Teaching Community Interpreting: A New Challenge?
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Abstract
While in the countries like Canada, the United Kingdom or Australia, community interpreting has been enjoying a considerable popularity in recent years, in Slovakia and most probably also in the countries of the region, it is an unknown notion. With regard to the constantly increasing mobility of labour force and opening of the labour market, it seems important for educational institutions engaged in translation training in Slovakia to rise to the challenge and prepare to fulfil the needs of the society.

Community interpreting is usually referred to as a special type of oral translation facilitating access to public services by mediating between service users and service providers who do not share the same language. Despite the fact that it is a rapidly growing field, especially in the countries with expanding foreign-based work force, we are witnessing a certain divergence in its perception. The variance is not only in a number of different names under which it can be found, such as *public service interpreting (UK), cultural interpreting (Canada), liaison interpreting (Australia), contact interpreting (Scandinavia)*, *dialogue interpreting,*, *ad hoc, triangle*, *face-to-face*, and *bidirectional* or *bilateral interpreting* (Gentile et al, 1996; Carr, 1997) but also in its scope. Although different interpretations of the term in most cases reflect different needs, traditions and local specifics, it is possible to define the generally accepted common features of the phenomenon.

Community interpreting is sometimes distinguished from other types of interpreting by the **contexts** in which it is employed. It is understood as a kind of interpreting that takes place in neighbourhoods and community agencies and is performed by amateurs or unpaid volunteers, often perceived as non-professional interpreters. It is related to situations in which non-native speakers are aided by native speakers (but also non-native speakers) in their communication with the providers of various public services. The settings where communication takes place include hospitals and doctors´ offices, attorneys´ offices, social welfare and housing agencies, employment agencies, or police stations. It is obvious that the typical clients are mostly migrant workers and their families and members of specific ethnic groups in large cities.

Another characteristic feature of community interpreting is the degree of **formality/informality** in the interpreting activities. Instead of interpreting a speech to a large audience, a community interpreter works in a more interactive atmosphere, often with a dialogic structure. This approach stresses the dialogic setting regardless of the given situation, whether this is in hospitals, public service agencies or police department. Therefore, it is sometimes labelled as *dialogue interpreting.*

Compared to other types of interpreting, the (unprofessional) community interpreter also serves as a guide, advisor or social **mediator.** His often spontaneous face-to-face interaction predestines him to function as a client's advocate and helping hand.

Community interpreting is also distinguished from other types of interpreting by the fact that no **equipment** is used for communication. Depending on the circumstance, it can take the form of either consecutive or simultaneous interpreting as chouchotage, but on principle in the presence of all persons involved, albeit sometimes over the telephone.

There is consensus in the literature that the community interpreter is required to be competent in the relevant languages and cultures (Jiang 2007) and in the communicative process of everyday and domain knowledge of an institutionalized communicative situation. The domain knowledge is often equated with terminological knowledge but recently has also included norms and conventions, e.g. in legal discourse.

As a consequence of the lack of a conceptual framework, opinions on the specific forms of community interpreting significantly vary from author to author, from country to country. The most controversial issue is whether community interpreting should also include such specific fields as *court interpreting or conference interpreting.* Roda Roberts (2002: 162) argues that community interpreting differs from court interpreting and conference interpreting. In community interpreting, there are (a) different objectives, (b) different types of parties involved, (c) different number of parties, (d) different discourse used, (e) different mode of interpreting, and (f) differences in the directionality of interpreting. Several authors include court interpreting into community interpreting (Mikkelson 1996b). Typical community interpreters, however, have not only a different role compared to court interpreters but also a different degree of *responsibility*. Therefore, as ad hoc service providers they are often related to non-professional interpreting services rendered by whoever is immediately available such as medical hospital staff, family members (including children) or even other patients. Court interpreters, on the other hand, are in most countries specialized professionals offering assistance not only to defence or prosecution but they are also active prior to the case. The fulfilment of this role requires an understanding by the interpreter of the complexities of the task to be performed and the fundamental ethical principles and standards prescribed by judicial authorities. In the case of court interpreting, the principle of neutrality and detachment is taken for granted. Accuracy, impartiality, confidentiality, proficiency and demeanour belong to the major quality requirements for court interpreters.

Contrary to the situation in some countries where court interpreting keeps a low status[1], in Slovakia a demand for a higher level of professionalism can be observed. According to effective legislation, some routine jobs of community interpreters are only reserved to qualified professionals appointed by the Ministry of Justice. In addition to court or legal interpreting that has the highest status, non-court contexts such as interviews in police departments, customs offices, or ceremonies at local registration offices also require sworn or official certified interpreters. All these services have a special status of an interpretation/translation for official purposes. Other types of interpreting are more informal and do not require highly qualified interpreters.

The profession of community interpreter as a formal occupation has no tradition in the Slovak society. In contrast to the situation in, for example Canada, where a non-profit organization working under the name Critical Link Canada puts a lot of effort into (a) promoting the establishment of standards which guide the practice of community interpreters; (b) encouraging and sharing research in the field of community interpretation; (c) adding to the discussion about the educational and training requirements for community interpreters; (d) advocating for the provision of professional community interpreting services by social, legal and health care institutions; (e) raising awareness about community interpreting as a profession (www.criticallink.org).

With regard to the above mentioned characteristics of community interpreting, introducing specialized training courses especially for bilingual individuals, including those representing linguistic minorities may be a challenge for institutions involved in translation and interpretation training. Such on-purpose-designed training courses could have the following major goals: (1) to ensure a high level of expression accuracy in the interpreter's working languages; (2) to develop awareness of potential cross-cultural differences in specific public services; (3) to develop the relevant skills for consecutive interpreting, including note-taking and message retention techniques; and (4) to ensure the candidate's commitment to a professional code of ethics. The overall aim of such training courses would be to develop *community interpreting competence* and thus to contribute to its professionalization and to make sure that individuals and organisations providing interpreting services have the appropriate skills and knowledge to provide high quality effective services for their clients.

Similarly to other professionals working in the interpretation industry, the community interpreter's competence should comprise such *abilities* as (a) the ability to translate a message from one language to another in the applicable mode; (b) the ability to assess and comprehend the original message and render it in the target language without omissions, additions or distortions, and it also includes (c) the knowledge/awareness of the interpreter's own role in the interpreting encounter.

From the point of view of the skills involved, community interpreting is making use of interpreting skills, linguistic skills, research and technical skills, and interpersonal skills.

- The *interpreting skills* include: active listening, good memory retention, note-taking, and mental ability to transpose and verbalize messages into the target language.
- The *linguistic skills* are represented by: the depth of knowledge in and the understanding of the interpreter's working languages and the required range of language registers; and the knowledge of subject areas and related terminology.
- The *research and technical skills* include: the ability to efficiently acquire the additional linguistic and specialized knowledge necessary to interpret in specialized cases, the experience in the use of research tools, and the ability to develop suitable strategies for the efficient use of the information sources available.
- The *interpersonal skills* include: strong communication skills, polite, respectful and tactful conduct, positive relationship to people, and good judgment.

The training in the development of the above-mentioned abilities and skills should focus on the specific types of events in which communication takes place. The event is defined by factors such as the physical location, number of participants and type of discourse. These include: medical appointments, press conferences, interviews, live broadcasts, negotiations, meetings and assemblies, presentations, consultations, or community forums.

As an example of a well run community training programme, a course provided by the University of Minnesota may be mentioned for inspiration. It is a 45-hour interpreting course for bilingual speakers consisting of the following 10 units:

1: Overview of interpreting and definitions of terms
2: The interpreter's role
3: The linguistic, cultural, situational, and professional tasks of interpreting
4: Processes and skills required for interpreting
5: Preparation and protocol
6: Ethics and ethical decision-making
7: Process management
8: Overview of interpreting in medical settings
9: Overview of interpreting in legal settings
10: The profession of interpreting
(http://www1.umn.edu/twincities/index.php)

Over the last twenty years, community interpreting has become a profession in many countries of the world. Training programmes and assessment tools have been developed and the demand for services has increased significantly. With regard to the constantly increasing mobility of labour force and opening of the labour market, it seems important for educational institutions engaged in translation training in Slovakia to rise to the challenge and prepare to fulfil the needs of the society. To meet this challenge is of particular importance if we take into account possible consequences of unprofessional conduct of those engaged in the job, as summarized by the Canadian scholar Nathan Garber:

The community interpreter must work in both languages and often must overcome cultural barriers that block communication. Usually, the environment is one of high emotion where misunderstanding will expose the parties to some serious risk. For example, it may result in improper diagnosis, unneeded tests, loss of income, criminal charges being wrongfully laid or the failure to lay criminal charges when warranted. Unfortunately, most community interpreting is done by volunteers, often family members, who have had no training, whose competence is unknown, and who have had no exposure to the ethical issues inherent in this type of interpreting (Pym 2003: 42).

Notes:
1 In Ireland, for example, the Department of Justice as well as police have no interpreting policy and court interpreters receive no training and are not tested (PHELAN 2001).

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