

Interpreting in Northern Ireland

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[This article appeared in *Translation Ireland* (2010) 18: 2, pp. 99-108, guest edited by Mary Phelan and Krisztina Zimányi, published by Irish Translators' and Interpreters' Association]

This article examines how interpreter provision in Northern Ireland developed in a very different way from Ireland or indeed England, Scotland or Wales. In general terms, interpreter provision in Northern Ireland is very good in that interpreters are routinely provided for hospitals, social welfare, schools and of course police stations and courts. The majority of interpreters have undergone training, and instead of outsourcing interpreting services to a translation agency, the authorities have opted for an in-house service for health and social welfare, a social economy enterprise for legal interpreting and a community development organisation for other types of interpreting. Each organisation has a register of interpreters.

Introduction

In Ireland, interpreters who work in garda stations and the courts attend a one-day training course. They are not tested to ascertain if they can in fact interpret. Most are recruited on the basis that they speak English and another language. There are some qualified interpreters who have obtained qualification in other countries and there are holders of the Graduate Certificate in Community Interpreting from Dublin City University. However, qualified interpreters are not prioritised for work. Most interpreting provision has been outsourced to private companies resulting in competition based on low prices – an approach which filters down into lower rates of pay for interpreters.

The situation in Northern Ireland is very different. Interpreter provision has developed in a very particular way and this is largely thanks to very strong legislation. Anti-discrimination legislation in Northern Ireland is much stronger than in Ireland. Article 20A of the Race Relations (NI) Order 1997 provides that 'it is unlawful for a public authority to discriminate against a person on the grounds of race or ethnic or national origins... in the course of carrying out any functions of the authority which consist of the provision of healthcare.' Article 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 places a statutory duty on public authorities to have 'due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity between persons of different religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status or sexual orientation.' Article 14 of the Human Rights Act 1998 focuses on the prohibition of discrimination and language is specifically included as grounds for discrimination.

When used in a positive framework, legislation can be the best way of ensuring that interpreting services are provided. In Northern Ireland most provision is not through commercial, profit-making companies but is based on different models. In the case of medical interpreting, Health and Social Services set up an in-house service. A registered charity, the Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities (NICEM), provides interpreters to

work for the Police Service Northern Ireland and for the lower courts. South Tyrone Empowerment Programme, a community development organisation, provides interpreters to the Department of Employment and Learning and to the Social Security Agency and are back-up providers to the Health Services.

All three bodies train interpreters to Open College Network level 3, which is the equivalent of A level standard.

Northern Ireland Health and Social Services Interpreting Services (NIHSSIS)

With regard to interpreting provision in the healthcare sector in Northern Ireland, strong legislation dating back to the late 1990s meant that there was an obligation on Health and Social Care Trusts in Northern Ireland to ensure that people who were not proficient in English would not experience discrimination when accessing services. The first step was to set up the Regional Health and Social Services Interpreting Project for Black and Minority Ethnic Groups. This was followed in 2004 by the Northern Ireland Health and Social Services Interpreting Services (NIHSSIS) which is currently managed by the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust and provides a 24-hour face to face interpreting service. While face to face interpreters are preferred for longer appointments, telephone interpreters are also available through The Big Word company, mainly for registration and for short appointments. There is a separate multi-agency contract for translation.

Prospective interpreters must complete a language test conducted by Belfast Metropolitan College before they are accepted onto the training course. The Community Interpreting course is held one day per week over 12 weeks and covers three units.

Unit 1 tasks on community interpreting research consist of:

- A written directory of 25 organisations
- A presentation of detailed information on five organisations
- A written paper on the needs of the ethnic minority community
- A presentation on a health and social services issue
- A research log and evaluation.

Unit 2 consists of a bilingual glossary and involves class discussion on the use of glossaries; interpreters compile a glossary of 50 terms with explanations, a glossary of 20 technical and colloquial terms and a glossary of 180 terms complete with target language equivalents.

Unit 3 focuses on a list of English language jargon terms, discussion on the skills needed to become a community interpreter, reflection on interpreters' own skills in a range of situations and a recorded roleplay. Interpreters are also required to carry out case studies on primary care, social services, hospital services, mental health services and community care.

Before registering with the Service, students must agree to adhere to the NIHSSIS Code of Ethics/Practice and sign a confidentiality agreement. At the time of writing, there is a register of 275 interpreters covering 34 languages. Professional Development sessions are provided to interpreters in areas such as domestic violence, child protection, social services, work ethics, self-employment and maternity and mental health in the form of half or full day workshops.

Additionally, there is a four-day Health Specific Conversion Course for those who have previously completed the Community Interpreting Course with South Tyrone Empowerment Programme (STEP) or the Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities (NICEM).

It is important for healthcare professionals to be aware of the need for interpreters and to know how to access them. A key aspect of the work done by NIHSSIS is the provision of training in 'Working Well with Interpreters' to hospital staff across Northern Ireland. Most importantly, medical staff are told that they have a legal duty to provide an interpreter.

According to the NIHSSIS *Annual Report*, in the year from April 2008 to end of March 2009, the top language by far was Polish, followed by Lithuanian, Hungarian, Latvian, Cantonese, Mandarin, Bulgarian and Portuguese. Demand for interpreters has grown substantially with over 40,000 requests in 2009 (NIHSSIS conference report), which means that due to the relatively high volume of work in health interpreting and healthcare, interpreters in the languages most in demand can make a living.

CONNECT-NICEM – Interpreting for the police and courts

CONNECT-NICEM was set up in 2002 as a social economy enterprise by the Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities. It is a company limited by guarantee and accepted as a charity by HM Revenue and Customs. It is operated as a social enterprise on a 'not for individual profit' basis. Company profits are used to support work with Black and Minority Ethnic communities and individuals throughout Northern Ireland, and to further improve the standards and professional development of interpreters.

The organisation provides a 24-hour service, 365 days a year. Clients can contact the service by email, fax or by phone to make a booking. The service endeavours to provide the highest qualified interpreter at the nearest geographical location. The same interpreter can be provided again if that is the preference of the client. Clients can request a male or a female interpreter. After the assignment, clients are asked to fill in a feedback form.

NICEM has contracts with Police Service for Northern Ireland (PSNI), Probation Service and Prison Service, NI Courts Service, Public Prosecution Service, Belfast Airport Police and a number of other justice agencies. They have been providing interpreters to the PSNI since 2004 supported by four office staff who deal with requests for interpreters. Particular care is taken with confidential records which are kept securely in hard copy, on a protected database and on a network without access to the internet.

In 2009 CONNECT-NICEM started providing interpreters to the Courts Service from the Magistrates' courts to High Court level. For cases heard in higher courts, interpreters who hold the Diploma in Public Service Interpreting (legal option) are recruited through the National Register of Public Service Interpreters (NRPSI) and flown in from England, Scotland or Wales.

In 1999 NICEM set up the first training programme for community interpreters in Northern Ireland. Since then they have trained 390 interpreters. Courses are run two or three times a year and have been delivered in Belfast, Ballymena, Coleraine, Dungannon, Derry, Letterkenny and Lisburn. NICEM have also provided a basic community interpreter course in Tullamore, Galway and Buncrana.

Anyone interested in working for CONNECT-NICEM has to complete a registration form and apply for the basic Community Interpreting training course unless they have already undergone training elsewhere. The registration form includes questions on qualifications, experience, personal details and references and applicants must provide evidence to support this information. Applicants must be resident in the UK for three years in order to apply for PSNI security clearance. This is a requirement for interpreters. However, police clearance from other countries is not a prerequisite. Applicants have to take an English assessment test and attend for interview.

Similarly to the NIHSSIS, NICEM trains interpreters at level 3, and the training comprises 60 hours in three units over the course of 12 days on a weekly basis. Upon completion learners should be able to: interpret confidently and accurately, select and apply the appropriate interpreting techniques, recognise implicit meanings, assumptions and attitudes, recognise jargon and terminology used in a range of public services, accurately translate terms from English into another language, and carry out relevant research in preparation for an interpreting assignment. Accreditation is awarded based on assessment exercises during the course and submission of a final portfolio.

The organization also runs a specialized course on Interpreting within the Criminal Justice System and consisting of five units at level 3. This course has been developed and accredited by NICEM with advice and guidance from independent consultant Joan Colin, co-author of *Interpreters and the Legal Process*, Waterside Press, 1996. The course was submitted for accreditation in 2005, and a new unit on interpreting within the prison service is in development for accreditation. The unit titles are:

1. Interpreting within the police service
2. Interpreting within the court service
3. Interpreting within the immigration service
4. Interpreting and Translation skills in the legal system
5. Research and report writing techniques

6. Interpreting with the Prison Service.

At the end of the training course interpreters are tested through three assessment exercises. These consist of a recorded roleplay and two written assessments; a bi-lingual glossary and a short piece of research on support available to the interpreter's community in their area, based on a case study devised by the student tackling issues which are common to the community. The language exercises are assessed by a pool of language assessors with particular qualifications in interpreting and/or translation or other qualifications which demonstrate their language abilities in English and their first language and are based on criteria established in the training units themselves. The pool of assessors is based in Northern Ireland and other parts of the UK.

NICEM plans to work with Queen's University Belfast to raise the standard of their training and to ultimately offer a postgraduate level course at either Diploma or MA level in Interpreting.

NICEM has also been involved in providing training to staff in other organisations who work with interpreters as well as further accredited training units for specific services on request. An example of this is attendance by a small group of interpreters at two awareness days with the PSNI Special Operations Branch to prepare them for siege or hostage situations where they could be asked to act as interpreters.

In 2006, the PSNI published a handbook containing guidance for officers and interpreters. The handbook was compiled by the PSNI Community Safety Unit with the help of CONNECT-NICEM and consultant Joan Colin.

As regards employment, CONNECT-NICEM operates a register of interpreters at different status levels. For full status, interpreters need level 3 in three units on the basic training course plus 25 hours of experience. New recruits learn about bookings procedures, timesheets, the code of practice and the role of the interpreter. The training course lasts six days and can be tailored to suit the requirements of different criminal justice agencies.

At the time of writing, just under 400 interpreters have the basic training qualification, but can only work through the service once their security clearance has been confirmed. Twenty-four have completed units of the level 3 accreditation in the criminal justice course to date, and the police element of the course is to run again in autumn 2010. The languages available over time change as interpreters join and leave the service but there are currently interpreters in 57 languages and those in most demand work in Polish, Lithuanian, Russian, Arabic, Portuguese, Latvian, Romanian, Mandarin, Czech, Slovak.

Furthermore, CONNECT-NICEM runs a professional development programme to upskill interpreters on their register. For example, they have run sessions facilitated by staff from a range of organisations such as:

- PSNI Serious Crimes Branch
- Probation Board for Northern Ireland on key procedures and terminology

- Northern Ireland Prison Service on key procedures and terminology
- Inland Revenue on Becoming self employed
- Social Security Agency on The Social Fund
- NICEM on International and National Human Rights Legislation
- PSNI on Human Trafficking Unit

Quality control is also a priority, and NICEM was the first organisation to introduce a Code of Practice for interpreters working in Northern Ireland. Interpreters who breach the Code are investigated and if it is found that a breach has in fact occurred, they may be given a warning or they may be removed as a supplier of interpreting. A number of minor breaches of the Code can also result in an interpreter's services no longer being required. A small number of interpreters who were found to have breached the Code no longer work for the organisation.

South Tyrone Empowerment Programme (STEP) – social welfare and employment services

STEP is a community development organisation based in Dungannon, South Tyrone. Since 1997, STEP has been involved in community initiatives and has worked with marginalised individuals and groups in an effort to help them become active contributors to society. It has received significant financial investment from Atlantic Philanthropies and provides advice on immigration, housing, debt, employment rights as well as individual and group training by 22 employees in four locations.

Historically, many migrant workers were coming to work in the agri-food industries in South Tyrone in 2001, and as a result the organisation saw a need for interpreter provision for people who did not speak much English, were isolated and unaware of their rights. To begin with, STEP recruited bilingual members of the migrant population to facilitate support appointments. STEP subsequently decided to set up an Interpreting and Translation Service which is now managed by a wholly owned subsidiary, a social enterprise called STL. With regard to employment, the organisation has a register of 250 interpreters who have undergone accredited training and who attend continual training in specialised areas such as education, immigration, health, housing, social services, legal matters and the police. Meanwhile, STEP translators are qualified to degree level and cover over 30 languages.

STEP began training interpreters in 2004, have a register of 250 interpreters and are sole providers to the Department of Employment and Learning and to the Social Security Agency. They are also one of two providers of interpreters to the North Eastern Education and Library Board and along with the other provider, FLEX, a translation company, as well as a back-up provider to NIHSSIS.

STL has grown considerably in terms of the number of interpreting assignments, the amount of translation, contracts and geographical coverage. The income generated from interpreting and translation helps fund STEP's community development and migrant worker support activities.

The top five languages used in 2009 were Brazilian Portuguese (25%), Polish (23%), Tetum (East Timor) (18%), Russian (9%) and Lithuanian (8%). Most sessions were at job centres, followed by medical appointments, schools and solicitors. In comparison, the top five language requests for translations in 2009 were Polish (35%), Lithuanian (18%), Portuguese (18%), Russian (6%) and Latvian (6%).

The STEP Interpreting course involves approximately five hours per week class time for seven weeks with additional time spent on individual coursework and glossaries. The Certificate in Community Interpreting aims to provide students with knowledge and skills required of a community interpreter in the public sector setting. Students cover three units: Skills for community interpreting; Community interpreting research skills; and The public service sector. Students are expected to complete a number of assessment tasks within each module. During this period of study, trainees engage in role play activities, presentations and research which will equip them with the skills for dealing with real-life interpreting situations. STL recognises the OCN level 3 Certificates in Community Interpreting successfully completed with other training providers without the need for a conversion course.

Conclusion

As we have seen, the model for interpreter provision in Northern Ireland is very different from that in Ireland or indeed in most other countries. The key to this model is strong legislation. In Ireland we have the European Convention on Human Rights Act 2003 whereby anyone accused of a criminal offence is entitled to the free assistance of an interpreter in garda stations and in the courts. There is also an upcoming European directive on Legal Interpreting and Translation which mentions quality and a register of interpreters. However, anti-discrimination legislation in Ireland is not as strong as in Northern Ireland and provision of interpreters in healthcare is still very poor. Most patients ask friends, relations or neighbours to act as interpreters for them when they visit GPs or when they go to hospital.

Most interpreters in Ireland have little or no training. In contrast, in Northern Ireland, there has been quite a lot of training. However, in the long term the level will need to be brought up from Open College Network level 3 and more emphasis needs to be put on interpreting skills and practice. This is particularly clear in the case of assignments in the higher courts. The authorities have decided that locally trained interpreters are not qualified enough to work there and prefer to pay for subsistence, accommodation and flights for NRPSI interpreters from England. CONNECT-NICEM is already considering moving towards postgraduate courses in cooperation with Queen's University Belfast. There is also a case for independent testing of interpreters.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Ligia Parizzi and Claire Hamilton from NIHSSIS, Gabrielle Doherty from NICEM and Fintan McAliskey from STEP for their input into this article.