

Rights, realities and responsibilities in community interpreting

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Abstract

Community interpreters need a profile of qualifications which is different from that of conference interpreters. Above all, community interpreters must be able to make consistent ethical decisions in the continuum between neutrality and advocacy. This is the reason why community interpreting should be integrated in the regular curricula.

Introduction

In his contribution for the First Critical Link Conference Franz Pöchhacker referred to the practice of Community Interpreting in Austria as “poorly developed” and stated that training for community interpreters was “altogether nonexistent” (Pöchhacker 1997: 224). After a brief overview of the development of Interpreting Studies I will present – admittedly from a somewhat personal stance – initiatives to improve the status quo and discuss perspectives for the future development of Community Interpreting.

Based on the Sociology of Symbolic Forms, which was developed by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (see for instance Bourdieu 1984), Community Interpreting will be modelled as a social field in which different social actors battle for their positions within the social system with the capital available to

them.¹ Capital is defined as all the material, intellectual and cultural resources which are available to an individual or an institution. It can be categorised into economic, social, cultural and symbolic capital. Economic capital can, in a simplified manner, be equated with material and financial resources. Social capital is a resource that facilitates or may facilitate individuals to act and cooperate within a system based on their membership in a more or less durable and institutionalised network of relationships, e.g. membership in a professional organisation. Cultural capital can include knowledge, skills, creativity, art and artefacts. It can be accrued in three different ways: as objectified, incorporated or institutionalised cultural capital. Objectified cultural capital manifests itself in artefacts, e.g. artworks and translations. Incorporated cultural capital is generally accrued through learning or practice, but can also be inherited. Institutionalised cultural capital is acquired in the form of educational degrees and certificates. Its value mainly depends on the status awarded to the degree-granting institution. An academic degree by a renowned university thus carries more cultural capital than a certificate for the completion of a training course at some other education institution. Each of these forms of capital can be converted into symbolic capital, which is the most powerful form of capital according to Bourdieu, if they are correlated with the specific hierarchy of values of a given society. The higher a certain form of capital ranks in the value hierarchy of a specific society, the more symbolic capital can be accrued through this specific form of capital.

I have used the term “translation culture” to discuss the mechanisms which determine concrete acts of translation. Translation culture can be defined as the set of norms, conventions, values and behavioural patterns used by all the partners involved in translation processes in a certain culture. Translation culture, as part of a culture, is linked in a circular relation to the total culture. On the one hand, prevailing power relations and values of a given society are reflected in concrete behavioural instructions; on the other hand, translation as a form of cultural import helps to shape the values and characteristics of a given receiving culture (Prunč 2008).²

The reflection of dominant value systems in translation culture involves both the characteristics and differentiation of social fields of translation, as well as the prevailing quality standards and conventions in the various fields. In the field of Community Interpreting, however, there appears – at least according to my personal observations of the situation in Austria – to be a discrepancy between the declared value systems of democracy and human rights and their realisation in specific patterns of interaction.

1 For the reception of Bourdieu’s sociological approach cf. Inghilleri (2005a), Inghilleri (2005b), Wolf/Fukari (2007).

2 For the application of the concept of translation culture in Community Interpreting see Pöllabauer (2006); for a critical discussion of the concept of translation culture see Grbić/Hebenstreit/Vorderobermeier/Wolf (2010).

1. Sociocultural background

The prevailing opinion among political classes in Austria is that people in the country speaking another language – foreigners, immigrants and asylum seekers – are themselves responsible for communicating successfully with the authorities. This basic attitude is only one reason why many are satisfied with the rudimentary linguistic mediation provided, for instance, by relatives who happen to be on the scene. The second reason lies in the fundamental misconception that proficiency in the two contact languages is sufficient for successful linguistic and cultural mediation. Thus, ad hoc and lay interpreters are recruited from among available immigrants. No consideration is given to the fact that these individuals usually have an unbalanced language profile, due to the way they have acquired a specific language and become socialised, and consequently these individuals need to be classified as double semilinguals rather than bilinguals.

It is an exception to the rule when people acknowledge that smooth communication in dealing with public authorities (e.g. in matters concerning the law, health and safety or education) is not only in the interest of the client speaking the “other” language, but also in the interest of the institutions themselves. It is a fact that inadequate and deficient communication primarily harms the efficiency of the institutions concerned. Consequently, it would make good economic sense to invest in this particular kind of trans-cultural communication and to avoid the unnecessary loss of time as well as the costs arising from such outcomes as wrongful conviction, misdiagnosis or bad investments (cf. Hampers/McNulty 2002).

The third reason is to be found in the history of interpreting and Interpreting Studies.³ The evolution of simultaneous interpreting coincided with the first great wave of globalisation. Conference Interpreting, together with technical translation, was well prepared to satisfy the need for cooperation in global networks and to meet the demand for information in globalised post-industrial societies. As a medium and allies of the “winners of globalisation”, conference interpreters could not only acquire economic capital in the field of interpreting, but also profit from the (social) status of their clients and the high status of their working languages. This in turn considerably increased their symbolic capital. Towards the end of the last millennium, Interpreting Studies almost exclusively focused on simultaneous interpretation and thus implicitly on Conference Interpreting (Pöchhacker 2004, reprint 2009). In addition to that, training institutions adapted their curricula to the needs of conference interpreters. Thus, conference interpreters, as a result of their excellent training, could acquire more incorporated cultural capital and, because they had academic degrees, were ascribed additional institutionalised cultural capital. So, even at the beginning of their professional career, conference interpreters had at their disposal all modes of relevant capital, which they, in the field of interpreting, could convert into a symbolic one. This tendency was further enhanced by successful international professional associations such as AIIC or national professional interpreter associations, which could ascribe the necessary social capital. The social practice

3 Cf. Pöchhacker (2006, 2009a, 2009b).

of Conference Interpreting, the institutionalisation of conference interpreter training and the protection offered by professional associations form an affirmative circle that could also be described as the *success story* of Conference Interpreting.

Such a road to success was not feasible in Community Interpreting. Rather, one could describe its development as a fatal spiral of negative labeling. Conference interpreters were, as mentioned above, on the winning side of globalisation, while community interpreters were, to use the words of the Polish-British sociologist Zygmunt Baumann (2004), left to deal with *the wasted lives* and the *outcasts of modernity*. In the last decades of the 20th century, however, the *collateral damage of globalisation*, to use another key term coined by Baumann (2007), presented itself in the form of global migration, often reinforced by armed conflicts. As a result, an increasing number of societies, not just traditional immigration societies, were confronted with communication problems when dealing with immigrants who spoke a different language. However, the problem was first and foremost identified as a social one and only secondarily as a communicative and cultural one. Thus the solution was a mix of social worker + interpreter. This intermingling of interpreting and social work, as well as resulting role conflicts hindered the development of a clear professional image of community interpreters (Niska 2002, Angelelli 2006).

On the one hand there is growing awareness of human rights among the general public, and this has the potential to bring about a change in social awareness concerning the need for a professional interpreting service in the community sector. On the other hand those in power play on the fears of the public (cf. Baumann 2004). This situation has made it impossible, at least in Austria, to draw symbolic capital from interpreting in community settings. On the contrary, the negative image of the clients and the low status of their working languages have had an adverse effect on the professional image of community interpreters. To this day, it has been impossible to acquire even a reasonable economic capital from Community Interpreting in Austria.⁴ The unacceptable rates of pay and fear of a “gray market” of lay interpreters with its inherent spiral of dumping prices kept professional interpreters and their professional associations from dealing with this interpreting setting.

2. Development of Interpreting Studies

In Austria, the social turn of Interpreting Studies was in particular influenced by the theoretical models and empirical studies of Franz Pöchhacker (2001, 2004, 2007b).⁵ Social turn is taken to mean here a general broadening of horizons with regard to interpreting settings other than Conference Interpreting, and in particular with regard to Community Interpreting (cf. Pöchhacker 2006, 2007a).

4 It was in fact a politician, responsible for the social welfare of immigrants, who in all seriousness proposed improving the economic basis of migrants by paying them an hourly wage of 5 Euros for interpreting in official settings.

5 See also Pöchhacker/Kadric (1999), Kolb/Pöchhacker (2008).

Here this broadening of horizons has been promoted by several initiatives and the Critical Link conferences.⁶

If we take a look at different research databases and bibliographies of individual researchers it is obvious that Community Interpreting has turned from the former Cinderella of Interpreting Studies into a quite respectable sister of Conference Interpreting.⁷ The studies on Community Interpreting conducted at the Graz Department of Translation Studies may serve as an example for recent research on Community Interpreting (Grbić/Pöllabauer 2006).⁸ From the Graz perspective the integration of Sign Language Interpreting research proved particularly fruitful as the latter is not only of a different semiotic nature compared to spoken language, but it is also highly sensitive to social and ethical issues because of its close relationship to the deaf community (Grbić 2001, 2006). At this point the efforts to establish Community Interpreting research and training by the department of translation studies of the University of Graz will be considered more in detail.

3. Graz initiatives

In Graz, it was Sign Language that opened the doors to Community Interpreting. It all started in 1990 with a conference entitled *Sprechende Hände – hörende Augen/Talking hands – listening eyes* (Grbić/Stachl-Peier 1990) which raised awareness and consciousness for Sign Language interpreting. Back then, the target group was limited to practicing Sign Language interpreters, who in most cases were hearing children of deaf parents. In (joint) workshops, the interpreting experiences of teachers of the department were discussed and put into practice in Sign Language interpreting classes. The next step was the World Congress of the Deaf in Vienna in 1995, which provided a supreme opportunity to build an international network and to recruit internationally renowned lecturers for Sign Language interpreting. In 1997/98, within the framework of an EU project, a training course for 24 practicing Sign Language interpreters from all over Austria was held. The course was repeated in the years 1999/2000.⁹

Meanwhile, the first generation of students was able to acquire knowledge of Sign Language in (basic) classes offered by the department. Within the scope of the University reform of 2002, Sign Language was introduced as the 13th officially taught language at the department. In 2007, the first students graduated after completing a full Sign Language Interpreting training programme in Graz.

In 1998, the participants of the training programme, the teaching staff of the department and experienced Sign Language interpreters, in a joint effort, created the first Austrian professional association for Sign Language interpreters. Not

6 Cf. the proceedings: Carr *et al.* (1997), Roberts *et al.* (2000), Brunette *et al.* (2003), Wadensjö *et al.* (2007), Hale *et al.* (2009).

7 For details see Prunč (2010); for an overview of research on Community Interpreting in German-speaking countries see Pöllabauer/Grbić (2008).

8 The research started with Pöllabauer's investigation of police interpreting, especially at asylum hearings (Pöllabauer 2005, 2007).

9 Cf. <<http://www.oegsdv.at/index.php?content=4>> (accessed 30 September 2011).

only did the association adopt its own code of ethics, it also introduced a certification system with a professional aptitude test that can be taken at the department in Graz.¹⁰ In the process of professionalisation of Sign Language Interpreting, the recognition of this certificate by the deaf community and governmental bodies was an important step forward.

It was therefore only natural to take the same path for spoken language interpreting. As with Sign Language interpreting, two objectives were set.

3.1 Awareness raising and public relations

This first objective was marked by three activities: a series of discussions in 2003 called *Brücken bauen statt Barrieren/Building Bridges instead of Walls* (Pöllabauer/Prunč 2003), the development of a curriculum for medical interpreters within the Grundtvig *MedInt* project, together with the Universities of Ljubljana, Mainz-Germersheim and Tampere,¹¹ and the CIUTI symposium *Community Interpreting: Training and Research at University Level* organised in September 2009 by and at the department.¹²

3.2 Improving the quality of Community Interpreting through in-service training for practicing interpreters

To meet the legal requirements, a special self-financed University training programme with its own curriculum and University certificate was set up. Thus, a training course for Community Interpreting (*Universitätslehrgang Kommunal-dolmetschen*) was offered from October 2004 to January 2006 for five languages (Albanian, Arabic, Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian, Russian and Turkish; all in combination with German). The curriculum was drafted in close cooperation with a number of local NGOs to guarantee the best possible practical relevance of the course content. This course was the first fully-fledged academic training programme for community interpreters in Austria. The *Österreichische Nationalbank*, which has a special fund for research and related issues, sponsored this first programme as well as the accompanying research. In 2008, a slightly modified programme was offered for Russian and Bosnian/Croatian/Serbian. The programme was completed in July 2010.¹³

10 Cf. Österreichischer Gebärdensprach-DolmetscherInnen-Verband; <<http://www.oegsdv.at/index.php?content=1>> (accessed 30 September 2011).

11 <<http://www.uni-graz.at/life1www/>> (accessed 30 September 2011) and Andres/Pöllabauer (2009), Ertl/Pöllabauer (2010).

12 The contributions to this conference are published in Kainz/Prunč/Schögler (2011).

13 Cf. <<http://www.uniforlife.at/index.php?lang=de&page=content/ulehr-kdolmetschen-de-inhalt.html>> (accessed 30 September 2011).

Currently, the curriculum is structured as follows:

Module	Topics	
General	Introduction to Translation Studies, Roles and Norms (5), Psychosocial Aspects of Interpreting (4), Culture and Interculturality (5)	14
I-Techniques	Interpreting (20), Note-Taking (2), Memory Training (2), Knowledge Acquisition & Knowledge Management (8)	32
Fields	Family & Social Aspects, Workplace (1), School, Public Service Organisations, Police and Asylum hearings, Healthcare, Psychotherapy and Psychiatry, Counseling	20
Writing	Structuring and writing of texts incl. Final Paper	5

Applicants had to take a written and oral entrance exam before being admitted to the course. Students also had to do a traineeship worth 4 ECTS with a public service organisation within the scope of the programme. A follow-up of this training course is planned for 2011/2012.

3.3 Restructuring the curricula

The implementation of the Bologna model provided the opportunity to adapt the focus of the training programme to suit new occupational fields. The new interpreting master's is usually completed in two foreign languages. All students are taught the basics in so-called mandatory classes such as:

- General and specialised interpreting studies lectures and seminars
- Fundamental skills of interpreting
- Analysis and interpreting techniques
- Analysis and translation techniques.

The structure of the course allows students to customise their studies by choosing electives from a pool of predefined modules according to their languages and professional interests. Students have to choose four modules of 8 ECTS each, amounting to 32 ECTS in total, from all interpreting and translation classes offered at the department. The modules can be freely combined. Only Conference Interpreting requires a double-module of 16 ECTS per language.¹⁴

Students interested in Community Interpreting can choose from the following modules, each worth 8 ECTS:

- Specialised module on Community Interpreting
- Liaison Interpreting (negotiations)
- Liaison Interpreting (conversations)
- Translating for courts and authorities

In addition, the curriculum also provides the possibility to train as a translator and interpreter with a focus on “translation *and* interpreting”. At bachelor level,

14 <https://online.uni-graz.at/kfu_online/wbMitteilungsblaetter.display?pNr=132015> (accessed 30 September 2011).

a similar programme started in autumn 2010.¹⁵ Both programmes seek to valorise the potential of bilingual students with a migration background and offer intensified translational training with one foreign language only.

At the end of the academic year 2010/11, the first generation of students who have chosen all their pooled electives from modules relevant to Community Interpreting and who, in addition to that, wrote their thesis on Community Interpreting or Sign Language topics, will graduate at the department of translation studies in Graz.¹⁶

The department of translation studies is attempting to break the vicious circle of low status, lack of training, low level of professionalisation, and lack of interpreting quality at an academic level by promoting and offering a wide range of courses to students and (lay) practitioners.

4. Perspectives

However, the ultimate goal – the professionalisation of Community Interpreting (cf. Grbić 1998) – can and will only be met by a joint effort of research and training as well as through well organised professional associations. We need a profile of qualifications which indeed is different from that of conference interpreters, but which is no less demanding due to the different parameters of qualification. Above all, community interpreters need to have the competence to make consistent ethical decisions in the continuum between neutrality and advocacy. This is the reason why we are calling for the professionalisation of Community Interpreting and search for opportunities to integrate Community Interpreting in addition to Conference Interpreting into the regular curricula.

As a conclusion, I would therefore like to present and design a, perhaps utopian, model of such a development:



15 <http://www.uni-graz.at/uedo1www__files__curriculum__deutsch__tkk.pdf> (accessed 30 September 2011).

16 For an overview of some of the topics tackled in master's theses at the department see Grbić/Pöllabauer (2008).

As a basis for such a societal process, a strengthening of solidarity amongst *all* interpreters would have to take place. In particular, it will be necessary to dismantle and overcome the anxieties and prejudices of conference interpreters towards community interpreters and to raise awareness of the fact that both, conference and community interpreters, can benefit from working together. The fact is that every incidence of “bad” interpreting, no matter where and by whom it is provided, ultimately reflects negatively on the professional image of interpreters in general. In Austria, where interpreting is not a protected occupation, it is necessary to build a culture of trust and mutual respect. With this in mind, the fact that *Universitas Austria*,¹⁷ the Austrian Interpreters’ and Translators’ Association, has started to deal with Community Interpreting and, like AIIC (cf. Bowen 2000, Mikkelsen 2004), has set up a special forum for Community Interpreting, cannot be overestimated.

Interpreting Studies have convincingly demonstrated in empirical studies that Community Interpreting is a highly complex activity which requires the same quality standards from interpreters as any other form of interpreting, although the quality demands are differently structured. In the long run, research-based teaching and training thus seem to be indispensable. Whether this can be offered in the form of in-service courses or as a regular curriculum depends on individual socio-cultural realities. In my opinion, it is of the utmost importance that the next generation of interpreters have the opportunity to acquire the necessary incorporated and institutionalised cultural capital so that they may gain symbolic capital as well and attain a better (social) position in the field of translation and interpretation. Introducing certification tests, which already exist for Sign Language interpreters or for court interpreters in Austria, could be a helpful additional measure.

As researchers we should, however, never grow tired of pointing out the responsibility of all social and political relevant factors for the discrepancies between the declared value systems and social reality particularly in the practice of translating and interpreting in community settings. Based on solid empirical evidence and equipped with the symbolic capital of science, the discipline as a whole is competent and entitled to demand sustainable solutions that have been adapted to the needs of a multicultural society when it comes to institutionalised communication with so-called “foreigners”. I am convinced that it is the ethical and political mission of responsible Interpreting Studies scholars and of the discipline of Interpreting Studies to model solutions. These solutions should provide even the weakest members of society with the opportunity to enforce their internationally recognised human rights by being able to communicate and interact as equal partners of official institutions. I am, however, well aware that these days all such efforts meet strong political and social resistance based on politically orchestrated xenophobia.

17 Cf. <http://www.universitas.org/links.html?id=19&LINK__CAT__ID=16> (accessed 30 September 2011).

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