

Does the Absence of Public Policy Compromise the Professionalisation of Community Interpreting?

Case Study and Analysis

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Abstract

In Ontario, Canada, there is no political commitment to the entitlement to equal access to public services for those newcomer and long-term residents of the province who have limited proficiency in the official languages of Canada – English and French. This paper examines the professionalisation of community interpreting and how it may be compromised by an absence of public policy. The authors present examples of accomplishments, challenges and paradoxes drawn from their experience in developing standards of practice and administering a government funded program which enables service providers in the social, legal and health sectors to work with victims of domestic violence with whom they do not share a common language.

Résumé

En Ontario, Canada, il n'y a aucun engagement politique à procurer un accès égal aux services publics aux nouveaux arrivants ou aux résidents de longue date de la province qui ne maîtrisent pas les langues officielles du Canada – l'anglais et le français. Ce document examine la professionnalisation de l'interprétation communautaire et la façon dont elle peut être compromise par cette absence de politique publique. Les auteures présentent des exemples des réalisations, des défis et des paradoxes tirés de leur expérience dans l'élaboration de normes d'exercice et l'administration d'un programme financé par le gouvernement qui permet aux fournisseurs de services sociaux, juridiques et de santé de travailler auprès de victimes de violence au foyer avec lesquelles ils n'ont pas de langue commune.

Introduction

The professionalisation of community interpreting in Ontario, Canada, reflects the pattern of ripples described by Franz Pöchhacker in his discussion of the evolution of interpreting in community-based settings (Pöchhacker 2004: 29). In this case study and analysis we are going to build on this metaphor and look at the ripple effects of a small pebble in a big pond.

We will look at the ways in which a political commitment and the dedication of funding to support this promise contributed to:

- the creation of this small pebble,
- the ripple effect of the pebble, and
- its contributions to the professional practice of community interpreters in Ontario.

We will also consider how the achievements of the pebble are threatened by the lack of a broader Human Rights policy which acknowledges the right to be free from discrimination on the grounds of language — in other words, a public commitment to the entitlement of equal access to public services for those newcomer and long-term residents of Ontario who have limited proficiency in the official languages of Canada, English and French.

The Small Pebble in a Big Pond

The big pond of our case study is the province of Ontario, where almost 233,000 residents out of a total population of 12,300,000 speak neither of Canada's official languages.^{1,2,3} In 2003, trained community interpreters enabled service providers in 500 social, legal and health care services across the province to work with 1.5% of these residents⁴. The small pebble at the centre of the ripple is the Language Interpreter Services Program supported by the government of Ontario's Innovations Fund to address the prevention of Violence Against Women (VAWP) and its Domestic Violence Justice Strategy (DVJS).

A Political Commitment and its Ripple Effects

The public policy underlying this program is the Ontario government's commitment to the prevention of violence against women. The community interpreter services supported by this program enable service providers in the social, legal and health care sectors to work with victims and perpetrators of domestic violence who have limited proficiency in English. This is *not* a commitment to equality of rights of access to social, legal and health care services.

The Ripples of Accomplishment

In her 1996 article, "The Professionalisation of Community Interpreting," Holly Mikkelson suggested that the practice of community interpreting was following the pattern of a profession in its infancy – an infancy characterized by a lack of standards for training and practice.⁵ Thus, an important ripple emerging from the program we work with has been the development of a statement of competencies which defines the standards of practice and the skills and knowledge expected of the cadre of community interpreters associated with the funded services. This statement of competencies guides the recruitment of the interpreters and the foundation of a 100-hour interpreter-training program. Rippling out from the statement of competencies are a

statement which defines the role and responsibilities of the interpreters and a code of ethics to govern their professional practice.

The Ministry has also supported the development of a limited number of language assessment tools which assess an individual's levels of fluency in English and one other language, and their aptitude for dialogue interpreting and sight translation.⁶ Successful completion of this test is one of the criteria for entry into a training program. Individuals who complete the 100-hour training program are also required to successfully complete a post-training assessment.

Responsibility for the recruitment and training of the interpreters rests with the 11 community-based agencies which have been funded to recruit and train interpreters and to deliver the services across the province. The one exception is in the Niagara Region where the training delivered by the local college is based on the curriculum developed by the Ministry.

Rippling of Professionalisation among Community Interpreters in Ontario

Over the years, the cadre of interpreters associated with the grant program has evolved from a fragmented collection of individuals with a range of interpreting skills to a group with a common understanding of a competency-based professional practice. Community interpreting is recognized as a specialised field of study, and the successful completion of the language tests and training program attests to their competence as practitioners in the field. Interpreters also see the training as the base upon which they may improve. At the same time, they recognise that opportunities for practice (read employment) as community interpreters and professional development activities are critical to refining their professional skills. That the certificate they receive at the completion states that the training program is endorsed by the Ontario Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration adds to the sense of professionalism.

As professionals, the graduates of this training program expect that the quality of service they provide will be respected and compensated at a level which recognises the inherent skills and the "critical link" they play in the delivery of services in the social, legal and health care sectors. While the level of compensation for those interpreters associated with the grant program is adequate, there are, as we will discuss later, a number of issues which continue to interfere with and challenge the ability of this body of community interpreters to gain the professional recognition and employment to which they aspire. We should note that some of the individuals who have completed the above-mentioned interpreter training programs are interpreters with professional interpreting and translating degrees from Europe and Latin America. These interpreters have remarked that, while worthwhile, there is much that can be done to improve the standard of the training programs in Ontario. In many respects, these comments are critical to, and inform, our contemplation of a vision for the future of community interpreting in Ontario. This vision is presented at the conclusion of the paper.

In spite of their limitations, the overall impact of these ripples of development has been the creation of a pool of community interpreters with a common understanding of the parameters of their practice and a shared base of knowledge and skills. The foregoing activities have also contributed to the beginnings of the recognition by service providers, and their clients with limited English proficiency, of the skills and knowledge which are essential to the practice and professional recognition of community interpreting. Indeed, a recent evaluation of the program found a great deal of appreciation for the quality of service and the professionalism of these community interpreters.⁷

An ever-widening ripple effect of the pebble is evident in the influence which the creation of standards and a competency-based training program has had on the delivery of community

interpreter services to agencies and organisations who are not supported by the grant program. The fee-for-service businesses of those community agencies which are funded are now able to promote and market their services on the basis of the qualifications of the community interpreters trained under the auspices of the grant program. Other interpreter agencies in the not-for-profit and the private sectors also actively recruit those community interpreters who have passed the language tests and completed the training program developed by the Ministry. The community interpreters associated with the funded program are freelance contractors. As such, they enter into contractual arrangements with a number of interpreter service agencies. The completion of a training program to the standards set by the Ministry is deemed to be an endorsement of the quality of the service which is provided.

In sum, this small pebble in Ontario has made significant contributions to the recognition of community interpreting as a professional practice in the “big pond” of the province.

How the Absence of a Public Policy Compromises the Accomplishments

In spite of the accomplishments of the grant program, the practice of community interpreting in the province of Ontario remains in Uldis Ozolins’ words “highly fragmented... with sharp differences in how they [the interpreters] view their role (1997: 33).” The differences in the perception of the competencies of a community interpreter are also evident in the attitudes of those who contract with the interpreters to work for their agencies and the service providers and professionals who need the services of interpreters. This fragmentation is in no small way due to the lack of agreed-upon standards and to the absence of any competency-based accreditation process and training programs to prepare candidates for professional accreditation. Across Ontario there is no single set of standards in place with respect to the assessment of language skills or the “accreditation” of community interpreters.

To qualify as an accredited court interpreter in Ontario, one has merely to sit through a two-day orientation to court procedures and memorise and respond to questions related to the law. Whereas years ago the language proficiency of court interpreters was tested in English and the other language, today it’s only the individual’s proficiency in English which is given any consideration. Along with its roster of accredited court interpreters, courthouses have fee-for-service contracts with interpreter agencies.

We know that public sector agencies, for example, the Immigration and Refugee Board and Legal Aid Ontario as well as private sector agencies employ a “mixed bag” of approaches to assessing the competencies of the individuals they employ. In a recent consultation with a number of community interpreters we learned about some of the consequences of this lack of quality control. We learned, for example, of a situation where individuals who had never had any formal training and indeed had never been inside a courtroom were contracted to interpret in a serious trial involving a number of accused.⁸

This seeming lack of appreciation for the service is in line with Joseph Tseng’s (Mikkelson 1992) description of the stages an occupation undergoes on its path to becoming a profession.

A second possible reason for the fragmentation of community interpreters in the province is the competitive nature of their work. Always on call and on the road, interpreters have few opportunities to come together with other freelancers and perhaps little incentive to welcome others into the fray.

Paradoxes and Challenges

Vulnerability of Programs to Changes in the Political Climate

In our years of working with government, we have been involved with two other government-sponsored initiatives where funding was provided to support the delivery of interpreting services to enable access to public sector agencies. A change in government saw the elimination of both of these programs, and the resulting return to the use of untrained volunteer interpreters and family members.

The pebble program remains in place by virtue of a political commitment to address the prevention of domestic violence in the province of Ontario, and the allocation of funding to cover the costs of the services, which are provided. However, like every situation where there is no legislative base, funding is discretionary and dependent on the political commitment of the government in power — a commitment which is vulnerable to change when the party in power switches. Where the political promise may not change, the disbursement of public funds to support it may take a different trajectory.

As we speak, the Government of Ontario is seeking creative solutions to sustaining the level of funding provided to cover the costs of those services provided within the commitment to address the issue of domestic violence.

The Service Provider Paradox

Our experience suggests that the model of a government-funded community interpreter service which has no expectations of accountability or cost recovery from the agencies which benefit from the program contributes to a systemic perception of the trained community interpreter as an “add-on” benefit rather than a service which is provided by a skilled professional and which should be integrated into the budget lines of their agencies.

The paradox of this perception is the way it undercuts the professionalism of the community interpreters which these workers and professionals claim to value. We believe that the professionalism of the trained community interpreters is undermined because there are no direct costs to the agency. When agency staff keep an interpreter waiting it is at the funded program's expense. This situation is aggravated when the freelance interpreter is scheduled for a number of assignments on the same day and delays in the start of one appointment make him or her late for the next. If the requesting agency were to pay for the interpreters out of their own budget, they would soon learn that there are costs associated with the delivery of the professional services and to value the time when the interpreter is present.

Another question relates to what would happen if the interpreting service were no longer provided on a fully subsidized basis. Would organisations be prepared to pay for the quality of service they currently receive? We feel it is likely that many cash-strapped social service agencies would give priority to other staffing concerns and material items and return to an ad hoc approach to meeting the needs of their clients with limited proficiency in English.

The provision of interpreting services at no cost to the designated agencies covered by the grant may also have dissuaded them from getting together to advocate for a broader political commitment to the provision of trained community interpreters.

In Ontario, a model for such collective action may be found in the work of the Healthcare Interpretation Network which is engaged in advocating for the recognition of the need for trained language interpreters in the delivery of health care services.

To paraphrase Uldis Ozolins (2000: 31), who will be responsible for maintaining control over the quality of interpreter services if the government in power retreats from providing support for this program?

At the same time, has the ability of this program to support the costs of the recruitment and training of community interpreters undermined the growth of professionalism in the field? Has this approach abnegated the responsibility of the individual to cover the costs of a professional education, and the responsibilities of the educational institutions to deliver this training? These questions are difficult to answer in a province where interpreters can find work without any training at all.

Many interpreters are committed to the field but need full-time employment. Once they find a job, their availability for interpretation diminishes drastically. Their names are still retained on the roster, but they can only provide interpretation during very limited and often inconsistent times. Other interpreters leave Canada for considerable periods to help out their aging parents, for example.

An extract from one of the reports submitted to the Ministry at the end of the last fiscal year indicates that while there may be three Portuguese interpreters on the roster, for example, their ability to fulfil assignments is severely compromised. Please see Table 1.

Table 1. Number of qualified interpreters per language

Languages	Number of qualified interpreters per language
Akan	1 (very limited availability)
Albanian	1
Amharic	4 (very limited availability)
Arabic	6 (very limited availability)
Bengali	4 (3 very limited, 1 marginally available)
Mandarin	5 (4 marginally available)
Oromo	1
Polish	3 (marginally available)
Portuguese	3 (1 marginally available, 1 very limited, 1 limited)

Responding to the Challenges

The preparation of this paper has provided us with an opportunity to reflect on the program for which we have been responsible, its contributions to the field of community interpreting in Ontario, the limitations of these accomplishments, and the issues which come into play when a program is vulnerable to the whims of political expediency.

We believe that the key stakeholders of the profession itself should drive the movement towards recognition and accreditation of interpreting in Ontario – first and foremost the existing pool of community interpreters who are committed to the professionalisation of their practice. In this respect we are encouraged by the interest of the 20 community interpreters who met in Toronto in April 2004 to discuss how they may be able to work together to achieve this goal. Next, are the post-secondary institutions, which can work in consultation to develop programs for the training of community interpreters. In the long term we would like to see an academic program

similar to the one in place in Australia and in the short term would like to see community colleges offer a training program which builds on the Ministry curriculum.

The development of training programs will of course not succeed without the students who are prepared to cover the costs of their education. This will not happen without their being able to see community interpreting as a viable profession. This, in turn, is dependent on an agreed-upon acceptance by interpreter service agencies, public sector institutions and private firms which hire and purchase the services of community interpreters that they will only call on trained and accredited interpreters. Overriding all of this is the presence of a public policy or legislation which requires that those with limited proficiency in English have the right to language interpreters. In this context public sector institutions will be responsible for having in place the budgets to cover the costs of these services.

Role of Critical Link Canada and other organisations dedicated to the professionalisation of community interpreting

We see Critical Link Canada, and its commitment to the recognition of the professionalism of community interpreting, as playing a key role in advocating at the national and provincial levels of government for the recognition of language as one of the grounds for discrimination against citizens of Canada who have limited proficiency in the official languages. Critical Link Canada's advocacy role should also be one which includes the education of service providers to recognise the important role the trained community interpreter plays in the delivery of social, legal and health care services. In this respect, Critical Link Canada, in partnership with the Toronto-based Healthcare Interpretation Network, has embarked on a national research project funded by Health Canada — research on the delivery of primary health care services to patient populations with limited proficiency in English or French in Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver. This three-year project will also address issues of service delivery, training of interpreters and training of service providers.

Public Policy Change

You can see that the Ontario Human Rights Code addresses different forms of discrimination.

Every person has a right to equal treatment without discrimination because of race, ancestry, place of origin, colour, ethnic origin, citizenship, creed, sex, sexual orientation, age, marital status, same-sex partnership status, family status, disability or the receipt of public assistance.

How might the picture look different if "language" were added to the grounds for discrimination in Ontario, as it is in the 1998 Human Rights Act, UK — in other words, if there were a public policy which acknowledges that while the majority of immigrants and refugees to Canada will strive to speak the official languages, there will be those newcomer and long-term residents who will be discriminated against because of their limited proficiency in the official language.

The resulting picture would vary depending on where this public commitment fell in the continuum between voluntary compliance and regulation. There may not be much change at all if the expectation were voluntary compliance and it were not backed by funding to enable the purchase of trained community interpreter services. Should legislation be passed requiring the

services of qualified interpreters then there would likely be increased possibilities of employment for interpreters and formal training at recognized post-secondary institutions.

An understanding of what “pushes” public policy can be found in the example of sign language interpreting. The Ontario Human Rights Code identifies disability as a ground for discrimination and individuals requiring sign language interpreters are covered by the existing Code. This entitlement was reinforced by the 1997 Eldridge Decision by the Supreme Court of Canada which stated that the failure to provide sign language interpretation where it is needed for effective communication in the delivery of health care services violates the rights of deaf people. The Eldridge Ruling states that governments cannot escape their constitutional obligations to provide equal access to public services.

Needless to say there is no equivalent ruling for language interpreting. There are a few public records of the impact of misinterpretation on the lives of those who have limited proficiency in English. We fear that it may unfortunately take a major tragedy, such as a loss of life, to trigger a change in public policy but we hope that the push will come from service providers in the social, legal and health care sectors. Without a change in public policy or decisions made by enlightened individuals we will continue to see ad hoc responses to the spoken language interpreting needs of our residents.

Conclusion

Does the absence of a public policy compromise the professionalism of community interpreting in Ontario? Has the small pebble in the big pond made a difference in the movement towards the recognition of community interpreting as a professional practice? One might argue that in spite of its limitations, the small pebble has indeed made a difference. On the other hand, we think it is fair to say that the absence of a public policy does compromise the professionalism of community interpreting in Ontario.

La lotta continua!

References

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Notes

- 1 Statistics Canada - 2001 Census data
- 2 Statistics Canada - Preliminary post-censal population estimates as of October 1, 2003
- 3 Canada's official languages are English and French. Although the official language of Ontario is English, the presence of a French Languages Services Act stipulates that French-speaking residents who reside in designated areas of the province are entitled to receive public services in French.
- 4 2003-04 Year-end Reports, VAWP/DVJS Language Interpreter Services Program, Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration.
- 5 <http://www.acebo.com/papers/pmenu.htm>
- 6 The Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration has supported the development of tests in thirty-eight languages and yet service is provided under this program in a total of eighty-seven languages. Where there is no standard test, recruiters attempt to assess the language other than English by having an interviewer who speaks the language or by asking the candidate to sight translate a document into English (but not from English into the other language.) The quality of training can be compromised when language tests have been used for some trainees and not for others, as the level of proficiency may vary more widely than if all trainees had passed the test.
- 7 A recently completed evaluation of the program included one focus group with a limited number of victims of domestic violence. These individuals were clear in their articulation of the differences in the quality of service provided by the interpreters in this program. However, as Adolfo Gentile noted (1997: 113-114), it is extremely difficult for the person who requires the service of an interpreter to be able to evaluate the quality. It is also difficult for interpreters to self-evaluate.
- 8 It should be noted that the provision of interpreter services for the accused and witnesses in the criminal court is the only area governed by legislation in Canada. In some respects, the situation described above is a reflection of what Joanna McPake, Richard Johnstone et al (2002: 26) describe in their observation on the ways in which service requesting the service of the interpreters was "in compliance with the letter of the law rather than the spirit."