Making sense of reality

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There is a pressing need to provide a worthwhile academic underpinning to public service or community interpreting and its professional context. This paper considers the strategies that could benefit both pure and applied research in this area by discussing a number of major factors.
First, the approaches used by interpreting as well as related scientific research in the public service field to engage with the relevant range of professional practitioners in identifying the topic, gathering adequate and reliable information, seeking ways forward, developing interdisciplinary understanding and implementing improved practice, are considered.
Second, it is argued that there is a crucial need for interpreting and language specialists to demonstrate and apply standards of valid research methodologies equivalent to those used in other disciplines in this context (such as medicine), in order to affirm their academic responsibility and interdisciplinary credibility.
Finally, the dissemination of the results of research, not only to fellow academics in the language world but also to academics in other related disciplines as well as to the practitioners - interpreters, translators, doctors, lawyers, police officers, social workers etc. - is considered. Research results must be accessible in order to improve practice and to enable the research results to be brought into the mainstream informed debate.

1. Context

Yet again interpreters and translators are acting as the catalysts for social change. Multilingual societies have become the norm. Modern systems of transport enable people to move between countries as never before. Individuals flee from natural and man-made disasters in their own countries. Others increasingly move between countries for education, work or simply pleasure. This is an undeniable and irreversible process. To pretend otherwise simply turns what could be an enriching fact into a problem.

Practical challenges arise when migrants do not have a fluent written and spoken command of the language of the country they arrive in and therefore cannot gain effective access to and make use of the public services essential to their quality of life. Likewise, countries that ignore the implications of this are in danger of having their social infrastructure weakened when significant proportions of their populations remain without adequate access to the legal systems, health care, education, housing and social services, because of language barriers.

Public service interpreters and translators belong to the new branches of the language professions that have emerged to meet these challenges. They have courageously taken their places, shoulder to shoulder with doctors, lawyers and other disciplines, at the cutting edge of a new reality. At the start they were armed with no more than an acute sense of professional responsibility, and with language skills and techniques that may have been only partly relevant. They have continued to refine and hone those skills to make them fit for the tasks in hand. They rightly insist that the standards of excellence required to meet their responsibilities, although not always available, are the same as those required for other domains. There are now increasing examples of specialised courses, assessments, codes of ethics and guides to good practice. Trainers of public service interpreters and translators are being trained, public service personnel are being instructed in how to work with linguists and bridge cultural gaps, and the beginnings of a career structure is in the process of being carved out.

Developments are taking place on three broad fronts:

- nationally – as each country seeks to meet its own needs
- by continent – as countries recognise the need for arrangements required to tackle issues involving their immediate neighbours. One good example of this is the series of Grotius and Agis projects supported by the European Union, to establish equivalencies of standards in legal interpreting and translation in all member states. Their aims included providing the language support required where individual cases involve more than one member state, and where judicial co-operation is needed to combat such matters as terrorism and trafficking in drugs or people. The projects' recommendations have been accepted by the European Commission and can be found in Hertog (2001), Hertog (2004) and Keijzer-Lambooy and Giselle (2005);
- internationally – this has been mainly brought about by the Critical Link conferences. Started by a group of indefatigable Canadians, the first Critical Link conference was held there in Geneva Park in 1995. No one, who had the privilege of being at that first gathering in the Ontario countryside will forget the joy of meeting up with people from many different countries who shared this common interest; people who were equally weary, some of them frustrated but all undeterred. Three more CL conferences followed: in Vancouver in 1998, in Montreal in 2001 and in Stockholm in 2004. The proceedings of each conference have been published by John Benjamins: Carr et al (1997), Roberts et al (2000), Brunette et al (2003), Dimitrova et al (2006). These publications reflect the gradual growth of recognision and expertise and, indeed, of a growing consistency of approach. The next CL conference will be in Australia in 2007.

The strength and speed of development of the work of public service interpreters and translators, and that of the national and international movements behind them, have surprised many people in academia, government and in

the public services who once considered these to be peripheral activities. Part of the reason for their strength is that their development is being forged through the pressures of two opposing forces. One is the demand for the interpreters' language skills, without which miscarriages of justice, higher infant mortality rates and the marginalisation of those who cannot speak the majority language would be inevitable. The second and opposing force is the apathy, ignorance and, in some countries, the often downright hostility of the decision and policy makers who, at best, neglect to make adequate provisions and, at worst, deliberately put obstacles in the way of progress.

To be fair to the policy and decision makers who are trying to assist, they are too often hampered by the nature of politics, and governed by the short-term: short-term political considerations to attract votes, short-term management targets or priorities, and short-term budgets.

A profession, by contrast, is a long-term concept:

> A profession is defined as a group of people who share a common expertise and 'profess' to a code of ethics and conduct, which is in the interest of their clients, colleagues and body of knowledge and which goes beyond the self-interest of the individual practitioner. Professions come into being where trust has to be engendered, primarily because the clients are not in a position to judge for themselves the quality of service being given at the point of delivery. (…) In order to fulfil what is required of them by their professional code, professions establish selection criteria, initial and in-service training, nationally recognised assessments at all levels, guidelines to good practice and disciplinary procedures. All five of these should be transparent, nationally/internationally recognised, consistent and accountable to the public and to the profession." (Corsellis in Hertog 2001: 147)

Indeed, the concept of what constitutes a 'profession' is a powerful one. It includes not only the aim to achieve, maintain and improve standards of practice but also the need to protect and defend them. It acknowledges responsibilities not only to clients and peers, but also to colleagues in other disciplines, and to the wider community.

To fulfil those requirements, a profession needs to be fully rounded: independent, confident in its expertise, alert to changing needs, open to development and equipped to defend its standards.

From the outset, public service developments in translation and interpreting have been given the support of experienced linguists from other branches of the profession. Conference interpreters have taught interpreting theory in many courses and training programmes and adapted it to the new public service context. Senior translators, more used to the fields of commerce or diplomacy, have wrestled alongside public service students over the translation of seemingly mundane but vital texts such as forms for operation consent and applications for housing.

Inevitably, the new does not take place in isolation. The new always takes place within the context of the old. Changes within this new branch of the interpreting profession are inevitably having effects on established ones. Where no appropriate traditional language professional structures existed, new ones have had to be put in place for the public service domain. As these new structures grow, they are acting as catalysts for change within the wider profession. One obvious result of this is that language practitioners in other fields are beginning to see the advantages of the formal national professional registers for public service interpreters and translators, which were drawn up to match the professional registers of other public service disciplines, such as those of doctors and lawyers. Regulatory national professional language bodies with formal requirements for codes, disciplinary procedures and continuous professional development are increasingly being considered where they did not exist before, such as those reflecting the Chartered status recently granted to the Institute of Linguists in the UK. Consideration is being given to the need for international recognition of common core professional structures to enable interpreters and translators to practise more easily in more than one country. One example of this is the EU Grotius and Agis project work, mentioned above, to establish equivalencies of standards for legal interpreters and translators in all member states. How else can recent and future EU legislation on mutual recognition of evidence, bail and judicial decisions function without mutual recognition of interpreting and translation skills?

2. The need for research

Since fundamental changes have been taking place in the language services offered in a public service context, there is also a significant need for academic work to consolidate these achievements, to underpin progress, to disseminate ideas and to make sense of the complex realities of the public service arena. Public service interpreters and translators should have the backing of an academic base providing sound, evidence-based research to underpin their activities.

In addition, policy and decision makers, often hindered by the constraints of the short-term approach and policy, also require solid, objective research to prove to their governments the social and cost effective merits of long-term investment in this area. The market forces that apply to the cost of interpreting and translation in the fields of diplomacy or commerce, for example, rarely apply in the public service field because both other-language-speakers and individual public services are likely to be financially constrained. And, rightly so, governments have to have good grounds to spend taxpayers' money on something that they do not see as a priority.

On the other hand, research can be problematic because the issues under investigation may be difficult to quantify. Can one prove that the health of a community has improved because of the assistance of qualified interpreters and translators? Is it possible to estimate the improvements in

the administration of justice brought about by good communication? Would a comparative sample of people who had been denied interpreting and translation in hospitals and courts be required? New approaches are obviously required.

3. Laying the foundations for worthwhile research

In the demanding process of meeting pressing practical needs, public service interpreters and others in this field have too often neglected to consult their colleagues in academia – except for those who were practitioners as well as academics. Time is now of the essence. Where research is aimed at improving the quality of practice, it has to be given the best possible chance of success. What follows are suggestions and ideas as to what is needed and how it might be achieved.

The first step is to forge some informed mutual understanding between academic linguists and professionals working in public services. Public service professionals, including interpreters and translators, have been trained to work quickly, quietly and precisely in multi-disciplinary teams where everyone should know and respect the other's role. Their common goal is the satisfactory outcome of the event in hand, be it aiding the birth of a baby, or finding a missing person. They tread a tightrope of good practice and are protective of the procedures of which they are an integral part, because of the human risks involved. Rightly, they are cautious of intrusion by third parties whom they do not know or who have not earned their trust. If a healthcare team is dealing with a multiple road traffic accident involving a tourist bus of foreigners, for example, a researcher who wished to explore their communicative strategies first-hand would have had to establish good working relationships with the team first and identified strategies with them beforehand. Otherwise, apart from potentially getting in the way, the researcher is unlikely to get useful data.

It is as well therefore to begin with some background understanding of how the two sets of disciplines may view one another. How can such situations be avoided? It is likely that public service practitioners, such as doctors and lawyers, do not know what academic linguists are or what they do, much less whether they can be of any use to them in the work place. Indeed, medical practitioners and lawyers have been earnestly holding conferences on "communication" without involving applied linguists whose discipline it is. They may not know the difference between a translator and an interpreter and use the titles interchangeably. They are unlikely to be aware of the subdivisions of the language discipline, of forensic linguistics, sociolinguistics and so on.

There is, therefore, a public relations task to be done by academic linguists wishing to enter the field. Another important reason is that, like the doctors, professionals in other public services are beginning to realise that they need help in this area. Like anyone entering an unfamiliar field, public service professionals may be uncertain about who to approach in the lan-

guage research world. Track records of sound work therefore have to be drawn up by and made available and accessible to the public services.

Conversely, some academics may think that they know about public services because they have been in hospital and visited the doctor, the police station or the court. But this is clearly different from knowing what it is like to actually do the job, to carry particular and onerous responsibilities and to follow ingrained codes of ethics. In other words, it is difficult to produce useful data based upon the simple observations of a bystander, because information yielded by such observation still needs to be decoded adequately. What is more, this has to be balanced against any need for objectivity and any effects on the situation by the very fact that an observer is present - although academics should know how to accommodate the observer's stance in experimental research.

Some secondary agendas also need to be accommodated. For example, there should be recognition, within the public services, of the needs of academics and their realities, which include requirements to produce a number of publications to meet research and academic career targets. Equally, public service professionals should appreciate that academics, like the members of any discipline, need to train younger colleagues of their own craft and that undergraduates and postgraduates must learn how to research and even make mistakes, without causing disasters. Student doctors, nurses and lawyers are in the same position in this respect.

Negotiating mutually advantageous approaches leads to mutual trust. Obviously, academics will be aware that, given the urgent need for worthwhile research and the scarcity of resources, those working in the public services will be justifiably cross if research opportunities are wasted and they see themselves as having been plundered merely to add to an individual's list of publications. That principle applies equally if a public service were unreasonably obstructive. Clearly, either would also reflect upon any subsequent academic exercise and on the value and adequacy of information and the co-operation given.

4. Possible approaches and processes

In a number of scientific as well as IT fields, extensive successful research has been conducted and quickly absorbed within public service practice. The enormous advances made thanks to applied research in medicine, for instance, even in recent years, have included the development of such essential items as cardiac pacemakers, intoximeters, amniocentesis, pharmacological products, etc. Similarly, academic linguists can make equally valuable contributions to society and in particular to public services interpreting, not in the form of a concrete piece of equipment but in improvements to the communication that is at the hub of a successful delivery of public services.

Below, the main stages that might constitute such research are considered, with some concrete examples added:

- identifying the problem to be solved – e.g. the police are finding that engaging face to face interpreters on every occasion which involves someone who does not speak their language, is proving expensive and logistically challenging. A researcher could be asked to assess when, or if, video or telephone interpreting would be adequate;
- determining the factors involved – e.g. working with police and lawyers to identify the criteria to be applied which could include the standards of information transfer required in a range of situations, such as guiding lost tourists, reporting missing persons, taking witness statements or interviewing suspects. What constitutes adequacy of transfer of meaning on each type of occasion? What is acceptable for evidential purposes? What is feasible in terms of costs and practicalities? Are there implications where small children and the elderly are involved? What checks and balances should be in place?
- developing assessment strategies and applying them, on a pilot scale, to a range of possible methods of interpreting solutions (face-to-face, video and telephone interpreting) in the range of situations against the criteria identified in the earlier phase - in collaboration with legal interpreters, police and lawyers - to clarify the advantages and disadvantages of each method;
- coming to a potentially best solution - which might be on the lines that telephone interpreting is adequate for guiding lost tourists, video interpreting is adequate for lawyers conducting routine consultations with their clients in prison but that face-to-face interpreting is necessary for evidential purposes. Those potential solutions then need to be tested and rigorously evaluated in practice on a more significant scale;
- dissemination of the confirmed solution needs to be supported by any necessary in-service training of both legal and language practitioners in relevant good practice, revealed through the development process;
- on-going multi-disciplinary evaluation and fine-tuning are necessary to monitor implementation to ensure it is being properly carried out, to identify shortcomings and problems and to improve the process where necessary.

This process does not look at the work of the academic language export in isolation, but at the relevant associated professional context as well. It also ensures the following necessary elements for any sound academic work: relevance, rigour, solid and sufficient data, sound methodology, adherence to ethical frameworks of all disciplines involved, accountability, worthwhile sample sizes, testing of hypotheses, and responsible recommendations or implementation.

Such a collaborative approach between academia and the public services is not only more likely to produce results that improve matters because it is grounded in real-life situations, it is also inclusive. As it includes

the views of, for example, the healthcare practitioners and patients, it is both more likely to be implemented than the narrower dimension of pure academic research and at the same time it may benefit from shared funding between the disciplines.

None of this of course precludes academic linguists from undertaking 'pure' research. Both pure, and applied research, have their place. However, in some countries, the national authorities, which rate university research outcomes, may have to be encouraged to review their existing hierarchies because they often rate 'pure' research higher than what is sometimes called 'applied research'. National and other funding bodies also may need to be encouraged to adapt their criteria for similar reasons. It seems obvious that research that aims to improve the quality of people's lives should be valued on a par with pure research, but this is not always the case.

Given the limited resources and the scale of the work that remains to be done, it would seem to be common sense to avoid duplication and to build on other relevant work in the field. A central register of research completed and in progress, accompanied by a short description and contact details, could be helpful for these purposes.

5. Training in research and supervision

By definition, at postgraduate level in particular, students are sometimes ahead of their tutors in respect of the detail of the discipline they are exploring. Nevertheless, in addition to the ability to teach the standard best research practice, supervisors in language research in the field of the public services, should have both a general background in the subject in order to understand the detail and know-how to conduct research appropriately within particular public service fields.

The young researcher, in particular, usually knows no fear and these are largely uncharted waters where there are still a large number of possible research topics to choose from. They are likely to come up with suggestions for work that would give the mature pause for thought, such as the discourse strategies or pragmatics in situations breaking the bad news of fatalities to families after accidents, or analysing interpreted cross examinations in complex trials, or examining turn-taking in interpreted domestic or neighbourhood disputes between participants who may become violent and may carry weapons. All these tasks may need to be done but they must be done well and the integrity of both the public service and the academic research processes need to be protected.

There is therefore a need for a clear set of guidelines to good practice for language faculty members, so that they can supervise responsible approaches to research in the public services. Such guidelines should also include advice on how to handle the ethical constraints of the research, the conventions for courtesies to the parties involved and the ultimate accountability of the researcher and his or her supervisor. Good lines of communic-

ation are another integral part of this and they include academic tutors communicating adequately with their colleagues in the public services, perhaps at meetings arranged for this purpose or in formal interdisciplinary research steering groups. This has been found to be mutually informative and beneficial. It not only supports the prevention of potential mishaps but provides a framework for rescue and recovery on the odd occasions when things go awry.

6. Dissemination

Academics read extensively about their subject as part of their job. However, people working in the public services have little time, energy or opportunity to read as much as they would like about their subject. In addition, when one has spent eight hours in an Accident & Emergency Department, a housing office or a police station, reading about how to improve procedures is not something many professionals will look forward to doing when they finally get home. This is not to say that public service employees never read academic articles but that, in a rapidly changing context, alternative modes for the dissemination of need-to-know new research findings must be considered.

It may be wise to consider, therefore a range of modes of dissemination. Academic colleagues can be reached through the normal academic journals and publications. Members of public service disciplines, including interpreters and translators, may need to be reached by other means. Much will depend upon the subject content, the context and the particular service. Academic linguists, above all disciplines, should be in a position to find a language and means of communication to make their work accessible.

A new range of alternative modes of dissemination should be devised besides the standard academic journals and publications, if members of the public service disciplines, including interpreters and translators, are to be reached and kept up to date. Much will depend on the subject, the context and the particular service, but intranet solutions seem self-evident, as are regular staff-researcher meetings and interdisciplinary in-service training seminars.

More research is obviously needed, even into the development of adequate methods for research dissemination among multidisciplinary professional groups with different backgrounds and traditions in the reception and communication of information

Maybe that, in itself, would make an interesting piece of research. Meanwhile, thought could be given simply to asking public service colleagues for their views, given that they will be fairly used to topping up their professional information base in a rapidly changing world. Information giving can often best be done on a need-to-know basis, layered and consolidated, for example through one sheet of bullet points in a good practice folder or a short DVD presentation with access to further information and detail if required.

Initial and in-service training formal syllabuses for the public service disciplines mutate more gradually to meet change. The need for inclusion of such items as basic medical anthropology for healthcare workers, and basic linguistics for all, is more likely to come through the accumulation of good accessible training materials that have incrementally become part of a profession's everyday practice.

7. Conclusion

Public service interpreters and translators are already working in the field. They are largely unsupported by a relevant academic body of knowledge, which would help them, and those with whom they work, make sense of their own experiences and guide them to improved practice – and they deserve the best.

Academic researchers are needed not as bystanders to this rapidly changing social process but as a relevant, responsible, reliable and integral part of it.

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