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Working conditions of community interpreters in Sweden: Opportunities and shortcomings

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to describe and analyse the working conditions of interpreters and interpreting services in Sweden. An understanding of interpreters' working conditions is a key to such factors as the management of resources, the reading and implementation of legislation, the organisation of interpreting services and the performance of interpreters in different situations. An understanding of interpreters' working conditions is also important in understanding how multiculturalism and multilingualism are viewed on a national scale in Sweden. This review of the working conditions of interpreters is based on material from two joint research projects, which appear to indicate that interpreters as a group have much to say and often reflect on their work and working conditions. The interpreters participating in this study often demonstrated a strong commitment to professionalism. At the same time, however, many of the reflections recorded for this study were about things that undermine professionalism: bad working conditions, low pay, the feeling of being "as replaceable as potatoes", and the feeling that the social status of interpreters is low. In analysing the consequences of working conditions we have found a tension between professionalism and deprofessionalisation. This tension has consequences for the rule of law and integration.

Keywords: working conditions, interpreting services, interpreter training, authorisation, procurement

Introduction

The aim of this article is to describe the working conditions of interpreters and to analyse interpreting services in Sweden. The article identifies and examines several shortcomings in current working conditions and points to possible ways of improving the situation. In a comparative study of interpreting services, Ozolins (2000) creates a model that illustrates different countries' responsiveness to interpreting and translation needs. Alongside Australia, Sweden is mentioned as a country with very comprehensive and organised language services, as well as training and accreditation for interpreters. Still, Ozolins argues that the situation is problematic; e.g. there are very few opportunities for professional development, and users often do not receive training. This article seeks to extend Ozolins' research, from the perspective of the interpreter. Although this article describes and analyses the interpreting situation in Sweden, the description may be seen as reflecting a broader context, as it uses first-hand narratives to show how the larger institutional and national contexts have a critical impact on the interpreting profession.

There appears to be a demand for a qualitative analysis of this kind in Sweden, since an understanding of interpreters' working conditions is necessary for deepening our understanding of how resources are managed, how legislation is read and carried out, how interpreting services are organised, and how the interpreter performs in

different situations (cf. Hale 2007: 252). An understanding of interpreters' working conditions is also important in understanding how multiculturalism and multilingualism are viewed on a national scale in Sweden (Kymlicka 1998).

The article comprises four parts. In the first, we describe the methods and materials used. In the second, we outline structural conditions that influence the interpreting services in Sweden. We then describe interpreting services and working conditions through the eyes of the interpreter, and finally, we analyse the use of interpreting services and the impact of these services on the interpreters' working conditions.

Materials and Method

This article is based on two research projects conducted in the Department of Arts and Cultural Studies, Division of Ethnology, at Lund University: *The Interpreter – a cultural broker* and *Behind closed doors – the impact of community interpreting in terms of rule of law and integration with a special focus on the reception of separated asylum seeking children* (2008-2011).

In these projects we investigated and analysed the role of the interpreter as it takes shape in practice. These projects were based on the assumption that interpreters generally work behind closed doors and that they become witnesses to the exercise of authority and communication in the context of multiculturalism in Sweden. We interviewed 26 community interpreters: four each in Stockholm, Göteborg and Malmö, and 14 in other places across the country. They were evenly distributed in terms of gender, and half of them had state authorisation. Some of the interpreters had extensive experience (up to 30 years), while others had very little (three months at the beginning of the study). The interpreters had been actively employed during different periods and in different contexts, so that their languages and nationalities reflected periodic migrations to Sweden. Only one of the 26 interpreters was a native Swede.

We met with the interpreters three times. In the first interview we asked three questions: Tell us how you came into the interpreting profession? How would you describe your role as an interpreter? When did you identify with the interpreting profession?

Before the second interview we asked each interpreter to select five interpreting situations, which we then discussed with them during the interviews, relating them to the "rules of professional ethics for interpreters" as found in *Good Interpreting Practice* (2010). We also talked about what the interpreter *can* do (cf. Angelelli 2004). It was during these second interviews that the discussions of working conditions took place. In the third set of interviews we aimed at a more detailed account of "working conditions" since these conditions are crucial for understanding the availability of qualified interpreters and the circumstances under which the public servants and clients receive the interpreter.

In addition, we had recurrent discussions with five types of stakeholders: (1) *authorised interpreters*, (2) persons who had depended on interpretation as *patients or clients*, (3) representatives of *interpreting agencies and procurers*, (4) *interpreter trainers*, and (5) *officials* using interpreters on an everyday basis. We also carried out many observations of interpreters, interpreter users, agencies, training, authorisation and procurement, and followed these observations with interviews. Finally, we studied the legislation in this area. In this article we will use selected quotations from the 26 interviewed interpreters. One of them, Maria, will be used as a main source,

since her story of a day at work is consistent with several other accounts in the interviews. Maria's story will be supplemented by quotations of reflections by other interpreters.² As the starting point, we will describe the structural conditions within which the interpreting services in Sweden operate.

Interpreting services in Sweden – structural conditions

Every day many encounters occur between Swedish officials and non-Swedish-speaking individuals.³ These encounters often require access to a community interpreter.

There are no current statistics showing exactly how many hours of interpretation occur in Sweden or how much the interpreting services cost. Within the public sector, the total interpreting time in 2004 was estimated to be 650,000 hours in more than 120 languages (SOU 2005:37: 81), and the figure has undoubtedly increased since then. Based on the Göteborg figures, we estimate that the total interpreting time in 2009 was between 1.2 and 1.5 million hours for the whole of Sweden.

General political decisions have a clear bearing on the use of interpreting, and legislation defines the responsibilities of the state, the regions and the municipalities in providing the service. It is against this background that the working conditions of the interpreters should be understood.⁴

There is no coherent set of rules and regulations (SOU 2005:37: 79ff.). Rather, various laws and ordinances have been drawn up, defining the state's responsibility for interpreting services.⁵ In short, the right to interpreting services, and the duty to provide them, are based on four fundamental principles: 1) citizen participation, 2) equal treatment for all, 3) the right of national minorities to their language, and 4) the right to plead one's case within the justice system. We have identified four means with which the state assumes this responsibility.

The first is the authorisation of interpreters. The first community interpreters were authorised by the National Board of Trade in 1975. Since then, *authorised interpreter* and *authorised translator* are protected professional titles. The Legal, Financial and Administrative Services Agency (KamK), which assumed responsibility for authorising interpreters in 1985, offers the possibility of authorisation in 38 of about 170 interpreted languages, including Swedish Sign Language (SFS 1985:613). KamK is also responsible for supervising the approximately 900 authorised interpreters. Following authorisation interpreters can take an exam for specialist competence as "legal interpreter" or "medical interpreter". In Sweden, around 190 interpreters possess specialist competence as legal interpreters, and 100 as medical interpreters.

The second means is a document entitled *Good Interpreting Practice* (revised in 2010), compiled by KamK in 1980 as a means of regulating the role of the interpreter and ethics within the profession.

The third means is the Public Procurement Act (SFS 2007:1091), which requires all public authorities at the state, regional and local levels to procure interpreting services on the open market.

The fourth is interpreter training. After almost 40 years of local initiatives, a national, consolidated, state-financed basic training programme in community interpreting for spoken language interpreters was set up in 2006. The programme, consisting of six courses,⁶ is offered at seven different educational associations and

folk high schools (adult education colleges) courses. An introductory course about the interpreting profession is followed by five other modules: “Social, insurance and labour market interpreting”, “Medical interpreting”, “Basic law”, “Law, supplementary course” and “Asylum interpreting”. All of these include factual knowledge, ethics of interpreting, interpreting techniques, and interpreting exercises. The basic training programme ends with written and oral exams. Students who pass these courses receive a certificate and can then prepare for authorisation.

The four means outlined above have certain shortcomings, however. Thus, for example, *Good Interpreting Practice* (2010) was written for authorised interpreters whose authorisation may be reviewed and withdrawn, but in fact only about 900 of the 5000 to 6000 working spoken language interpreters in Sweden are authorised, and half of them are either beyond retirement age or trained in languages other than those in greatest demand.

As KamK is short of resources, authorisation opportunities are infrequent and cover only a handful of languages. Resources for training are limited as well, and may entail no more than a single semester of study – hardly long enough, in our opinion, for integrating all of the relevant competences. There is a clear need – both in Sweden and internationally – to further develop the training available for spoken language interpreters (Englund Dimitrova 1991; Hale 2007; Paulsen & Galal 2005; Roy 2000; Valero-Garcés & Martin 2008; Wadensjö 1992, 1998). In short, there is a large gap between the demand for competent interpreters in Sweden and the number of interpreters who can gain access to training and who have an opportunity to become authorised.

We believe that the Public Procurement Act has led to a worsening of the working conditions for interpreters. The deregulation of the market in the mid-1990s generated many competing agencies, forcing down prices, to the detriment of quality. Agencies are not under any form of public supervision and there are no requirements for quality except those defined by the buyer. Even if quality requirements are defined in signed contracts, these are rarely monitored.⁷

Another need highlighted by members of the interpreting community is for training programmes designed for officials (cf. Ozolins 2000). In the training programmes for teachers, doctors, health care staff, police officers and social workers that we examined, there are no modules covering how to work with interpreters despite the fact that existing modules in these programmes include communication and dialogue methodology and that participants in these professional programmes will most probably work with interpreters in their future employment. The lack of training for working with an interpreter can be seen as a product of viewing multiculturalism and multilingualism as aberrant, i.e., of the national tendency to take it for granted that professionals in the public sector normally deal with people who speak Swedish (cf. De los Reyes 2006; SOU 2006:40).

Training, authorisation and procurement are associated with some uncertainty, since interpreting services are subject to constant change. Time, space and required languages determine the market demand, which is further subject to considerable regional and local differences, making it difficult for the interpreter in less demanded languages to maintain professional knowledge as well as interpreting skills.

The working conditions of interpreters depend on the structural conditions determined by legislation, on how the state assumes responsibility, and on the unpredictability described above. In the following sections we will describe these working conditions, through the eyes of an interpreter, in relation to agencies,

procurement, officials, clients/patients, training, authorisation, and other interpreters (see Figure 1).

@@@ Fig. 1 approx. here @@@

The voice of the interpreter

Our representative interpreter, Maria, has been working as a community interpreter for several years. In what follows, we present her recollection of one stressful day at work.

Her first appointment was scheduled for 30 minutes interpreting at a hospital, where she was asked to accompany the patient, who was in a bed, and two members of staff, from the emergency ward to the radiography unit. Once in radiography, the interpreting session began. The patient was hard of hearing and the conversation took longer than expected. When the x-ray examination was over, Maria was already behind schedule. She realised that she would have difficulties making it on time to her next appointment, which was at another hospital some 30 kilometres away.

When Maria announced that she had to leave, a new problem arose. Hospital staff always has to work in pairs when they move a patient in a bed. Just one nurse was still in the room and Maria was asked to help transport the patient back to the emergency ward. Maria replied that the regulations did not allow her to transport patients, and that if anything happened she would not be insured. Maria's response annoyed the nurse. Seeing that the corridor was full of people who might think that she was being unhelpful, Maria felt pressured and agreed to help.

When Maria came out of the first hospital she phoned the agency that schedules her work and asked someone there to inform her next customer that she would be late.

She "drove like a maniac". When she arrived at the other hospital she announced herself to the unit secretary. The waiting patient was irritated that Maria was late. There was still a margin of time, however, as the patient's medical examination was scheduled to take 30 minutes and Maria had 50 minutes at her disposal before she had to continue to her next interpreting appointment. Unfortunately, the doctor did not turn up. Maria and the patient waited together. After 50 minutes Maria had to leave, so as not to be late for her next appointment. Before leaving, she gave the unit secretary her card and asked her to phone the interpreting agency if the doctor arrived. She explained that the agency might be able to arrange an interpreter by telephone. The rest of the day continued with no further incidents. By evening Maria was utterly exhausted. Just as she began to relax the patient she had been forced to leave telephoned and told her off (No. 8:2).

Interpreters and agents – a relation without security

After the phone call from the patient, Maria rang her boss at the interpreting agency. She wanted to give her version of what had happened. Later she also asked for counselling, which the agency provided. Maria's experience was that she could turn to the agency and that it supported her in clearing up misunderstandings in a professional way.

Usually, the interpreter works as a freelancer for one or more interpreting agencies. The first agencies in Sweden were established in the 1970s and for a long time interpreting services were offered primarily by immigrant bureaus run by the municipalities. In the 1990s private agencies began competing with the municipal ones, offering the same basic service of providing interpreting but under somewhat different conditions.

Normally, the interpreter registers with an agency, which then examines the interpreter's training, authorisation and specialist competence. If the agency considers the interpreter competent, he/she is invited for an interview and a test. From our interviews with interpreters and agencies in different parts of Sweden, however, we have learned that this is not always how the process works. Most interpreting is done with a non-authorised interpreter, and almost anyone with a passable knowledge of two languages may be called upon to interpret. There are several reasons for this: Some agencies are less than scrupulous, and may not be sending the interpreter best qualified for the job, particularly in the case of languages less commonly used in Sweden.

In Sweden, the agencies pay the interpreter on a time-unit basis, the fee being set out in the contract between the agency and the buyer. The interpreter also receives some travel time allowances, but the agency does not usually cover preparation time. Different agencies follow different practices, but generally, our interviewees noted that their income was too low to set aside money for holidays or insurance. Their situation as freelancers meant that they might not receive sickness benefits when they are ill (cf. SOU 2004:15: 172).

Even if Maria was not authorised, she was high on the agency's priority list as she was regarded as competent in both Swedish and her other language as well as in other aspects of interpreting expertise. For commonly occurring languages, interpreters high on the agencies' priority lists are fully booked, but those further down or those who interpret less common languages may have difficulties supporting themselves on interpreting alone. Working conditions thus vary, depending on whether the interpreter receives enough work to make a living. Part-time interpreters usually have another job.

The ideal situation for all parties involved in an interpreted encounter is for each individual interpreting assignment to be carried out professionally, whether the interpreter works full time or only occasionally. However, many agencies invest only limited resources in their interpreters, claiming that competition has forced them to lower prices. Still, Maria is happy with her agency. She only works with one agency and says that this is because they invested in her by supporting her when she attended the new basic training programme. Her agency invests in the well-being and competence of its listed interpreters. It pays for training, further education, authorisation and professional guidance. It has an interpreters' council and shows an interest in raising the status of the interpreting profession and promoting an appreciation of interpreting through training programmes for officials and dialogues with buyers.

Procurement – being treated as a commodity

Government authorities, county councils and municipalities purchase interpreting services from interpreting agencies, and such procurement occurs above the heads of the interpreters. As they do not employ interpreters directly, agencies cannot guarantee access to the interpreting resources described in their tender. When an

agency loses a contract it can no longer offer the same amount of work and, consequently, risks losing the interpreters on its books. Interpreters will often register with the winner of a contract, even if it means working for lower fees. The constant movement resulting from the system of two-year procurement contracts makes it difficult for the agencies to ensure continuity in employment.

The loose relationship between interpreters and agencies has both negative and positive effects on loyalty, professional development and morale. For example, Fatima, who has registered with two competing agencies, described how she waited for assignments from both agencies on Sunday evening, and gave priority to one agency over the other. In fact, interpreters might cancel a booked interpreting assignment at short notice when they receive an offer of a “better job” from another agency (No. 15:3).

Furthermore, buyers do not often ask agencies for information about the interpreters they have listed at the time of the tender. Agencies also have a right to demand that the buyers not make their bid available to competitors. Indeed, a number of interpreters told us that even though they had not submitted an application, some agencies were listing them. They had even found themselves listed with agencies from which they had resigned, while buyers assumed that agencies list only those who had agreed to be listed. Buyers often seemed unaware that interpreters may refuse to work for an agency that had lowered its fees in order to win a contract.

The Swedish National Courts Administration is the only authority that uses a fixed fee for interpreting services, based on a general salaries index. Interpreters’ professional organisations and unions have called for a national wage standard which would apply to all users of interpreters. Proponents argue that such a standard fee would create stability. Agencies would be forced to compete by means other than keeping interpreters’ fees low. Cost-saving before quality and the lack of a standard wage have led to situations in which authorised interpreters are without work while non-authorised and even untrained interpreters are hired.

Güle, an authorised interpreter with specialist competence as both medical and legal interpreter, described how she voluntarily turned down all health care assignments. She realised that she would cost the agency more than it would be receiving under the contract. Instead, she decided to focus on legal interpreting. She saw this system as a waste of resources and a threat to the medical security of the patients.

In their interviews, the interpreters talked about the agencies’ lack of transparency and supervision and about their own vulnerable position.⁸ They describe this situation, in which the competence they represent is traded above their heads and beyond their influence, as a clear indication that society accords the interpreting profession a low status. From their point of view, both agencies and buyers of interpreting services treat them like “potatoes”.

Officials – friction in everyday work

Before leaving the hospital on that stressful day Maria gave her card to the unit secretary who then gave the number to the patient. Maria recalled the situation:

I don’t know if she was a replacement for the regular secretary. She didn’t have a clue about the situation, about times and how things work for interpreters. I don’t think she had ever met an interpreter before. I think I went to see the secretary three to five times during those 50 minutes. I ran back and forth and asked her to

Speak to the doctor and the technician and whoever it was to try to hurry things up. Often they're reasonably considerate when you turn up as an interpreter, but she said "Well, I can't do anything" and showed no involvement whatsoever (No. 8:2).

In their everyday work interpreters meet many officials, who do not always understand the notion of role boundaries and the limits of the interpreter's responsibility. This was the case when Maria was asked to carry out tasks which were not part of her job. It also happens that officials try to delegate to the interpreter certain routine tasks by saying things like "You've heard this so many times. Why don't you give it to them directly to save time?" Occasionally, the official tries to elicit the interpreter's opinion through such questions as "Do you think the applicant is lying?"

In accordance with *Good Interpreting Practice* (2010: 13), the interpreter must find out enough about the interpretation before beginning to assess whether he/she will be able to interpret satisfactorily. Therefore, some of the interpreters we interviewed would like agency representatives to ask officials beforehand about the assignment and to find out whether there are specific things to consider. The agency representatives rarely do so, however. Aisha described a visit to a maternity ward. Such visits are almost guaranteed to be about positive things. Sometimes, though, a maternity ward assignment can involve emotionally difficult topics such as deformity, death, maltreatment or social destitution. In such cases, it is important for the interpreter to be emotionally prepared. (No. 6:1).

Since interpreters work in widely varying environments, they have to deal with different areas of expertise, such as law, health care, social services, schools, or the Migration Board. Interviewed interpreters suggested that officials did not always understand their natural limitations. These clients appeared to believe that interpreters should be walking encyclopaedias. Nor did they appreciate the need for interpreters to possess a sound knowledge of the area(s) they may be called upon to interpret.

Several of the interpreters in our study thought that officials regarded them as an element of friction rather than as an instrument for simplifying communication and facilitating their own work. Sometimes customers will add time to the payment order as a way of rewarding the interpreter. Others phone the agency to complain. In Maria's case it was the patient who phoned.

Clients/patients – a complex relationship

Long after the incident at the hospital related above, Maria met the patient who had told her off.

I can't quite remember where I met her, but it was somewhere in the hospital. I asked her to write about the incident. I told her that it didn't matter how she formulated it or what her feelings were or if it all was my fault, as long as she wrote it down and sent it to the agency. "You can write in your language and they will translate it," I said and gave her the name, address and phone number of the agency's manager. After that I've been able to let it go – even though I don't know if she ever did what I asked her to do. (No. 8:2).

The interviews revealed that it was unusual for patients or clients to phone the interpreter. Maria did not defend herself against the patient, but she felt that it was

unfair that the doctor was not held responsible, as he was undoubtedly the one who had been neglectful. The incident, and what Maria says in the quote, point to at least two things. The first is the problem of being known among the people for whom one interprets. Maria did not know the patient, but she had met her on various occasions. Our material shows that the interpreters' relationships with officials and clients/patients are complicated, both in the interaction during the interpreting situation itself and in life outside work – particularly in smaller communities. The role of the interpreter, the obligation to maintain confidentiality, the requirement for impartiality in respect of the parties involved, and neutrality in respect to content, all place high demands on the interpreter which can lead interpreters to isolate themselves in various ways.

The second problem is the complexity of being a “compatriot” and of the loyalties that might have an impact on the interpretation. Maria understood from the patient's rebuke that the patient saw her as an ally who should have been supporting her during the medical consultation, an important reason for this alliance being their shared language. The interpreters, however, expressed mixed feelings about being regarded as compatriots. In some cases, they indicated that they were ashamed of compatriots who had committed criminal acts or who were obviously lying to an official. In other cases, they felt frustrated and wished they could take sides; e.g. in asylum interviews or when social welfare officers were unable to see the needs of the client or who withheld information. Several interpreters recalled occasions when social services agents took children into custody, with the lack of cultural competence displayed by these officials leading to a situation where neither the child nor the parent understood why they were being separated.

There exist a few forums where interpreters can vent their thoughts on impartiality, inequality, loyalties, shame, responsibility, etc. In Maria's case, we saw how an agency can be supportive. Also, training and further education are forms of support for the individual interpreter.

Training and authorisation – becoming a professional

Currently, Maria is one of about 325 interpreters in 29 languages who have completed the consolidated interpreter training programme.⁹ When she refused to help move the bed from the radiography area to the emergency ward she was applying what she had been taught about the role of the interpreter and her understanding of professional ethics. However, she changed her mind under pressure. Maria's account paints a picture of interpreters' vulnerability in work situations where they have to make decisions that sometimes contradict what they have been taught to regard as ethically or otherwise correct behaviour (Kredens & Fowler 2010).

Interpreters state that training is necessary not only for the acquisition of factual knowledge, terminology, techniques and ethics. Livia emphasized that there was a great difference between *working as* an interpreter and *being* an interpreter. According to her definition, being an interpreter meant having adequate training and certification. Livia believed that if more interpreters were trained and became authorised this would raise the status of the profession and enable interpreters to improve their position in the labour market in terms of both competition and compensation (No. 12:1).

The certificate awarded to those who complete the consolidated training programme is becoming a common prerequisite for interpreters assigned through procurement. Many currently active interpreters with long experience of interpreting

attended equivalent courses earlier in their careers, but these programmes were not rated at the time, so that the experienced interpreters are now at a disadvantage.¹⁰ To solve this problem, TÖI (the Institute for Interpretation and Translation Studies at Stockholm University) has decided that, in languages where there is no possibility for authorisation, a test will be provided for validation of competences. Those who interpret languages for which authorisation currently exists have to take the authorisation exam in order to avoid dropping down the priority ladder.

Becoming authorised is far from being a guarantee of competence. Our material indicates widespread criticism of the authorisation procedure in its current form. Interpreters we interviewed questioned the order of the written and oral exams, the quality of the exams, the requirements, the language experts, etc. Some said that they wanted qualification exams to be difficult while others would prefer a more practical-minded approach where the interpreting test would take into account more than factual and terminological knowledge.

There is the view among both interpreters and agencies, as well as among KamK officials, that the authorisation system needs to be reviewed and updated (Nordlund & Pettersson 2009). This revision requires political will and adequate resources.

However, our interviews reveal that it is not through formal training that interpreters acquire most of their competence. Professional growth is a result of assiduous individual investment in the study of one's interpreting languages, and of the relevant laws and regulations, customs, and everyday culture. In these efforts, exchange with other interpreters is essential. Angelique, an experienced interpreter who also works as a teacher and language supervisor, explained her belief that training alone would not ensure the availability of more competent, better trained and/or authorised interpreters. She contended that further education – in-depth studies in particular – fill a vital personal function for interpreters as a place for guidance, reflection, debriefing etc. During her training, Angelique established a friendship with two colleagues who live in other parts of Sweden and it is to these colleagues that she turns when she needs to discuss anything from terminology to loyalty conflicts (No. 26:1,2).

Other interpreters – competition and support

Talking to colleagues thus fills an important function in the otherwise lonely interpreting profession. In contrast, Batu has defined his relationship to other interpreters by declaring, "Interpreters are vultures!" (No. 14:1). Essentially this statement is about interpreters competing for work in an unregulated market in a way that affects relationships, particularly within language groups. In addition to the sporadic personal contact among interpreters, there are only a few associations and organisations to serve the interpreters' own professional needs. The oldest is the Swedish Association of Interpreters (STOF), formed in 1975. There are other local, regional and national associations in which mainly authorised interpreters pursue issues and monitor procurement. One union, Vision, has set up a section for interpreting issues.¹¹ Above all, the associations have been critical of the deregulation of the market for interpreting services and of the fact that the authorities – including those within the health care system – continue to use untrained interpreters.

Our interviews revealed a strong feeling among interpreters of wanting to take pride in their profession. At the same time there was an evident disconnect between

the low level of interest in joining professional associations and widespread dissatisfaction over working conditions.

Consequences for interpreters and interpreting services in Sweden: Shortcomings and possibilities

To complete this analysis of interpreters' relationships to other actors in the interpreting field, we will summarise and analyse the consequences of inadequate working conditions for both the interpreters and society as a whole.

In analysing the interpreters' relationships with other actors we have found some keywords that capture the working conditions of community interpreters: freedom, power, recognition, loneliness and satisfaction.

Working as a freelance interpreter gave Maria a sense of *freedom*. She wanted neither fixed working hours nor a fixed office. Several of the interpreters interviewed talked about being free to plan their own working hours and of being able to do telephone interpreting at home.

The freedom of being a freelancer can also be seen as illusory, since interpreters often lack security such as pension plans and holiday pay.¹² Also, competition is tough. There are interpreters who sleep with their mobile phone under their pillow in order not to miss any opportunity for work. Freelancer freedom is based on the conditions of an unregulated labour market.

Interpreters also talked about their *power*, and about how it has made interpreting an exciting and attractive profession. By power they seemed to be referring to the indispensability of skilled interpreters in so many of the situations they encountered on a daily basis. They noted that they would often direct their power against the official rather than the client, and would play a role in reducing any power imbalances, choosing words and expressions that advocate for the client. They also talked of their power to enable clients to express themselves fully in their own language. Furthermore, power is available to the interpreter in the sense that the persons helped are unable to judge the competence of the interpreter.

The interpreter may get a sense of powerlessness when not allowed to intervene even though it is apparent that the client/patient or customer is being misinformed, discriminated against, or cannot understand. On the other hand, the interpreter may also feel powerless when the client/patient is perceived as lying or trying to manipulate the official, or, as in Maria's case, when the interpreter was forced to leave a patient.

Many accounts we heard highlighted the interpreters' sense of awe at being able to move among different settings – to interpret during a birth, a kidney transplant, a police interrogation of a small child, a family counselling session or an asylum interview. While this variety of settings is rewarding and stimulating, it may also exact an emotional price, with limited opportunities for guidance, therapy or follow-up counselling.

In several of our interviews, interpreters brought up the subject of the status of their profession and the ways in which clients did (or did not) express recognition and appreciation. Too often, they felt, particularly when a procurement process was involved, it was price, not competence or quality that counted, and they were shown little appreciation for their efforts.

Some of the interviewees said that interpreting is a profession that provides constant *satisfaction* because it fills a central function in a multicultural society. They

captured this notion by describing in detail the feeling they got when an interpretation had gone well. They felt that they “disappeared” and that the parties spoke to and understood one another. The feeling of professionalism and self-assurance in one’s role was a source of satisfaction and created a sense of professional pride.

In analysing the consequences of interpreters’ working conditions from a societal perspective, we found a tension between professionalism and non-professionalism. We believe that this tension has consequences for the rule of law and for the understanding of integration.

The interpreters we interviewed had a positive attitude toward their work. They were frequently driven to learn more about the society in which they were working and to improve their interpreting languages. Overall, the interviews showed that interpreters, as a group, have much to say and often reflect on their work and working conditions. Their commitment to *professionalism* appears to be strong. Not surprisingly then, many of the interpreters in our study reflected about things that undermine professionalism: bad working conditions, low pay, the sense of being “as replaceable as potatoes”, and the feeling that the status of the profession in society is low. Several interviewees had become involved in developing and improving the situation for interpreters through their agencies, associations, unions and professional training opportunities. Some had resigned because they felt unable to change things, or to make themselves heard and earn the respect that ought to accompany the profession. From the perspective of the interpreters, more attention seemed to be paid to the agencies’ profit margins than to the views and wishes of the interpreters themselves, causing some capable and well-trained interpreters to leave the profession. We believe that the turnover of interpreters and the unfavourable working conditions that are common in the interpreting profession, lead to *de-professionalism* (cf. Valero-Garcés & Martin 2008). In line with Ozolins (2000: 32) we argue that the lack of opportunities for promoting professionalism is a consequence of interpreting being an institution-driven field rather than a profession-driven one.

In reality, there are no rules and regulations for the hiring of trained and professional interpreters in Sweden. As a result of this “legal vacuum”, both officials and clients/patients are at risk – the officials because they are liable for any possible inappropriate decisions or mishandling, and the clients/patients because they are totally dependent on the interpretation for understanding their legal, medical, and social rights and obligations.

Interpreting also has an impact on the way in which the newly arrived immigrant is integrated into the receiving country. For example, an immigrant might have learned enough Swedish to manage in everyday situations but when faced with something like a medical consultation or a trial still needs an interpreter to ensure full mutual understanding, as does the official.

Conclusions

Our study of interpreters’ working conditions, and relationships to various actors in the interpreting field in Sweden points to both shortcomings and opportunities in the current system. Maria’s account of “a day at work” presents a series of conflicting expectations which may have an impact on the interpretation and what may be understood as legally secure for the individuals involved. Maria provided insights into a stressful day during which relationships were constantly being tested and ultimately being determined by institutional and national conditions for interpreting services. We

believe that without public supervision of this costly service, legal, medical and social security and the rights of individuals will continue to be compromised.

Our review of working conditions for interpreters reveals the urgency of this issue from a broader societal perspective since interpreting relates to issues of diversity and multilingualism and the national self-image both in Sweden and more generally, in Europe (cf. Witteveen 2010). Although Sweden has been pursuing a multicultural welfare society since the 1970s, multiculturalism is still not fully seen as an obvious basis for the public sector in Sweden. (cf. Borevi 2002). There is a substantial risk of interpreting services being seen as relevant only to immigrants rather than as a service that affects society as a whole and relates to such fundamental values as democracy, equality and justice. A common view amongst the interpreters is that the current low status accorded to the interpreting profession is primarily due to an undervaluing of individuals who do not speak Swedish. Many of the interpreters we interviewed argued that the low demands made on interpreting services and the lack of agency supervision ultimately boiled down to a form of quiet and insidious discrimination. Therefore, we regard the subject of interpreter professionalism and working conditions worthy of further research and development in the broader context of language policy and minority rights as well as Interpreting Studies.

Notes

1. Norström, Fioretos and Gustafsson have contributed equally to the production of material, analysis and text.
2. The project has been ethics tested in accordance with the Ethical Review Act (SFS 2003:460). All places and names are fictitious. Details and information are slightly changed for reasons of anonymity and confidentiality. The numbers we use as references when we quote interpreters refer to which interpreter (1-26) we are quoting and whether it is the first, second or third interview.
3. Our writing deals exclusively with community interpreting and the situation for interpreters of spoken languages. We have chosen to use the term *official* for the party using an interpreter in the course of their work, unless we specify the party's professional title, e.g. doctor, teacher, policeman. We call the non-Swedish-speaking individual *patient* or *client*, depending on the specific situation.
4. Cf. "Community Interpreting in Context: The Impact of Institutional and National-Political Variables on Interpreting", panel debate, Critical Link 6, Birmingham 2010.
5. The Swedish Code of Judicial Procedure (1942:740), the Administrative Court Procedure Act (1971:291), the Administrative Procedure Act (1986:223, Section 8), the National Minorities and Minority Languages Act (2009:724), the Health and Medical Services Act (1982:763) and the Social Services Act (2001:453)
6. Another route to the interpreting profession is to complete higher education courses in interpreting at Stockholm University (Interpreting and translation I, interpreting II-III and a Bachelor's course). These courses require previous knowledge of a language other than Swedish (60 ECTS).

7. TSR, (Tolkservicerådet), an association of 22 interpreting agencies, has an environmental and quality certification. Agencies within the private sector follow ISO 9001:2008 and ISO 9001:2000.
8. A 2004 report, *Tolkförmedling – kvalitet registrering tillsyn* (SOU 2004:15), proposed a law on registration and supervision of interpreting agencies, meaning that they would be operating within a framework of government rules and regulations. This proposal has hitherto not led to any changes.
9. TÖI, Stockholm University, 23 November 2010.
10. These courses, which are still being offered separately from the consolidated programmes, do not, however, lead to any formal qualification in the form of a certificate.
11. Vision is a national trade union for salaried employees working with service and support to the public.
12. Cf. the political-philosophical discussion on freedom in Taylor (1979).

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Figure 1. The interpreters' relation to other stakeholders within the field of interpreting in Sweden