals and academics could be fruitful, as they can teach future generations of interpreters to adapt to a constantly-changing market, to learn that what they translate in the booth can have an impact on people’s lives and to tell their clients that interpreting is not an expensive luxury but a social instrument promoting understanding and cooperation. As history shows, the costs of miscommunication can be much higher than the costs of hiring an interpreter.

## REFERENCES

- Baigorri-Jalón J. (2004) *Interpreters at the United Nations: A History*, Salamanca, Ediciones Universidad de Salamanca.
- Bayles M. D. (1989) *Professional Ethics*, Belmont, Thomson Wadsworth.
- Bourdieu P. (1991) *Language and Symbolic Power*, Harvard, Harvard University Press.
- Bruce S. & Yearley S. (2006) *The SAGE Dictionary of Sociology*, New York, SAGE.
- Dam H. V. & Zethsen K. K. (2013) "Conference Interpreters – the Stars of the Translation Profession?", *Interpreting* 15:2, pp. 229-259.
- Dingwall R. (2012) *Essays on Professions*, Farnham, Ashgate Publishing Ltd.
- Ferrante J. (2014) *Sociology: A Global Perspective*, Boston, Cengage Learning.
- Freidson E. (1989) "Theory and the Professions", *Indiana Law Journal*, 64:3, pp. 423-432.
- Ganzeboom H. & Treiman D. J. (1996) "Internationally Comparable Measures of Occupational Status for the 1988 Standard Classification of Occupations", *Social Science Research*, 21:1, pp. 201-239.
- Giddens A. (1979) *Central Problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure and Contradiction in Social Analysis*, Oakland, University of California Press.
- Greer R. C., Grover R. & Fowler S. G. (2007) *Introduction to the Library and Information Professions*, Westport, Greenwood Publishing Group.
- Harris Poll (2009) "Firefighters, Scientists and Doctors Seen as Most Prestigious Occupations", <http://www.harrisinteractive.com/vault/Harris-Interactive-Poll-Research-Pres-Occupations-2009-08.pdf> (last accessed 01.09.2014).
- Herbert J. (1952) *The Interpreter's Handbook: How to Become a Conference Interpreter*, Geneva, Georg.
- International Standard Classification of Occupations (2012), [http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/publ/documents/publication/wcms\\_172572.pdf](http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/publ/documents/publication/wcms_172572.pdf) (last accessed 23.08.2014).
- Katan D. (2011) "Occupation or Profession. A Survey of the Translators' World", in *Identity and Status in the Translational Professions*. Ed. by R. Sela-Sheffy & M. Shlesinger, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing, pp. 65-89.
- Lane J. F. (2000) *Pierre Bourdieu: A Critical Introduction*, London, Pluto Press.
- Luchins A. S. & Luchins E. H. (1978) *Revisiting Wertheimer's Seminars*, Bucknell, Bucknell University Press.
- Pattison S. & Pill R. (2004) (eds.) *Values in Professional Practice: Lessons for Health, Social Care and Other*, Abingdon, Radcliffe Publishing, Ltd.
- Pöchhacker F. (2004) *Introducing Interpreting Studies*, Abingdon/New York, Routledge.
- Pym A. (2012) *The Status of the Translation Profession in the European Union*. (DGT/2011/TST) Final Report, [http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/translation/publications/studies/translation\\_profession\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/translation/publications/studies/translation_profession_en.pdf) (last accessed 16.07.2014).
- Reynolds C. R. & Fletcher-Janzen E. (2007) (eds.) *Encyclopedia of Special Education*, Hoboken, John Wiley & Sons.
- Saha L. J. & Dworkin A. G. (2009) *International Handbook of Research on Teachers and Teaching*, Berlin/Heidelberg, Springer Science & Business Media.

Sela-Sheffy R. & Shlesinger M. (2011) (eds.) *Identity and Status in the Translational Professions*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia, John Benjamins Publishing.

Stolley K. S. (2005) *The Basics of Sociology*, Westport, Greenwood Publishing Group.

Viezzi M. (2013) “Simultaneous and Consecutive Interpreting (non-conference settings)”, in *The Routledge Handbook of Translation Studies*. Ed. by C. Millán & F. Bartrina, Abingdon/New York, Routledge, pp. 377-389.

Volti R. (2011) *An Introduction to the Sociology of Work and Occupations*, New York, SAGE Publications.