



Recibido:30/11/2024

Aceptado: 01/10/2024

Publicado: 31/10/2024

Languages of lesser diffusion and French public service interpreting: a matter of terminology and strategy/Lenguas de menor difusión y la interpretación en los servicios públicos de Francia: terminología y estrategias

Elisabeth Navarro

Université Paris Cité, France

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2977-4440>

Abstract: Since the 1970s, in France, public service interpreting has become a major branch of the professional translating sector. Today, the non-profit organizations that provide interpreting services provide interpreters in nearly all the languages spoken by new immigrants. These languages often have unexpected shifts and changes due to geopolitical changes. However, despite the resources that have been provided and an outstanding ability to adapt, the market for translating and interpreting (T&I) in the context of migration is under constant linguistic pressure, which, in part, determines the status of these associations considering the market. This has consequently led to new challenges for everyone involved in the sector, both for interpreting organizations and for the institutions that benefit from their services. Managing the language portfolio has, therefore, become a crucial issue, requiring a variety of short-, medium- and long-term strategies. After briefly outlining the history of the emergence of community interpreting in France and the issues involved, we will look at the designation of 'rare' languages or 'languages of lesser diffusion' in the context of the language market for T&I services. We will then consider the strategies currently implemented to meet demands for rare or even very rare languages. We will finally investigate new opportunities for developing and/or rapidly creating a pool of interpreters.

Keywords: Public Service Interpreting and Translation; Language diversity; Languages of lesser diffusion; Rare languages

How to cite this article / ¿Cómo citar este artículo?

Navarro, E. (2024). Languages of lesser diffusion and French public service interpreting: a matter of terminology and strategy. *FITISPos International Journal*, 11(2), 83-95. <https://doi.org/10.37536/FITISPos-IJ.2024.11.2.412>

Resumen: Desde el año 1970, en Francia, la interpretación en los servicios públicos se ha convertido en una rama importante del sector de la traducción profesional. Hoy en día, las ONG que prestan servicios de interpretación proporcionan intérpretes en casi todas las lenguas habladas por los nuevos inmigrantes, lenguas que a menudo sufren cambios y desplazamientos inesperados como consecuencia de los cambios geopolíticos. Sin embargo, a pesar de los recursos aportados y de una notable capacidad de adaptación, el mercado de la traducción e interpretación (T&I) en el contexto de la migración está sometido a una presión lingüística constante que, en parte, afecta a la situación de estas asociaciones en el mercado laboral. En consecuencia, ello ha dado lugar a nuevos retos para todos los implicados en el sector, tanto para las organizaciones de interpretación como para las instituciones que se benefician de sus servicios. La gestión de la cartera lingüística se ha convertido, por tanto, en una cuestión crucial, que requiere diversas estrategias a corto, medio y largo plazo. Tras recordar brevemente la historia de la aparición de este tipo de interpretación en Francia y los problemas que plantea, examinaremos la designación de lenguas ‘raras’ o de menor difusión en el contexto del mercado lingüístico de la T&I. A continuación, estudiaremos las estrategias que se están aplicando actualmente para satisfacer la demanda de lenguas raras o incluso muy raras. Por último, investigaremos las nuevas posibilidades de desarrollar y/o crear rápidamente una bolsa de intérpretes.

Palabras clave: Traducción e Interpretación en los Servicios Públicos; Diversidad lingüística; Lenguas de menor difusión; Lenguas raras

1. Introduction

Since the 1970s, in France, public service interpreting has become a major branch of the professional translating sector. Today, the non-profit organizations that provide interpreting services can provide interpreters in nearly all the languages spoken by new immigrants. These are languages that often have unexpected shifts and changes due to geopolitical changes. However, despite the resources that have been provided and despite an outstanding ability to adapt, the market for translating and interpreting (T&I) in the context of migration is under constant linguistic pressure, which, in part, determines the status of these associations considering the market. This has consequently led to new challenges for everyone involved in the sector, both for interpreting organizations and for the institutions that benefit from their services. Managing the language portfolio has, therefore, become a crucial issue, requiring a variety of short-, medium- and long-term strategies.

After briefly outlining the history of the emergence of community interpreting in France and the issues involved, we will look at the designation of ‘rare’ languages or ‘languages of lesser diffusion’ (LLD), in the context of the language market for T&I services. We will then consider the strategies currently implemented to meet demands for rare or even very rare languages. We will finally investigate new opportunities for developing and/or rapidly creating a pool of interpreters.

2. A short social and linguistic history and migration and interpreting services in France

Public service interpreting has been present in France under a variety of names¹ since the

¹ Such as the French term ‘interpretariat’ was mainly used in the social and medical context; PSIT, Public Service Interpreting and Translation was used in a broader European context; ‘interpretation-mediation’ was used in

1970s, when large-scale immigration began, for the most part from North African countries. The migration flow, which increased steadily and then massively in the 2000s, was and still is the target of various policies in France. The most significant of these, and the one with the greatest influence, began in 1981, when policies no longer contemplated immigrants' return to their country of origin. Then, the French government guaranteed the right to residency, abandoned assisted return policies, and reformed the deportation system (Rygiel, 2013). Now that immigrants were settling in France on a longer-term basis, they needed more specific help over the short or even long run, particularly with a range of administrative paperwork, and for communication on an on-going basis. Therefore, some organizations set up a system of social and linguistic support and assistance that did not yet bear the name of interpreting, but which, from the outset, was to make what would become community interpreting: primarily a social activity and, by necessity, a linguistic one. From then on, actions close to mediation and socio-cultural support were taken.

Indeed, it was during the late 70s that awareness concerning the communicational difficulties of the immigrant population really began to grow, as well as regarding the ensuing issues of integration. It was in the health sector, in hospitals, maternity wards, and in childcare centers² that the most urgent needs were identified. In response to this emergency, centers were being opened in Paris and in Lyon to provide language services, whether in the form of social support, linguistic assistance, writing³, translating and/or interpreting, or even in the forms of mediation. Inter Service Migrant (ISM), a pioneering non-profit organization that provided 'supervised' interpreters to help immigrant populations communicate, was also created. From the outset, this service involved a high degree of linguistic and cultural mediation, as the interpreters were required not only to translate words but also to decode behavior and, above all, to explain it. Interestingly, the first documents and protocols that ISM signed with the French Assistance Publique and the DASS des Yvelines⁴ mentioned 'non-professional interpreters' (Sauvêtre, 2006). From a terminological point of view, this was an invaluable precision, since it would keep the profession in a non-professional state for a long time to come, with its ad hoc rules and practices stamped and with the inherent suspicion that it was a casual job with no real skills (Tabouri, 2014).

Although the initial desire to downgrade the professionalism of this activity is surprising, it can, nevertheless, be accounted for by the fact that the people who offered their services were themselves immigrants and could pride themselves on their personal apprehension of the host country's culture. Their experience, background, as well as linguistic, cultural, and pragmatic knowledge helped them facilitate smooth communication between administrative institutions and the recently settled populations. Interpreters were people from the same countries as recent immigrants, who shared their same cultures and traditions. Above all, they understood the barriers to communication and were able to explain them so that they could be overcome.

If back then, a non-professional helper/interpreter was a peer 'who helped', today, the

university research and courses; 'liaison interpreting' or conversational interpreting and 'linguistic mediation' was also used as well as 'interpreted communication'.

² Childcare centers in France as well as services such as women's and children's health within PMI (Protection maternelle et infantile).

³ Back then, the 'Public Writers' a service that helped migrants to write and produce paperwork, appeared. Today the need still exists but it is mostly entrusted to non-profit organizations. Nowadays, the same organizations help migrants write personal 'life stories' when they apply for asylum in France. A service that is a major part of the Public Writer's activity, even if it is not known as such.

⁴ DDASS: 'Direction départementale des affaires sanitaires et sociales'.

same term can be found in a new formulation, the French 'pair aidant'⁵, literally a 'peer helper'; it refers to people who share a similar experience and personal background and are able to provide mutual assistance. This offers another asset: it does not convey an over-professional image of the interpreter, which would be unsuitable for people who are already socially disadvantaged simply because they do not understand the language. In fact, this is the very sign of the deep-rooted nature of the concept of mediation in the interpreter's craft, in as much as the decision to give up professionalism was taken to better adapt to the local and psychological situation of the immigrant. Indeed, professional interpreters, with their own techniques and postures, would not be in any position to join the cultural dialogue or adapt to the context of a social dialogue. As a matter of fact, they would be unable to help immigrants.

This approach, which made sense at the time, can be seen as a major flaw today, in the light of the profession's new realities and ambitions. Yet, it also provides several lessons. This lack of definition, which alternates between linguistic and practical assistance, has, from the outset, placed ethical and action-related issues at the root of the profession and, consequently, turned mediation into a priority. Thus, mediation is now increasingly required for all interactions that involve interpreters in the context of migration. The ensuing 1980s were a time of inclusion policies, social cohesion, and the opening up of dialogues with new communities. However, fully aware of the need for interpreters to be independent of communities, interpreting agencies and non-profit organizations offered interpreters from outside local areas, who were much more neutral because they were less involved.

This marked the beginning of a reflection on ethical principles along with a desire to provide neutral services. Many texts and papers have indeed emphasized the very perverse effects of seeking linguistic assistance from family or from members of the community. Privacy and intimacy are less respected, and the risk of community surveillance is an ever-present possibility. In this context, ad hoc interpreters, while not disappearing completely, were gradually giving way to professional interpreters.

However, from the 1990s onwards, as the need for interpreters became greater and more acute, the very definition of the profession was reconsidered. The inadequacies of the early days, the benevolent and sometimes amateur practices, while they may have gone unnoticed at the outset, became an issue as soon as what was once an activity became a real trade that needed to fit into a specific framework as well as be defined considering its boundaries. Besides, the need for languages was greater and the range of languages was widening to the point where some non-profit organizations now have as many as 183 languages in their portfolios.

So much so that, since the 2000s, with the mass migration of individuals and the exponential rate of increase regarding the need for interpreters, the language issue for interpreting organizations has become a major functional issue that put their credibility at stake. The figures are quite telling. In 2010, ISM declared a portfolio of 83 languages. Twenty years later, in 2022, the non-profit organization declared 185 languages (ISM, 2022). And Ofpra's recent Annual reports show that the presence of interpreters is almost systematic, to the extent that it is Ofpra's 2nd budget item, amounting to 11.56 million euros⁷. On the other hand, the CNDA's budget for 2024 legal costs, mainly interpreting

⁵ 'Pair aidant' in France is not an interpreter *per se* but is the person who helps; it is a new status that can apply to members of the family or even to close friends.

⁶Office Française de Protection des Réfugiés et Apatrides

⁷ OFPRA Annual Report, 2022.

⁸ Cour nationale du droit d'asile

services, amounts to 11.2 million euros⁹. The CNDA claims to have a pool of “approximately 600 interpreters who can provide interpreting services in nearly 150 languages” (CNDA Annual Report, 2022). It is clear that linguistic trends have become highly complex, and, although the demand for interpreters in many languages is met most of the time, some languages still experience a lack of interpreters on a more or less occasional basis. This makes linguistic engineering for interpreting organizations and the institutions that depend on them all the more complex.

In the light of this brief historical overview, which places interpreting in a migratory context at its very beginning, we can grasp the full scope of interpreting in the context of reception and asylum but also in the context of health, as a dynamic ecosystem that is, by definition, unstable. It is an activity that is rooted in the history of the people and their relationships, but which nevertheless lies at the heart of projections mapped out and re-mapped over time by social, educational, migratory, and linguistic policies that are, in some cases, contradictory. This is why an ecosystem that takes community interpreting as its core is, of course, sensitive to any change in its own parameters and constituent units, but it is also responsive to any movement or rewriting of any of its defining units. Besides, languages as well as the policies that deal with them are part of the ecosystem, all the more so as the relationship that state institutions have with language policies is not of the same nature.

3. Languages, interpreted languages, and languages in France?

It is, therefore, easy to grasp the extent to which the sociolinguistic issue and, by extension, the demand for interpreting services, particularly in the public and social domain, have radically changed since the early days of this activity. Starting out essentially in Arabic, language mediation services are now provided in so many languages that linguistic engineering in this field is particularly complex, plastic, and constantly in progress. It reflects the multilingual and plurilingual “*liquid times and societies*” (Bauman, 2007), the reality of which no one really knows in the absence of national surveys on the languages actually spoken in France. The best source for finding out information about the languages in use in France, whether permanent or not, are the linguistic resources of Inter Service Migrant, the Paris-based non-profit organization, which provides interpreters for government institutions, non-governmental organizations and all structures that are involved in the reception of migrants. Very few, if any, official surveys can provide such a comprehensive picture of the languages spoken and used throughout France.

⁹ For more information please see:

‘L’essentiel sur ... le projet de loi de finances pour 2024. Avis sur les crédits relatifs aux « juridictions administratives » et aux « juridictions financières ». Commission des lois. Sénat.’ <https://senat.fr/ra/a23-134-4/a23-134-4-syn.pdf>



Figure 1. Languages in 2022. Source: (ISM, 2022a)

Moreover, the brochure listing the languages used by Inter-Service-Migrant (ISM) (Figure 1), which we shall use here as an example of the non-profit organizations operating in France, is a world within a world, a world of languages in the translating ecosystem as defined by Louis-Jean Calvet (2007)¹⁰. It can also be considered as a listed world of languages ready to be interpreted, which forms an ecosystem, that of a non-profit organization whose mission is the engineering of language services specific to the context of migration.

The French model is different from the one in countries such as Canada (through the Quebec example) since there are no banks of interpreters. In fact, if somebody is interested in acting as an interpreter for a public service, they must join a non-profit organization or any other agency.¹¹ ‘Inter Service Migrants’ range of public service interpreting services reflects not only the breadth of languages offered but also their diversity throughout France, whether they are national languages or the result of past or more recent migration. Rather, it is a list of language systems considered as a whole, either expanding or contracting in line with the times, the period, and the geopolitical movements (Navarro, 2023).

This brochure, which displays approx. 185 languages in 2022, gives an account of the linguistic diversity and globalization that define French society. However, it does not suggest a quantitative hierarchy of languages that would help us accurately determine the scale of distribution of the languages listed and to determine their sociolinguistic status within the French territory. Most of these languages cover the whole of the interpreting territory, but for some languages, known as ‘rare languages’ or ‘languages of lesser diffusion’ (LLD), interpreters are not available or can only be found with extreme difficulty.

¹⁰ This ecosystem is part of what Louis-Jean Calvet calls the *gravitational model*, which, is, in turn, part of the ecosystemic analogy (Calvet, 2007).

¹¹ This applies especially to the CNDA and Ofpra, where interpreting is subject to public bids. Freelance interpreting is also available, yet in most cases non-profit organizations are efficient and indispensable partners.

This is the case of languages such as Tigrigna, Tagalog, and Oromo.

The issues at stake are such that advertising for an interpreting provider is first and foremost a matter of displaying one's ability to offer a varied and precise range of interpreters. Its operational linguistic potential is, therefore, promoted in documents intended for external communication primarily through the brochure above, but also through explanatory textual support. In 2020, for example, ISM used these words in its annual report to ensure that it was able to meet even the most demanding requirements of its partners and customers:

The Organization currently provides services in more than 183 languages and dialects: from the rarest languages (such as Tagalog from the Philippines) to the best-known languages (English, German, Russian, ...), including the languages of the most numerous communities in France (Arabic, Turkish, Tamil, African), along with local dialects (Peulh from Senegal, Diola, Taki-Taki, Zaghawa, etc.) (ISM, 2020).

In 2021, the year that followed the COVID-19 pandemic, the rare language issue became a major challenge for a non-profit organization whose main purpose is not only to link institutions and interpreters, but also to offer sufficiently specialised services to meet all expectations. This is where providers are expected to prove their ability to respond to unexpected linguistic emergencies. Interpreting non-profit organizations are, thus, faced with the major challenge of dealing with languages under pressure¹² and geopolitical movements that are likely to reshuffle the linguistic board in France. Their credibility and ability to pass contracts, particularly in the field of asylum, depend very heavily on this ability.

As the 2021 Report states:

Recruitment in rare languages is notoriously difficult. A number of methods have been used to find suitable candidates from a linguistic, cultural, and professional point of view, who can take part in a difficult interpreting activity with vulnerable and underprivileged people. This extensive demand mainly targets interpreters in Bengali and Pashto (ISM, 2021).

This factual issue, which has to do with the technical aspects of providing interpreters, is an acute concern insofar as some government bodies, such as those dealing with asylum applications (CNDA and Ofpra), require the presence of an interpreter if the applicant so wishes. Finding interpreters in the required language is a key structural issue that affects the entire asylum procedure. In fact, legal proceedings will not be held without interpreters.

4. Rare languages? Languages of lesser diffusion? Languages in tension: the importance of terminology in context

In 2018, Jacquesson defined rare languages as "languages with a relatively small number of speakers" (Jacquesson, 2018). More recently, Gonse (2022) broadened the definition by adding new dimensions, namely educational and translating: 'beyond the small number of speakers, we think that the fact that languages are little taught, little disseminated, little

¹² With the exact meaning of such a term as 'short-staffed jobs'.

Cf. Sabrina Royer. "Language courses for migrant workers in areas of short-staffed jobs: engineering in French as a Professional Language and on-site training. Language and communication in linguistic and non-linguistic support systems of newly arrived migrants", Nov 2020, Lille, France. (hal-03124563)

studied or little translated in general can also qualify them as rare”.

However, the concept proves to be inadequately defined in the context of migration, diaspora, and interpreting: a rare language may be rare in one country but not in another. The issue of rare languages therefore arises both from the perspective of quantity and from that of context. Migratory flows develop in line with social and geopolitical situations. Thus, with the suddenness of change, the concept of language rarity can no longer be taken for granted. While in the field of sociolinguistics a rare language often means a language that is in danger or threatened, as UNESCO (2010) puts it, in the context of community interpreting, a rare language can suddenly emerge as the result of a conflict. This was the case of the outbreak of war in Ukraine; the need for Ukrainian interpreters in France and in Europe dramatically increased to become both a human emergency and a technical challenge. In the context of the T&I market, Ukrainian became a rare language for a few months. Russian as well as Ukrainian interpreters were "hard to come by", as the press pointed out at the time:

“Translator needed”; “Who can speak Ukrainian and Russian?”; “Interpreter needed”. The requests are pouring: hastily posted on the gate of the Ukrainian church in Paris, printed in the reception area of the town hall in Chalon-sur-Saône (Saône-et-Loire), on the Ministry of the Interior’s official “I’m supporting Ukraine” website and everywhere else. At a time when thousands of Ukrainians are being driven to France by the Russian invasion, the goodwill of some is coming up against a language barrier. Professionals are overwhelmed (Le Parisien, March 2022).

We need to consider that, when we talk about interpreting and interpreters, a rare language can refer to the languages of migrants and interpreters alike. A language can be rare when it comes to finding interpreters, either because it is so rare in the country concerned that it is difficult to provide interpreters, or because it is so needed that there are not enough interpreters to meet the demand (e.g. the conflict in Ukraine) (Giorgis, 2021). Intuitively, we tend to understand that these are languages for which there are not yet any existing recruitment strategies because there is not enough demand.

As for the traditional English expression, LLD, the majority of translations into French are ‘*langue de faible diffusion*’ or ‘*langue de moindre diffusion*’. However, its use is much less common than it is in English and does not apply to the same realities. The term ‘lesser-used language’ is certainly used, but very often in teaching and learning contexts; Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, and Russian are also referred to as lesser-used languages in language acquisition, for example, although, from the sociolinguistic point of view, this usage is also improper; they are in fact only ‘lesser-used’ in the French school context. In the community interpreting market, ‘lesser used and lesser taught languages’ (MoDiMEs) would be a more appropriate and accurate term.¹³

It is, therefore, necessary to adopt a multi-faceted perspective and to work within the appropriate ecosystem, in this case, the ecosystem of languages interpreted in the context of migration. To be more precise and more functional, we should, therefore, be literally talking in French about languages that are poorly represented when this refers to the number of speakers in France, and about languages that are in short supply when we are talking about languages for which there are no or very few professional interpreters that can provide interpreting services in French public services and bodies. Borrowed from the term ‘short-staffed jobs’, which usually refers to trades for which the job offer exceeds the

¹³ See *Langues moins Diffusées et moins Enseignées (MoDiMEs)/Less Widely Used and Less Taught languages. Langues enseignées, langues des apprenants/Language learners’ L1s and languages taught as L2s*, Editions Peter Lang, 2020.

number of applicants, the term 'short-staffed interpreted languages' seems operational and appropriate in the professional context of interpreting or translating. This term was recently chosen by ISM in its latest activity report (2022).

The distinction makes it possible to tell the difference between a sociolinguistic issue and a recruitment or market concern because the two are not necessarily connected. For example, a language under pressure may not be a language with little visibility. It may be a language that is in such high demand that there are not enough interpreters in the country. This is the case for the languages of the Horn of Africa, for which non-profit organizations keep recruiting (sometimes with much difficulty) in response to growing demand. This is true of Oromo, the language of Eritrea, which is spoken by a third of the population in Ethiopia, and for which it is difficult to find interpreters in France.

On a broader level, and to provide a few examples, ISM has recently been asked by the CNDA and Ofpra to provide services in languages that are poorly represented, such as Baga (Guinea), Edo (Nigeria, a non-English-speaking group), Hadya (Ethiopia), Nouchi (Côte d'Ivoire), Konianké (Guinea), Bissa (Burkina Faso), Galician (Spain) and Koyaka (Ivory Coast) (Giorgis, 2021). Some of the languages on this list are not included in the ISM brochure (2022a), which undoubtedly reflects the limited number of requests and the fact that there are still no available interpreters able to interpret in these languages. As a result, palliative strategies have become the rule (Giorgis, 2021).

5. Short-term palliative strategies implemented by French providers: a trial-and-error way

What happens when a government body such as Ofpra or the CNDA needs an interpreter for a language for which there are no interpreters, although they are legally required to translate? The legislation allows applicants to the CNDA to "be heard in a language of which they have sufficient knowledge" if their request for an interpreter cannot be met. The concept of sufficient knowledge has a subjective and vague nature which has been widely debated (Marhoug and Bouagga, 2020; Marechal, 2022); nonetheless, it makes the contemplation of palliative options possible and, although not totally acceptable, these options are, at least available.

When it comes to a minority language, the immediate strategy is to propose switching from the official language to the language requested. Such a strategy works perfectly well in the case of Galician, for example, since a Spanish citizen is bound to speak Spanish in addition to the language of their autonomous communities. This means that, unless their request is eminently political, Galician asylum seekers are technically entitled to interpreting from and into Spanish. However, the level of education and social position of some people makes the use of the majority language more difficult (Marhoug and Bouagga, 2020).

Another sign of rare languages (Gonse, 2022) is the use of a pivot language, one of the most common strategies in T&I. In the international context, for example, the pivot language is usually English, Spanish, or French, but in the specific context of migration, the use of one of those languages may be more difficult to determine, or may even be unexpected. When faced with the lack of an interpreter in a given language, the interpreters' non-profit organizations engage in sociolinguistic investigations to identify languages that are close to the migrant's language. Then, they contact interpreters from the same country and thus, obtain socio-political details that allow them to identify the 'ideal' interpreter. These are certainly makeshift strategies but, over time, organizations build up a network and expand their language portfolios, which ends up being an effective strategy.

The use of this double interpretation system, which is very common among conference interpreters, has sometimes been a matter of luck. As an extreme example, there once was a need for a Four/French interpreter at Ofpra, and after extensive investigations, the interpreting agency was able to find an interpreter who had recently arrived in France and who could speak both Four and Arabic. Arabic thus became the pivot language for this interpreting performance. Today, after more time and more practice in French, he is the only Four/French interpreter in France. While the complexity of any such system may lead to fears of a loss of information, accuracy, and may even lead to errors, it is still sensible to think that, in view of the institutional obligation to provide interpreters, such a strategy, whenever possible, is invaluable. Besides, no one really knows how the CNDA manages the issue when there are no interpreting resources available¹⁴. It should also be noted that the choice of language in the context of an asylum seeker's application is highly strategic, as it constitutes evidence of the applicant's geographical origin and nationality. This is the case for individuals from a range of countries, particularly where linguistic minorities are threatened (Rohinga, Four, or Zagawa). According to legal experts, the language chosen plays a 50% role in the success of the appeal. This means that it would be more complicated to obtain official refugee status for a Four applicant who cannot use Four and therefore will not be heard in Four (GISTI, 2020). It is, therefore, also clear that finding an interpreter for a language that is subject to pressure is of vital importance.

In medical settings, there are other, more common strategies, such as off-site interpreting, videoconferencing and, of course, telephone interpreting, all of which are becoming increasingly popular. The pandemic has led to an accelerated development of off-site interpreting (Krystallidou, 2020; Pöchhacker, 2020; Valero-Garcés, 2020). On the other hand, it also allowed entities to really benefit from the skills of an interpreter in a rare language with no need for the interpreter to travel, making the organization of appointments easier and/or reducing the time required for administrative formalities.

Geographical distribution is, therefore, a key issue for public service interpreting and this is how the CNDA understands it. This entity is now in the process of restructuring the system based on identified language areas, among other aspects, to recruit local interpreters and make the process of finding an interpreter who speaks a lesser-used language easier. Work has already been initiated in Nancy and Lyon with videoconferences.¹⁵

6. Prospective strategies: using universities as resources in the mid- and longer-term.

Aware that recruitment in languages in demand is a major issue and challenge, ISM has adopted an active approach to anticipating and finding interpreters in highly demanded languages, which, in the latest Annual Report (2022), was referred to as 'new talent' in an attempt to promote the interpreters' image. Indeed, finding the person who meets the required quality criteria is, of course, the ultimate challenge. The use of an interpreter in a highly demanded language could, to some extent, be complicated. Following the ethics of the profession and impartiality, a mastery of the specialized terminology used in the field, a knowledge of the institution's culture, a high level of training, among other aspects, are just some of the criteria that a professional interpreter must meet. Moreover, and this is a

¹⁴ We refer to one-to-one conversations with an interpreter.

¹⁵ For more information please see:

'L'essentiel sur ... le projet de loi de finances pour 2024. Avis sur les crédits relatifs aux « juridictions administratives » et aux « juridictions financières ». Commission des lois. Sénat. <https://senat.fr/ra/a23-134-4/a23-134-4-syn.pdf>

subject that is not often discussed, the rarer the language, the more vulnerable the interpreters because the more likely they are to know the applicant. Although this could occur in the case of several languages, the risk is much greater in the case of a language under great pressure. The guarantees for the interpreters themselves and the professional and ethical guarantees for the employers and beneficiaries are unstable, to say the least.

In their report on the CNDA, the rapporteur has highlighted the issue of the increased risks for interpreters working in rare languages:

The rapporteur appreciated the complexity of the task they are entrusted, particularly when they have to work in a rare language. Interpreters often have personal links with the countries from which asylum seekers come. As a result, they must carefully assess any potential conflicts of interest. In addition, their involvement with the CNDA may expose them and their entourage to pressure from the authorities of the country concerned. Their commitment is to be praised (ISM, 2022).

To tackle these issues, in 2021, ISM appointed a Recruitment Unit, whose responsibilities are to “seek out potential candidates, select and qualify all the various applications (...) through a range of initiatives, such as flyers in strategic locations, connections with universities, in particular INALCO, but also with France Travail, with social media, and so on (...)” (Activity Report, ISM, 2022).

Obviously, there is a clear need, in the future, for more extensive and systematic resources that would contemplate knowledge and consideration of the linguistic realities and resources of the country, even beyond the skills that are strictly linked to interpreting. This would mean working on collecting data, an activity that comes under the heading of DATA intelligence. Knowing on a broad scale who is speaking what and where, and with the utmost precision, would make the effective amplification and pool of a database possible; this database will not only include interpreters but also potential resources in the languages that are most in demand.

To this end, universities are a major source of multilingual students, either because they are studying languages and speak them at home or because they are themselves on international mobility exchanges. Student mobility is, in fact, a little-used source of public service interpreting. Many students come from foreign countries and sometimes master rare languages. Even if they do not necessarily want to work in linguistics or T&I, their skills could be of great use in a situation where there is an acute shortage of interpreters. Moreover, in addition to the extreme sociolinguistic value of these data, it would be useful to carry out a survey at the national or even European level to find out about the resources and potential pool of talent available. Students with a command of a family language apart from French can work in this field from time to time during their studies, even if the aim is not to embark on a career as interpreters or translators. Any university lecturer is aware that the first, second and even third-generation student population is not sufficiently regarded as a linguistic resource. What's more, the benefits to Europe as a whole would be multiplied tenfold if interpreting agencies and institutions in need of interpreters were provided with data on language skills.

Finally, it is important to stress that, in Paris, the Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales (INALCO) is admittedly able to offer qualified students specializing in languages that are in short supply or under-represented. Yet, it is clear that a large number of students in their undergraduate and Masters years, without necessarily following linguistic curricula, could constitute an immense reservoir of resources, thereby promoting policies for the development of multilingualism.

7. Concluding remarks

Providing an interpreter for every language requested within reasonable timescales and in a highly professional environment is the challenge which non-profit organizations that provide interpreters throughout France as well as public authorities that use interpreting services have set themselves. In response to an issue that is becoming more structural than occasional, a variety of strategies are used, ranging from working to improve networks to internal restructuring, creating dedicated centers for service providers; more in-depth reforms aim for greater flexibility, greater efficiency, more efficient use of time, and lower costs for the institutions.

However, there is more at stake than that. To begin with, this is a social issue, as the credibility of state institutions, where interpreting is at the core of all decisions taken, is involved. The CNDA and Ofpra use interpreters and their translations to decide on asylum applications, and it is society as a whole that is affected by the decisions taken by these asylum bodies. Yet, few French citizens are aware that interpreters are the key professionals in this case. Therefore, their professionalism must be guaranteed, whatever the language.

The issue is also a political one, as migration is a burning issue in France. Asylum policies are, therefore, closely scrutinized, and both the CNDA and Ofpra are regularly questioned in cases involving people who have been granted asylum and have committed some serious offences on French territory. However, the interpreter is never observed either by the media or by the citizens themselves, which demonstrates the trust that citizens place in the institutional system and its organization.

To some, the issue of rare languages may seem peripheral, but this is not the case, since the greatest risk lies in these sometimes too-hasty recruitments. In a politically tense context, and specifically regarding short-staffed linguistic services, the management of languages, and therefore of interpreters, is a particularly sensitive issue. Short-term strategies are effective and not necessarily second-best options, far from it, but there remains the risk.

Finally, and on a more positive note, multilingualism is, of course, a key issue, and should then be a priority. This is another role to be played by actors in the sector. A resolute move towards universities is also about giving students from diverse backgrounds the ability to believe that their multilingualism is not only useful but also a professional asset and, therefore, a promise for the future.

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