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Interview with Dr. Elisabet Tiselius. PSIT and 21st century challenges: communication, collaboration, and inclusion

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The transformations of the 21st century have caused a paradigm shift at the social, health, educational, economic and environmental levels. To address these needs and difficulties, institutions and public and private entities have proposed measures and initiatives, either in the long term (see UN Agenda 2030) or in the short term. In this context, speaking of these societies in transition means speaking of Public Service Interpreting and Translation (PSIT) as PSIT is directly related to the changes and challenges posed by migratory flows (Valero-Garcés, 2019). The wide range of scenarios posed by PSIT (health, police, legal-administrative, educational, social work, immigration offices, etc.) is a framework of interest for the analysis of the inclusion and communication of migrants and allophones. In fact, several of these contexts can pose a special challenge when communicating with allophones and citizens from other cultural contexts. Moreover, the role of PSIT, on its way towards professionalisation, takes on a new dimension and becomes, together with the other agents involved in this process, one more piece in the overall framework that should lead to a fairer and less vulnerable society.

Have institutions and society itself become more aware of this transformation of society in 21st century?

It's a question which does not have only one answer. Institutions and society are very much dependent on the context surrounding them. I can only truly answer for the society and institutions I know very well, i.e., the Swedish ones.

Sweden changed from being a rural society characterized by emigration in the 19th and early 20th Century to becoming an industrialized society characterized by immigration from the mid-20th Century. Furthermore, Sweden was never characterized by overseas colonization nation. This history has formed the society today in terms of approach to immigrant groups and how they are received and hosted. The Swedish society today, I would argue is both aware of the transformation and adapting to it. However, transformation and adaptation take time, and it might not be totally painless.

Adaptation in terms of accessibility for foreign and minority language speakers has been happening all the post WWII-era. Sweden has several legal bases for the provision of interpreters for both the judicial, and the health care sector. Interpreters are also available in many other sectors such as education and social services. Furthermore, Sweden has for over 40 years provided interpreter training. Interpreters can also be state authorized (i.e., a certification given after passing a written and oral test).

Sweden also has a well-developed system for learning Swedish as a foreign language, both for adults and children. There is also legislation protecting Sweden's minority languages and the minority language speakers' right to their languages.

However, there system is not without critics, and current political winds have created a debate about whether it is better that immigrants pay for their interpreters and whether language immersion without dedicated teaching is not the best language learning pedagogy.

For a fuller overview of the situation in Sweden, I wrote this article:

Tiselius, Elisabet. 2022. Swedish interpreters' roles and identities – How legislation and the surrounding world contribute to creation and disruption of work environment and education. *The Translator* 28(2). 178–195. DOI: 10.1080/13556509.2022.2104664

Is the UN Agenda 2030 having any impact on the provision of translation and interpreting to migrants and displaced people?

The UN Agenda 2030 gives support for the protection of the language rights already achieved for migrants, displaced people and minority language users in Sweden. I would argue thought that Sweden, through translation and interpreting was contributing to the whole

societies access to for instance good health and well-being (goal 3), or quality education (goal 4), or reduced inequalities (goal 10), or peace, justice and strong institutions (goal 16).

Having said that, this is naturally also something that Sweden as a nation could support on a more global level. Yet, I'm not sure that we could argue that Sweden as a society would see as their responsibility to provide translation and interpreting to migrants, displaced people and minority language users wherever those groups may be located in the world.

Given your research and training experience in conference interpreting and in PSI, which similarities do you find in these two realities? What differences? Similar challenges? And solutions? Same code of ethics?

There are more similarities than differences between conference interpreting and PSI. PSIs have shorter education (if any) and more commonly have clients (often the allophone language speaker) who have low status and low economic power. Furthermore, PSIs tend to use the short consecutive mode (dialogue interpreting) on a regular basis whereas conference interpreters tend to use simultaneous mode with equipment on a regular basis.

Yet, both types of interpreters use the same basic processes for interpreting (identify, decode, transfer, encode and produce [Nida 1964]). They also need to master the same skills (languages, note taking, consecutive and simultaneous interpreting etc.). The situations where they interpret may be equally cognitively challenging.

An important difference between the two varieties can be found in the codes of ethics. For many interpreter professions codes are national, rather than international, as is the case for conference interpreters who in many cases use the AIIC Code of Ethics, while PSIs tend to have national or local codes. Furthermore, different codes of ethics may be based on different approaches to moral philosophy, depending on the interpreting profession. Obvious examples are military interpreters which have codes based on trust, or signed language interpreters where the codes are based on non-discrimination and inclusion. For conference interpreters and PSIs, I have argued elsewhere that the conference interpreters code proposed by AIIC is based on deontology (very short - the right or wrong of an action) while many national codes are based on virtue ethics (very short – what a good person – good interpreter – would do). I do think that different interpreter professions or fields need different codes, and also different countries or regions.

For a much more in-depth discussion of this I have two articles:

Tiselius, Elisabet. 2023. "Ethics of interpreting professions – One size fits all?" In Agnieszka Biernacka & Wojciech Figiel. *New Insights into Interpreting Studies: Technology, Society and Access*. Berlin: Peter Lang. 79–94.

Tiselius, Elisabet. 2022. *Conference and Community Interpreting – Commonalities and Differences*. In Michaela Albl-Mikasa & Elisabet Tiselius (eds). *Routledge Handbook of Conference Interpreting*. London: Routledge. 49–64. 10.4324/9780429297878-6

Nida, Eugene 1964. *Toward a science of translating*. Leiden: Brill.

In practice, the use of bilingual people with no training, a low remuneration, and volunteering is still common practice. Do you envisage any change in our times? Should governments and institutions play a more active role? Should civil society be involved in a more direct way? New policies developed?

For PSI, it is important that governments and institutions actively contribute through policy and education provided that governments want to contribute to mutual understanding between public institutions, health care, immigrations services and allophone speaking individuals. This was shown very clearly by Uldis Ozolins in 2010, in his review of public service interpreting systems in different countries. Ozolins concluded that institutional initiatives, funding, a coalition of interested organisations, and infrastructure for training and certification are necessary for the successful provision of interpreters. I couldn't agree more.

However, we must also understand that we can never fully predict which languages will be needed at any given time, since migration flows change over time. Therefore, a resilient interpreting system must also be equipped to support ad hoc mediators without interpreter training. This can be done if there is a strong base of trained interpreters, functioning provision of interpreters and trained institutional users of interpreting in place. If knowledge and responsibility is present at all levels, then situations where ad hoc mediators are needed (one could imagine a sudden flow of immigrants from an area with a less wide spread language) would offer a support structure for the bilingual individual who would be called upon to act as ad hoc interpreter.

It is not for me to predict whether there will be a change in our time. PSI is very different from country to country and region to region. Nevertheless, I believe that without actions from governments and civil society, and without a clear political will, we will not see any changes to the current situation.

Ozolins, U. 2010. "Factors that Determine the Provision of Public Service Interpreting: Comparative Perspectives on Government Motivation and Language Service Implementation." *The Journal of Specialized Translation* 14. https://www.jostrans.org/issue14/art_ozolins.php

However, scientific production on PSIT has progressed significantly. How could these two ends get together?

I believe that these ends do meet. Many PSIT researchers are also active in their respective countries, by spreading information about PSIT, lobbying for the use of PSIT, engaging in the education of interpreters and translators, and also education of the users of PSIT. One of the driving factors of the professionalization of an occupation is in fact research. Clearly, researchers in PSIT have a responsibility for reaching out to interpreters and users of PSI. I also believe that it is important for researchers focusing on PSIT to reach out and find each other. Too many researchers are isolated islands within nursing studies, law and languages. In order to perform strong research, we should not reinvent the wheel, we should put all our wheels together to get the cart going. Good examples of doing that are the teams of Heidi Salaets at KU Leuven, Barbara Schouten at University of Amsterdam, Sabine Braun at the University of Surrey, and Hanne Skaaden at Oslo Metropolitan University just to mention a few.

We now find ourselves in a double transition – both ecological and digital – what challenges does PSIT face in this 21st century? How can those changes affect or are they affecting the training of translators and interpreters? And in PSIT?

Interpreting goes through disruptive times. Technological changes affect almost all parts of PSIT. How interpreters are trained, how they prepare, how they are booked, which tools they use, and so forth. Technology also makes it possible to work on distance, and from hubs. Indeed, some interpreter providers see openings to break into new markets as their interpreters can work on distance even from another country.

Distance interpreting diminishes travels which is good for the environment. It also allows a better allocation of interpreters. However, a large body of research shows that interpreters on site are both preferred by users and diminishes misunderstandings. Thus there seems to be a need for good matching of type, mode and location of interpreters and their users.

The basic interpreter skill is and will remain the same whether we use technologies or not. However, interpreter programmes need to adapt to how technologies are used in interpreting and also include the teaching of the use of these technologies.

How is PSIT being affected by digitalisation? Or how do you think it affects PSIT, particularly when considering languages of lesser diffusion (LLD)? What about the interest in boosting the use of a lingua franca? Is the digital divide increasing? Or on the contrary, are linguistic and cultural barriers being removed and thus, promoting

the integration of migrant people?

Lingua francas vary over time and region. We see many *lingua francas* in the world today, and although speaking more languages is surely an asset for an individual, it seems naïve to think that a lingua franca could totally replace interpreters.

Digitalization can play an important role in language revival, or when there is a need to communicate over language barriers without access to interpreters and translators. But once again, it is probably naïve to think that technical solutions will solve all problems of communication. We also see that machine translation works best with big languages with many written sources, and have more difficulties with smaller languages with limited written sources.

Linguistic and cultural barriers are both disappearing and growing. In a globalized world, we see also an urge to strengthen specificities of different groups, different languages, and different cultures. Furthermore, a country cannot “order” migrants with the right linguistic and cultural background. Users of PSIT are often heterogenous in terms of linguistic, cultural and educational background.

Do you think PSIT curricula sufficiently address issues related to coping with emotionally-complex situations and stress? What do you recommend?

I think it varies very much, depending on the course or programme. Some spend more time on these issues others less. In some cases, I think there is a certain blind faith in how much ethical guide lines can solve. Interpreters benefit from having guide lines, but will have to prepare themselves for many different situations. Roleplays and case analysis are methods which can be used to familiarize future interpreters to the unpredictability of interpreting.

What are the main challenges professional translators and interpreters have to face in the 21st century?

It differs of course from country to country, but I think translators and interpreters will have to face many of the same challenges as the population in general. Consequences of climate change and war. More specifically for the PSIT profession, the impact of new technologies is difficult to survey exactly, but clearly the profession will change as a consequence of the technological development. Personally, I do not believe that PSIT will be completely replaced by AI very soon. The profession will definitely change, but I still believe interpreters and translators will continue to be around for a while. The reason I say so is because PSIT cover many languages of lesser diffusion, many vulnerable situations and, for interpreting, the spoken languages of a dialogue is erratic, repetitive, and often emotionally and ethically charged. All these characteristics are difficult to handle for a machine, even a very sophisticated and intelligent machine. To quote C3PO from Star Wars “Sometimes, I just don’t understand human behavior”.

Many students are discouraged by uncertain career prospects at the end of their studies. What would you say to them?

I’m very sorry that students are discouraged. We see decreasing numbers of applicants for our programs. I would really like to reach out to students who are passionate about languages and are curious about interpreting and translation and tell them to go for it.

Over the years in our programme there has been ups and downs of the profession. Also, not all of our students end up working as translators or interpreters. However, the experiences from our programme are that students are sought after on the work market, and that the job opportunities are good after a translation and interpreting program. We educate highly qualified multilinguals with thorough competences in information gathering and project management. Our students are either focused on public speaking or creative writing. Our education teaches many so-called transferrable skills which are highly sought after on the work market. Therefore, I say: “Go for it” – it is a really good education.

How do you think translation training should be adapted in the light of technological developments and AI revolution? Online training?

Our PSIT programmes need to include education in the use of technological tool of course. Over-the-phone interpreting is very common in PSI for instance, yet I sometimes hear of programmes where it is not taught. We should not forget though that the basic skills in translation and interpreting are still the same, whether we interpret over the phone or use a CAT-tool. Furthermore, as teachers we must remember that what we teach should be transferrable. I mean that students are not helped if they only learn one tool, rather we should teach an approach to understand and quickly make use of different types of tools. We should definitely not stop teaching basic skills, but we must include teaching how to use different types of technological tools.

Online training is already a part of many PSIT programmes. We should of course not underestimate the benefit of on-site classes either, but online classes give us access both to more teachers and more students.

In your experience, how has the profession changed over the last few years?

I graduated from my programme and started interpreting almost 30 years ago. When I started, we still went to the library to do research for our assignments. I was subscribed to four international weekly magazines. We were booked over the phone, even for PSI assignments, and my first big investment was an answering machine for my land-line phone and a telefax (google it if you don't know). We already had computers and internet, but it was slow and expensive. We had mobile phones and text messages existed, but we used our phones for (expensive!) calls as texting was slow and complicated. Only a few years into my career, the Internet had revolutionized how we prepared, how we were booked, how we managed our travels, and how we trained.

The turn from analogue to digital meant that things go faster, and lead times became shorter. For PSI, I went from being booked a week or two in advance to being booked a few days in advance, or even the same day. Another effect of the digitalization is preparation time, I am more well prepared for my assignments today, yet I spend less time preparing. I have all libraries and information channels I can dream of at the tip of my fingers. Since the mid-1990s, over-the-phone interpreting has grown enormously, and after the pandemic, so has internet platform interpreting. Looking back, we see that PSIT is in the forefront of change. PSIT exists in a globalized world, close to the flow of people. As a consequence, I argue that PSIT is and will continue to be in constant change. Thus, the translator and interpreter working in the field of PSIT is and will continue to be at the forefront of change.

What can we do to improve awareness of the profession of translator and interpreter in public services in today's society?

Ideally, training institutions will train not only interpreters, but also institutional users of interpreters. There are good examples of this type of initiatives, such as the interprofessional training in Ghent for instance. Furthermore, by training interpreters and translators, we also give the profession the metalanguage they need to promote and describe their profession. Yet, as I already said earlier, without the public society's support and legislation there are limits to what can be done. It is worth mentioning the importance of lobby and information. In Norway, the Norwegian association for interpreters was deeply involved in setting up the interpreting services at the Oslo University hospital and also lobbying for the Norwegian legislation on interpreting which was passed in 2021.

In conclusion we can educate interpreters and their institutional users, we can get organized, and we can lobby.

Krystallidou, Demi, De Walle, Céline V., Deveugele, Myriam, Dougali, Evangelina, Mertens, Fien, Truwant, Amélie, Van Praet, Ellen & Pype, Peter. (2018). Training "doctor-minded" interpreters and "interpreter-minded" doctors: The benefits of collaborative practice in

interpreter training. *Interpreting*, 20(1), 126-144.

Artificial intelligence and machine translation are changing job market. How can the academia cope with these changes?

I have mentioned the impact of these new technologies several times in the interview. I think the whole society will change because of these technologies. Thus, academia will have to handle the impact both for themselves and for the programmes they offer. However, as I'm positive in nature, I also believe that it will be a helpful tool. The current difficulty lies in the fact that we do not know for which society we train future translators and interpreters. So, the more important to train lifelong learners who are good at handle new situations, which I believe is the essence of PSIT.

Which future do you see for languages of lesser diffusion or minority languages when there is such a strong trend towards the use of lingua franca - especially English? How can this tendency condition the future of multilingualism and the recognition of human rights? and of training? What kind of training do you think would be the most appropriate?

I think that English is not the only language which can be seen as a potentially threatening lingua franca. There is also for instance Arabic, Swahili, Chinese and many others. As I said in the beginning of the text, linguistic rights and political actions to protect those rights are vital to support languages of lesser diffusion and minority languages. However, there is also the status of the language, a high-status language may be desirable to master to perfection at the disadvantage of a lower status language. It is thus equally important for legislators to make sure that children learn to read and write in the languages of the country.

As training institutions, universities can make sure that our future interpreters and translators master their profession (including their languages of course) to perfection. Researchers can contribute by writing and publishing not only in the lingua franca, but in the country's majority (or minority language). I truly believe in education and training as a strong tool to empower our profession. I think that we need to keep flying the flag for that.

References

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