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Interpreting Community in Algeria

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Abstract

In recent decades, considerable steps have been taken in various countries to develop the supply and quality of interpreting and other services that enable citizens, business-man and expatriates with limited proficiency in the local official language(s) to access public services such as health care, education, legal recourse, the police, and social benefits. These improvements in the provision of 'community' or 'public service' interpreting have coincided with an increase in the training and research conducted in this field. Courses, postgraduate programs and systems of accreditation in community interpreting or its subfields have been launched across the world, and ever more research into interpreting in settings such as courtrooms, hospitals and police stations. In Algeria, however, the situation is rather different. Although certain Algerian laws, bylaws and regulations do prescribe and detail the use of (spoken and signed) interpreting in legal and other settings, in reality, alternative to ad hoc solutions and untrained interpreters is very common. Only a handful of university teachers Interpreting scholars and trainers, medical, legal and other professionals have attempted to set the provision of community interpreting on a stronger institutional footing. Given this, the paper aims to take stock of the state of community interpreting in Algeria, in terms of needs, legal and political framework, provision and training, and the actual experiences of interpreters (professional or informal) and those who rely on them.

Mots clés :

Interprétariat, Compétences analytiques, Connaissances culturelles, Connaissances du sujet

Résumé

Au cours des dernières décennies, des mesures considérables ont été prises dans divers pays pour développer l'offre et la qualité des services d'interprétariat qui permettent aux citoyens, aux hommes d'affaires et aux expatriés ayant une maîtrise limitée de la ou des langues officielles locales d'accéder aux services publics tels que les services de santé les soins, l'éducation, les recours judiciaires, la police et les prestations sociales. Ces améliorations dans l'offre d'interprétariat « communautaire » ou « de service public » ont coïncidé avec une augmentation de la formation et de la recherche menées dans ce domaine. Des cours, des programmes de troisième cycle et des systèmes d'accréditation en interprétariat communautaire ou ses sous-domaines ont été lancés à travers le monde, et de plus en plus de recherches sur l'interprétariat dans des contextes tels que les salles d'audience les hôpitaux et les commissariats de police ont été dévelopés. En Algérie, cependant, la situation est assez différente. Bien que certaines lois, arrêtés et règlements algériens prescrivent et détaillent l'utilisation de l'interprétariat dans des contextes juridiques et autres, en réalité, l'alternative aux solutions ad hoc et aux interprètes non formés est très courante. Seule une poignée d'enseignants universitaires, chercheurs et formateurs en interprétariat, des professionnels de la santé, du droit et d'autres professionnels ont tenté d'établir l'offre de l'interprétariat communautaire sur une base institutionnelle plus solide. Dans ce contexte, l'article vise à faire le point sur l'état de l'interprétariat communautaire en Algérie, en termes de besoins, de cadre juridique et politique, d'offre et de formation, et sur les expériences réelles des interprètes (professionnels ou informels) et de ceux qui en dépendent.

1. Introduction

Through this paper I only try to raise more questions about the interpreting community in Algeria.

Basically I have one thing to ask about, why there is little research on interpreting concerns in our community, which in turn calls for an explanation of why it is that the interpreting profession suffers from low esteem in our country. On one hand, Algerian society looks askance (suspiciously) at the variety and importance of spoken languages perceiving it i.e. the Algerian society as ethnically and linguistically homogeneous. On the other the public lump all language professionals together ranging from language teachers, translators, to interpreters and even transcribers and court reporters are all the same to them.

Do practitioners make such an effort to differentiate themselves, or is there any kind of association of interpreters or translators in Algeria?

In fact, interpreter's research and studies were launched earlier in Algeria as an informal gathering of those who were interested in studying, in academic and

scientific ways, the phenomenon of interpreting in its multiple facets.

Comparing with the nations, there, existed a solid body of interpreting studies literature as an emerging new academic discipline in Europe. However, there are few solid studies in interpreting that political and court bodies can rely on. In many ways, this was only natural because of the rather low esteem in which interpreting profession were held in our country. People think interpreting could be done by anybody who could chatter in English or any given mastered, target language.

For a long time, a general perception of Algeria as a homogeneous country with one race and one language had been dominant especially in trade and economics affairs. During a decade or more the Algerian economy was doing well, growing rapidly in the era of globalisation and this gave the opportunity to western and American investors to take place in a country whose people lack interpreting and translation institutions.

Then the Algerian policy–maker attributes Algerian economy growth and flourishing investments to linguistic and racial homogeneity, implying that multilingual and multicultural situation would be detrimental (disadvantageous) and constitute an economic cost, rather helping to enrich the economy and culture of Algeria. One can safely maintain that Arabic and French are typically High-context language while English is a low-context one.

So how do spoken-language interpreters fare in such a society? To express it differently how new formed interpreters put into practice their knowledge and taught concepts?

We are not at all optimistic about our prospects towards interpreting studies that existed in Algeria. I did feel very strongly that organised efforts had to be made in this front. I felt it was imperative for Algerian interpreters to become part and parcel of an on-going new area of research in the world because the profession by its very nature is global. I also felt it to be humble duty to make a due contribution to bringing Arabic language and Algerian culture to the notice of the rest of the world, thus making interpreting studies more comprehensive.

What should be taken into consideration while translation and interpreting studies converge towards the LMD system is the performance of an effective and beneficial programme that enhances logic and cognitive thought in our students.

Through my work I try to provide a description of the ideal interpreter, regardless of whether the subject of discussion is court, medical or conference interpreting. The following qualities are identified by various authors and specialist in the field as essential for a good interpreting.

2. Interpreting skills

2.1. Language skills

Even laypersons recognize that interpreters need to have a good command of their working languages to interpret accurately, though they underestimate the extent of that command. Writers about all types of interpreting emphasize the breadth and depth of linguistic proficiency required. They are also unanimous in making the point that language is just a prerequisite for mastering the techniques of interpreting.

2.2. Analytical skills

The interpreter should have a kind of spontaneity, he has first to analyse the speech before interpreting it Gonzalez et al (1991: 363) declare that analysis is among the strategies employed by interpreters, "so essential to [simultaneous interpreting] that it can be considered an intrinsic part of the process rather than an ancillary tactic." As cited the analysis of the speech is foremost as a key element in interpreting proficiency.

2.3. Listening and recall

Effective interpreting requires effective listening skills. Many authors define the specific kind of listening that interpreters perform as "active listening," and further point out that "this active, attentive listening is quite different from other forms of listening, and has to be learned by the interpreter" (Jones, 1998: 14). Memory or recall is also identified as essential in interpreting, regardless of the type." Having a good memory is especially important for a judiciary interpreter, who must retain and include in the target language message even paralinguistic elements: "the interpreter must be included in the target-language version in order to provide a legal equivalent of the source-language message" (Gonzalez et al, 1991: 384).

2.4. Ethical behaviour

Ethics are a major consideration for all interpreters (Frishberg, 1996; Sussman and Johnson, 1996). Jones (1998) describes the delicate situations that can arise in international conferences, requiring that interpreters thoroughly understand their role and exercise good judgment. Medical interpreters must be particularly attuned to the importance of patient privacy issues.

2.5. Speaking skills

Public speaking is indeed a key component in the training of all types of interpreters (Weber, 1984; Frishberg, 1986; Gonzalez et al, 1991). Gentile et al (1996: 47) point out that even who generally interpret in more intimate settings, need to be able to express ideas well: "Effective speaking skills range from quality of voice to choice of idiom, vocabulary, phrasing etc. So both what comes out of the mouth of the interpreter and the way it comes out are important in the overall effectiveness of the interpretation."

2.6. Cultural knowledge

It is almost universally acknowledged that interpreters need to be acutely aware of cultural differences although there is widespread disagreement about what they should do with that knowledge (Carr et al, 1997). What many of these interpreters may not recognize is that interpreters, too, consider themselves not just linguistic but also cultural intermediaries. Jones (1998: 4) sums it up best when he says that "in all of their work, interpreters must bridge the cultural and conceptual gaps separating the participants in a meeting."

2.7. Subject knowledge

In order to interpret accurately ("You don't need to understand it, just translate it!"), all experts on interpreting recognize the need to acquire technical terminology and content knowledge in relevant fields (Seleskovitch, 1978a; Gonzalez et al, 1991; Frishberg, 1986).

Thus, it is clear that to some degree or another, all interpreters must demonstrate the qualities listed above, regardless of where and for whom they interpret. The fact that many individuals who are called upon to interpret in certain settings lack these qualities does not mean they are not needed; it simply means that the client requesting interpreting services does not appreciate their importance. So if all interpreters are really performing the same task, why is there such disparity in the formal training, pay, and prestige of interpreters?

3. Suggestions

The interpreting focuses on the setting, the mode, and the subject matter of the interpreter-mediated event. Individual interpreters may wear a variety of hats, working one day in a conference, the next in an escort situation, and the next in a court proceeding. Thus, when someone identifies himself as a conference interpreter this does not necessarily mean that he interprets only in conferences.

The additional parameters that I would like to see included concern (a) the various elements of the communicative situation: Who speaks, to Whom, about What, Where, When and Why (and for what purpose ...), rather than simply the temporal characteristics of delivery and the spatial coordinates of communicants, and (b) the nature of the texts involved in the event, not just in terms of topic but also in terms of the way the text is built, whether it is more oral-like or written-like, and the intertextual relationships obtaining between the individual texts which constitute the macro-text of an interpreter-mediated event.

Alexieva goes on to note that in real life, interpreter-mediated events are so complex that it is impossible to establish clear-cut categories. She advocates approaching the events as '"families,' with central members (prototypes) and peripheral members (blend-forms) being identified on the basis of their position on a scale or continuum...» She then specifies the parameters that should shape the definition of interpreting: 1) mode of delivery and production, 2) participants in interpreter-mediated events, 3) the topic of an interpreter-mediated event, 4) text type and text building strategies, 5) spatial and temporal constraints, and 6) the goal of an interpreter-mediated event. In this way, interpreter-mediated events can be placed along a "continuum of 'universality' vs. 'culture-specificity' using a number of scales":

'Distance' vs. 'proximity' (between speaker, addressee and interpreter);

'non-involvement' vs. 'involvement' (of the speaker as text entity);

'equality/solidarity' vs. 'non-equality/power' (related to status, role and gender of speaker and addressee, as well as the interpreter in some cases);

'Formal setting' vs. 'informal setting' (related to number of participants, degree

of privacy, and distance from home country);

'Literacy' vs. 'orality';

'cooperativeness/directness' vs. 'non-cooperativeness/indirectness' (relevant to negotiation strategies);

'Shared goals' vs. 'conflicting goals'

This approach allows for a more precise analysis of interpreting in real-life situations.

In the absence of imposed academic standards for practitioners, certification programs in which interpreters are required to pass proficiency exams have been developed in many areas as a means of providing potential clients with a pool of competent interpreters to choose from. The lack of training programs to help candidates prepare for these exams results in high failure rates, however (Gonzalez et al, 1991; Lascar, 1997). A vicious circle is created, as the low pay and poor working conditions of interpreting work give prospective practitioners little incentive to invest in long training courses, and thus colleges and universities have little impetus for establishing such programs.

Factors such as the economy, demographics, politics, and culture of the country or region where an interpreter works have a major impact on the professional opportunities available to him or her. A conference interpreter with a French/German/English combination, for example, one may find plenty of work in Europe, but not in Algeria. All circumstances affect the demand for interpreters, the terms under which they are hired, and the status they are accorded.

Finally, the degree to which interpreters are organized and regulated in a given location affects their status. Tseng (1992: 148) in his discussion of professionalization in general, he notes that occupations attain the status of professions by gaining control over the market in which they work. One way of establishing this control is by forging "alliances with the state," including lobbying for government regulation of the profession. According to Gonzalez et al, (1991), this has proven true in the case of court interpreters in the United States, where legislation requiring that interpreters working in the federal courts pass a proficiency exam brought about an immediate increase in the pay and prestige of interpreters in that jurisdiction, in stark contrast to their counterparts in the state courts (Gonzalez et al, 1991).

4. Conclusion

This analysis of the different types of interpreting has shown that regardless of the adjective preceding the word "interpreter," practitioners of this profession the world over perform the same service and should meet the same standards of competence. What accounts for the tremendous disparity in working conditions and status is not the nature of the interpreting itself, but external factors that affect the market in which interpreters render their services. The way to lessen this disparity is to recognize the commonalities in interpreters' work and to form strong professional associations and alliances that will unite practitioners striving to achieve common goals.

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