Interpreting is interpreting – or is it?

Analysis of the different types of interpreting shows that regardless of the adjective preceding the word "interpreter," practitioners of this profession the world over perform the same service and should meet the same standards of competence.

Holly MIKKELSON.
Published: December 14, 2009 Last updated: December 2, 2015

1. Introduction

The title of this paper may seem simplistic, but it represents decades of reflection on the practice of interpreting. As someone trained in a program oriented toward conference interpretation who went on to practice court interpreting and is now involved in training community interpreters, I am constantly reminded of the many similarities between these types of interpreting. Yet I am also constantly hearing practitioners strive to differentiate their type of interpreting from that of other practitioners.

- A conference interpreter on medical interpreting: I didn't get all those years of training to be able to say, "Where does it hurt?"
- A medical interpreter on court interpreters: They wouldn't last five minutes in the emergency room, they're so used to the plodding pace of court proceedings.
- A court interpreter on conference interpreting: What could be so hard when you always get the speech in advance, and you only work 30 minutes at a time?

In California, interpreters certified for criminal court proceedings set themselves apart from those who are "merely" certified for administrative hearings. Several court interpreter colleagues, upon hearing that I had established a center on community interpreting, expressed the fervent hope that I would not include court interpreting as a species of "community interpreting." "After all our hard work for professional recognition, we don't want to be lumped together with that bunch," was the message I got.

A common topic at interpreters' meetings is the need for client education: "We need to educate our clients so that they understand how specialised our work is; we're not like those other so-called interpreters."

I'm not the only person to ponder this issue, of course. Scholars such as Roberts (1997) and Gentile (1993, 1997) have also discussed the divisiveness of drawing distinctions among different types of interpreting. Gentile, in particular, advocates eliminating the adjectives and simply talking on interpreting. Garber (1998), on the other hand, points out that there are some profound differences between types of interpreting, and that labels are helpful for distinguishing them. Perhaps it is naïve to think that people will discontinue the use of qualifiers, given the human propensity for classifying things. If we are going to use them, though, they should serve some purpose other than mere divisiveness.
Some years ago, I came across a thesis written by a conference interpreter in Taiwan, Joseph Tseng, about the struggles he and his colleagues were enduring to gain recognition in their country. The parallels between the nascent conference interpreting profession in Taiwan and the equally inchoate community interpreting profession in the United States struck me immediately, spurring me to write a paper on the subject (Mikkelson, 1996a). That paper only raised more questions in my mind, however. Why does the public, on the one hand, lump all language professionals together—language teachers, translators, interpreters, and even transcribers and court reporters are all the same to them—while on the other hand, practitioners make such an effort to differentiate themselves? Could there be any correlation between the public’s confusion and ignorance, and the profession’s obsession with drawing ever-finer distinctions? Garber (1998) contends that the labels alleviate confusion, noting that "outside of a small group of people who share our interest in interpreting, the word 'interpreter' has very little meaning. In order to give it some practical meaning, we must add some type of qualifier." Whether the distinctions add to or lessen the confusion remains to be seen.

As I’ve traveled around the world meeting interpreters of myriad languages working in a vast array of settings, I’ve been struck with another irony: Interpreting is becoming an increasingly common activity that is now an essential part of human interaction at all levels; more and more people are employed as interpreters in government and public agencies, non-governmental organisations, and private industry—but the interpreters I talk to are almost unanimous in complaining that they are underpaid, undertrained, and underappreciated. In a situation that would appear to defy the law of supply and demand, the demand for interpreters far exceeds the supply (of qualified interpreters, that is—or in some cases, even unqualified ones), while the pay and working conditions deteriorate. Although the number of interpreters in the world is not keeping pace with the need for their services, it is growing in absolute terms. So why do interpreters have so little clout? I think the answer can be found in the preceding paragraphs.

In this paper I hope to show that the traditional labels attached to different types of interpreting are inadequate and may be contributing to the divisiveness we see among interpreters today. I will attempt to identify not what distinguishes one type of interpreting from another, but what unifies them, and along the way I hope to dispel some myths. It is my hypothesis that what actually differs is not what the interpreters do, but how they are perceived. In other words, whereas the intrinsic nature of interlingua communication varies little from one interpreted event to the next, powerful external factors intervene to create major differences in attitudes among the clients and the practitioners themselves. I will analyze these factors and discuss how they affect the interpreting profession.

2. Myths About Interpreting

Interpreters are familiar with the misconceptions the lay public has about their profession, but they tend to be unaware that each segment of the interpreting profession has its own myths about other types of interpreting, such as:

1. Only conference interpreters perform simultaneous interpretation.
2. Only court interpreters have to be concerned with ethical considerations such as confidentiality and impartiality.
3. Community interpreters are always amateurs with limited formal education.
4. Conference interpreters always interpret for trained public speakers, and they always get the speeches in advance with plenty of time to prepare.
5. Only community interpreters deal with cultural differences.

The following discussion of different types of interpreting should dispel these myths.

3. Types of Interpreting
Interpreting itself can be described in simple terms: "(T)he interpreter has first to listen to the speaker, understand and analyze what is being said, and then resynthesize the speech in the appropriate form in a different language ..." (Jones, 1996: 6). The following list, though not definitive, contains the subcategories most frequently encountered in the literature about interpreting. In every one of these subcategories, interpreters perform the (seemingly) simple task described above. The first three focus on the mode of delivery, and the remaining categories emphasize the setting or the subject matter of the interpreted event. The types of interpreting are listed in order of the unofficial hierarchy that prevails among interpreters, the informal but very real differentiation that places some interpreters at the pinnacle and others at the "bottom of the heap."

**Simultaneous interpreting:** As the name suggests, providing the target-language message at roughly the same time as the source-language message is being produced. According to Seleskovitch (1978a):

In simultaneous interpretation the interpreter is isolated in a booth. He speaks at the same time as the speaker and therefore has no need to memorize or jot down what is said. Moreover, the processes of analysis-comprehension and of reconstruction-expression are telescoped. The interpreter works on the message bit by bit, giving the portion he has understood while analyzing and assimilating the next idea. (125)

**Consecutive interpreting:** In this case, the interpreter waits until the speaker has finished before beginning the interpretation. Again quoting Seleskovitch (1978a):

In consecutive interpretation the interpreter does not start speaking until the original speaker has stopped. He therefore has time to analyze the message as a whole, which makes it easier for him to understand its meaning. The fact that he is there in the room, and that the speaker has stopped talking before he begins, means that he speaks to his listeners face to face and he actually becomes the speaker. (123)

**Whispered interpreting:** Also known as *chuchotage*. When equipment for simultaneous interpretation is not available, "one participant speaks and simultaneously an interpreter whispers into the ear of the one or maximum two people who require interpreting services" (Jones, 1998: 6).

**Conference interpreting:** "(E)nables participants in a multinational meeting to communicate with each other in a seamless fashion, making the language barrier almost imperceptible" (GSTI, 1998a: 6). Some writers equate conference interpreting with simultaneous interpreting. According to Jones (1998), most conferences are conducted with simultaneous interpreting these days, though interpreters must be prepared to perform in the consecutive mode as well.

**Seminar interpreting:** A term used by the U.S. Department of State to designate the interpreting that takes place in meetings and small conferences. Gonzalez, et al (1991: 28) assert that "the basic difference between conference interpreting and seminar interpreting is the size of the meeting."

**Escort interpreting:** Refers to the interpreting services provided for government officials, business executives, investors, observers, and the like, who are conducting on-site visits. "Escort interpretation is marked by the spontaneity and the broad spectrum of situations interpreters may find themselves in, from formal meetings to tours of factories to cocktail parties. The mode most often used in this type of interpretation is consecutive, and is usually limited to a few sentences at a time" (Gonzalez, et al, 1991: 28).

**Media interpreting:** A catchall term encompassing the interpreting performed at press conferences, publicity appearances, and interviews, as well as films, videos, videoconferences, and television and radio programs (GSTI, 1998b).

**Court interpreting:** Also known as legal, judiciary, or forensic interpreting, refers to interpreting
services provided in courts of law and in legal cases of any sort. According to Gonzalez et al (1991):

**Legal interpretation** refers to interpretation that takes place in a legal setting such as a courtroom or an attorney's office, wherein some proceeding or activity related to law is conducted. Legal interpretation is subdivided according to the legal setting into (1) quasi-judicial and (2) judicial interpreting or what is normally referred to as **court interpreting**. (25, emphasis in original)

In some jurisdictions, such as the State of California, a further distinction is made between **court interpreters**, who work in criminal and civil proceedings in courts of law, and **administrative hearing interpreters**, who provide services in hearings conducted by administrative law judges under the auspices of state government agencies. In the United States, most interpreting in legal settings is done in the simultaneous mode, although consecutive is the mode of choice for witness testimony (Gonzalez et al, 1991); but in other countries, interpreted court proceedings are most likely to use the consecutive mode (Driesen, 1989; Tsuda, 1995).

**Business interpreting**: Sometimes known as commercial or trade interpreting. Gentile et al (1996) define the term broadly:

In the narrowest sense, the term denotes two or more business people discussing business matters through an interpreter. ... However, we take interpreting in business settings in its broadest possible sense, to include all [liaison] interpreting situations which are outside the welfare/medical/legal rubric. We do not include relationships characterized by a marked differential in power or status within a given society. Examples of these interpreting settings range from arts, sport, tourism and recreation to patent negotiations or government-to-government meetings and delegations. (116)

Another setting where interpreting takes place with increasing frequency is the workplace, where the employer or supervisor speaks the official language of the country and employees speak a minority language; this could also be considered business interpreting, and it does involve a differential in power. Frishberg (1986) reports that sign-language interpreters are called upon to interpret with increasing frequency in commercial settings, whether for employers and employees or for interlocutors who are on a more equal footing. Business interpreting may entail either consecutive or simultaneous interpreting.

**Medical interpreting**: Alternative terms are **health care interpreting** and **hospital interpreting**. According to Frishberg (1986: 115),

"Interpreting in medical settings encompasses a variety of situations, from routine consultation with a physician to emergency procedures, from prepared childbirth classes to support for complex laboratory testing." Many experts include **mental health interpreting** as a subcategory of medical interpreting. The State of California has designed another subcategory, **medical-legal interpreting**, to refer to services provided for physicians conducting medical exams for purposes of evidence-gathering in legal cases such as industrial injury claims and personal injury lawsuits. Significantly, the certification exam for medical-legal interpreters includes a test of simultaneous interpretation skills (CPS, 1998), although consecutive interpreting is considered the norm in the medical setting. The Standards of Practice developed by the Massachusetts Medical Interpreters Association (MMIA) (1995: 14) state, "If the interpreter is competent in the simultaneous mode, [he/she] uses it when it is important that the speaker not be interrupted (e.g., psychiatric interview, periods of high emotion)."

**Educational interpreting**: Often included under community interpreting, this is a rapidly growing field of specialisation, especially among sign-language interpreters (Frishberg, 1986; Aguirre et al, 1997). It involves interpreting in the classroom for students who cannot understand the language of instruction, as well as interpreting between teachers and parents and at school board meetings and disciplinary hearings. Either consecutive or simultaneous interpreting may be required, depending
on the circumstances.

Over-the-Phone Interpreting (OPI): Also known as remote interpreting, this term refers to interpreting services provided via telephonic links (occasionally with video links as well), in which neither the interpreter nor the parties are in the same physical location. (Heh and Qian, 1997). OPI interpreters tend to work in medical, social service, business, and legal cases. At present, most OPI interpreting is done consecutively, but as telecommunications technology develops further, simultaneous interpreting will become more prevalent (Mints, 1998).

Community interpreting: Perhaps the most controversial of the terms used to differentiate between types of interpreting (see Mikkelson, 1996a & b; Roberts, 1994), it refers to interpreting that "enables people who are not fluent speakers of the official language(s) of the country to communicate with the providers of public services so as to facilitate full and equal access to legal, health, education, government, and social services" (Carr et al, 1997). This type of interpreting is also known as liaison, ad hoc, three-cornered, dialogue, contact, public service, and cultural interpreting; there is very little consensus about the definitions of these terms and whether or not they are synonymous (Gentile et al, 1996; Carr et al, 1997).

Community interpreters were once considered amateurs and well-meaning but misguided "do-gooders" (Gonzalez et al, 1991: 29), but nowadays they are increasingly recognised as specialists in their own right. Some writers consider community interpreting an umbrella term that includes court and medical interpreting (Mikkelson, 1996b), while others (mainly court interpreters) regard it as a separate category. Some sources contend that community interpreting is by definition performed in the consecutive mode (Gentile, 1997), but in fact simultaneous interpreting is often used when the interpreter is capable of it and the situation is conducive to it (Gentile et al, 1996). Gentile (1997) has expressed frustration at the imprecision of the term "community interpreting" and expresses a preference for "liaison interpreting" because it better describes the process. He goes on to say that the continued use of the label "community interpreting" will have an adverse effect on the profession, perpetuating the "cinderella image" that attaches to it.

It will continue to be regarded as a second rate form of interpreting which is not worthy of specific attention in terms of status, training, remuneration and research. ...This is basically because it does not describe an environment which is easily recognisable as an area of interpreting nor does it use terms which are devoid of ambiguity; the term community can be applied to a community attending a conference, a community living in one area, a community of people interested in a single issue, or a community of speakers of a certain language. (117-118)

Nevertheless, "community interpreting" appears to be pushing aside the other terms in worldwide usage.

4. Qualities of Interpreters

A survey of the literature reveals a great deal of overlap in the descriptions of the ideal interpreter, regardless of whether the subject of discussion is a court, medical, or conference interpreter. The following qualities are identified by various authors as essential for good interpreting:

Language skills: Even laypersons recognise that interpreters need to have a good command of their working languages to interpret accurately, though they underestimate the extent of that command. Writers about all types of interpreting, from conference (Seleskovich, 1978a; Jones, 1998) to court (Gonzalez et al, 1991) to community (Frishberg, 1986; Gentile et al, 1996) emphasize the breadth and depth of linguistic proficiency required. They are also unanimous in making the point that language is just a prerequisite for mastering the techniques of interpreting.

Analytical skills: Gonzalez et al (1991: 363) declare that analysis is "foremost" among the strategies
employed by court interpreters, "so essential to [simultaneous interpreting] that it can be considered an intrinsic part of the process rather than an ancillary tactic." Writing about conference interpreting, Jones (1998) also stresses how important it is to analyze a speech before interpreting it. The standards of practice for medical interpreters (MMIA, 1995) also cite analysis as a key element in interpreting proficiency.

**Listening and recall:** As Gentile et al (1996: 44) note, "Effective interpreting requires effective listening skills." Many authors define the specific kind of listening that interpreters perform as "active listening," and further point out that "[t]his active, attentive listening is quite different from other forms of listening, and has to be learned by the interpreter" (Jones, 1998: 14). Memory or recall is also identified as essential by virtually all experts on interpreting, regardless of the type: Seleskovitch (1978a: 34) goes as far as asserting that "in interpretation, memory and understanding are inseparable; the one is a function of the other." Having a good memory is especially important for a judiciary interpreter, who must retain and include in the target language message even paralinguistic elements: "What makes the court interpreter's job much more difficult than that of the conference interpreter is that the court interpreter cannot entirely discard non-semantic information such as pauses and hedges because they must be included in the [target-language] version in order to provide a legal equivalent of the [source-language] message" (Gonzalez et al, 1991: 384).

**Interpersonal skills:** One might expect heavy emphasis on this quality among medical and social service interpreters, who are in more direct personal contact with their clients than conference interpreters (Roberts, 1994). But even conference interpreters are encouraged to develop these skills, as they may have a great deal of personal contact with delegates (Jones, 1998; Seleskovitch, 1978a). Despite the stereotype of the conference interpreter who spends all day in the booth addressing faceless bureaucrats in a disembodied voice, many conferences involve direct contact between interpreters and delegates. Moreover, the conference attendees are not necessarily international civil servants or businessmen; they may come from all walks of life, and range from factory workers to housewives to farmers to refugees.

**Ethical behavior:** Although the interpreter's code of ethics has the greatest impact on the interpreter's work in legal settings (which is why Gonzalez et al devote an entire 42-page chapter to the subject), ethics are a major consideration for all interpreters (Frishberg, 1996; Sussman and Johnson, 1996). Jones (1998) describes the delicate situations that can arise in international conferences, requiring that interpreters thoroughly understand their role and exercise good judgment. Medical interpreters must be particularly attuned to the importance of patient privacy issues (MMIA, 1995).

**Speaking skills:** Most people associate speaking skills with appearances before large audiences at public events such as congresses, assemblies, or press conferences; and public speaking is indeed a key component in the training of all types of interpreters (Weber, 1984; Frishberg, 1986; Gonzalez et al, 1991). Gentile et al (1996: 47) point out, however, that even liaison or community interpreters, who generally interpret in more intimate settings, need to be able to express ideas well: "Effective speaking skills range from quality of voice to choice of idiom, vocabulary, phrasing etc. So both what comes out of the mouth of the interpreter and the way it comes out are important in the overall effectiveness of the interpretation."

**Cultural knowledge:** It is almost universally acknowledged that interpreters working in medical and social service settings need to be acutely aware of cultural differences (hence the term "cultural interpreter" that is so prevalent in Canada), although there is widespread disagreement about what they should do with that knowledge (Carr et al, 1997). Court interpreters are also expected to take culture into account, although they are much more restricted in their ability to educate their clients about cultural differences (Gonzalez et al, 1991). What many of these interpreters may not recognise is that conference interpreters, too, consider themselves not just linguistic but also cultural
intermediaries. Seleskovitch (1978a & b, Seleskovitch and Lederer, 1984) has written extensively about the link between language and culture. Perhaps Jones (1998: 4) sums it up best when he says that "in all of their work, (conference) interpreters must bridge the cultural and conceptual gaps separating the participants in a meeting."

**Subject knowledge:** Although professional interpreters often complain that their clients do not understand their need to prepare ahead of time and gain some understanding of the subjects to be discussed in order to interpret accurately ("You don't need to understand it, just translate it!"), all experts on interpreting recognise the need to acquire technical terminology and content knowledge in relevant fields (Seleskovitch, 1978a; Gonzalez et al, 1991; Frishberg, 1986; Gentile et al, 1996; MMIA, 1995).

Thus, it is clear that to some degree or another, all interpreters must demonstrate the qualities listed above, regardless of where and for whom they interpret. The fact that many individuals who are called upon to interpret in certain settings lack these qualities does not mean they are not needed; it simply means that the client requesting interpreting services does not appreciate their importance. So if all interpreters are really performing the same task, why is there such disparity in the formal training, pay, and prestige of interpreters?

The differences may be the result of confusion between the practice and the practitioner. Conference interpreting is a well-established, highly competitive field in which practitioners must undergo extensive training and demonstrate a high level of skill to be able to work for very selective international organisations, government institutions, and private clients. As a result, conference interpreters can command high fees and are treated with respect by their clients and colleagues.

In contrast, hospital interpreters, for example, are hired (in the best of cases) by public hospitals with limited budgets to provide services, on the one hand, for overworked, underpaid medical professionals who may never have worked with interpreters and do not know what to expect, and on the other hand, for immigrants who have limited resources, often lack a formal education, are unfamiliar with the workings of the health care system in their adopted country, and are not in a position to impose high standards on interpreters. Rarely are the interpreters required to show proof of any formal education in their languages or training in medical interpreting; the only criterion for their selection is purported knowledge of the required languages (or, in the worst of cases, physical presence, a foreign name or appearance, and accented speech). The remuneration and status accorded these interpreters are commensurate with the low standards for their selection.

The tables would be turned if the conference organisers approached the janitor on the day of the conference, asked him if he spoke the languages in question, and dragooned him into service, while the hospital administrators contacted a physician in the patient's home country who had also graduated from an interpreting school and set up a date for her to fly in to the hospital for the patient's appointment. The interpreting that each of these clients needs would not change, but their attitude toward the interpreter certainly would.

5. Another Approach to Categorizing Interpreting

The interpreting categories listed in Section 3 above tend to focus on the setting, the mode of interpreting, or the subject matter of the interpreter-mediated event. Individual interpreters may wear a variety of hats, working one day in a conference, the next in an escort situation, and the next in a court proceeding. Thus, when someone identifies himself as a conference interpreter, that does not necessarily mean that he interprets only in conferences. The interpreter's working languages are a major factor influencing the type of interpreting he performs; hence, an interpreter of French and German has a wide variety of options to choose from, depending on education and training, aptitudes, and the local job market, whereas an interpreter of Somali, no matter how skilled, will not
have many opportunities to interpret conferences or business negotiations. In other words, the categories are not very helpful for describing the job of a particular interpreter.

Not only do these labels create confusion among potential users of interpreting services, but they also cause strife among practitioners. As Gentile (1997: 111) points out in reference to the term "community interpreting":

In the professional context, there are obviously tensions created in the establishment of another "form" of interpreting within a scenario which is evolving rapidly and which will, by definition, upset the accepted order of things as well as alter the hitherto perceived skill requirements of practitioners engaged in the field in general.

Alexi Eva (1997) also rejects the traditional categories of interpreting on the grounds that they are based on "single parameters," and thus are too limiting. She advocates a "multiparameter approach" (which, incidentally, would also eliminate the hierarchical perception noted above).

The additional parameters that I would like to see included concern (a) the various elements of the communicative situation: Who speaks, to Whom, about What, Where, When and Why (and for what purpose ...), rather than simply the temporal characteristics of delivery and the spatial coordinates of communicants, and (b) the nature of the texts involved in the event, not just in terms of topic (in answer to What above) or the 'whole' vs. 'segment' distinction proposed by Salesky, but also in terms of the way the text is built, whether it is more oral-like or written-like, and the intertextual relationships obtaining between the individual texts which constitute the macro-text of an interpreter-mediated event. (156)

Alexi Eva goes on to note that in real life, interpreter-mediated events are so complex that it is impossible to establish clear-cut categories. She advocates approaching the events as "'families,' with central members (prototypes) and peripheral members (blend-forms) being identified on the basis of their position on a scale or continuum..." (156). She then specifies the parameters that should shape the definition of interpreting: 1) mode of delivery and production, 2) participants in interpreter-mediated events, 3) the topic of an interpreter-mediated event, 4) text type and text building strategies, 5) spatial and temporal constraints, and 6) the goal of an interpreter-mediated event. In this way, interpreter-mediated events can be placed along a "continuum of 'universality' vs. 'culture-specificity' using a number of scales":

- 'distance' vs. 'proximity' (between speaker, addressee and interpreter);
- 'non-involvement' vs. 'involvement' (of the speaker as text entity);
- 'equality/solidarity' vs. 'non-equality/power' (related to status, role and gender of speaker and addressee, as well as the interpreter in some cases);
- 'formal setting' vs. 'informal setting' (related to number of participants, degree of privacy, and distance from home country);
- 'literacy' vs. 'orality';
- cooperativeness/directness vs. 'non-cooperativeness/indirectness' (relevant to negotiation strategies);
- 'shared goals' vs. 'conflicting goals'. (169)

This approach allows for a more precise analysis of interpreting in real-life situations. Thus, a broad term like "media interpreting" does little to inform the uninitiated about what the interpreter actually does, but using Alexieva's model, we find that an interpreter working at a press conference at the Olympic Games is performing the tasks traditionally associated with conference interpreting, whereas the interpreter assigned to a magazine interview with a movie star is not. Similarly, the court interpreter working at a mass arraignment, in which a judge, sitting high on a bench, addresses a group of defendants listening to a whispered interpretation, performs a very different task than
when interpreting at an attorney-client conference in a jail cell, or the cross-examination of a witness during a jury trial. Parameters such as distance/proximity, formal/informal setting, shared goals/conflicting goals contribute a great deal to elucidating the nature of the communication that is taking place.

The way the multiparameter model is applied to different interpreter-mediated events depends, of course, on the researcher's purpose. To answer the questions I posed above, I would like to carry Alexieva's approach a little further by adding some external factors to the mix. I believe that it is extrinsic, not intrinsic, factors that account for the vast differences in interpreters' pay, working conditions, and status. In that context, I would like to examine the following factors:

1. The status of the languages involved in an interpreter-mediated event.
2. The multilingual or bilingual environment of an interpreter-mediated event, and whether the interpreter is expected to interpret bidirectionally or unidirectionally.
3. The degree of interpreter preparation required and allowed for an interpreter-mediated event.
4. The criteria for being selected as an interpreter for a given interpreter-mediated event, and
5. The job market for interpreters in the location of the interpreter-mediated event, and
6. The degree to which interpreters are organised and regulated in the location of the interpreter-mediated event.

**Status of languages.** The status of the languages being interpreted affects the status of the interpreter. This factor is related to the non-equality/power parameter identified by Alexieva (1997). Consider, for example, that the interpreters working at the United Nations General Assembly are interpreting for some of the most powerful people in the world, and the official languages of the United Nations are those of the most powerful countries in the world. UN interpreters enjoy excellent working conditions and are highly respected professionals. In contrast, Tseng (1992: 132) reports that conference interpreters in Taiwan, interpreting between two UN languages (English and Mandarin), have relatively low status, partly because English is "a symbol of prestige and good education" and meeting participants would rather "use what little English they have" than rely on interpreters, "to show off to their peers or to avoid losing face by using [simultaneous interpretation] receivers." Therefore, it is important to look at attitudes toward the languages involved in an interpreter-mediated event in the location of that event.

With the notable exception of Spanish in the United States, the majority of the languages interpreted in community settings (hospitals, social service agencies, refugee centers, etc.) are relatively low-status languages of limited diffusion (Gentile et al, 1996), and interpreters in these venues work under very poor conditions. Ironically, some of the most advanced research and scholarship on interpreting in the United States is being done by interpreters of American Sign Language (Patrie, 1993; Roy, 1989; Cokely, 1984), yet sign language interpreting has not yet received the recognition that some types of spoken-language interpreting are beginning to enjoy. The various sign languages used by deaf people all over the world are low-status languages; in fact, many linguists only recently accorded them the rank of full-fledged languages, and the lay public is generally unaware of how sophisticated these languages are (Frishberg, 1986). Thus, the work performed by interpreters for the deaf, regardless of the setting and the complexity of the communication, is undervalued just as much as that of spoken-language interpreters of minority languages.

**Multilingual environment, direction of interpreting:** Whether interpreters are expected to know multiple languages and work unidirectionally within a language pair is another factor that differentiates high-prestige interpreting assignments from less desirable ones. Staff interpreters at international organisations such as the European Union and the Organisation of American States must demonstrate proficiency in interpreting from two or more languages, but they generally interpret into just one language, their "mother tongue." In other conference interpreting markets, however, meetings generally involve only two working languages and the interpreters are expected
to work into and out of both (Jones, 1998). Interpreters who work bidirectionally do not necessarily suffer from a loss of prestige - Japanese conference interpreters being a case in point - but the more specialised the interpreter is perceived to be, the more respect he or she commands. (Inggs, 1998) reports that court interpreters in South Africa routinely interpret multiple languages, but in a given case they will be interpreting bidirectionally between just two languages. She also points out that the interpreters are not tested for competence, since the languages, the defendants needing interpreters, and the interpreters themselves are held in low esteem.

*Preparation for assignments*: How much an interpreter is expected and allowed to prepare for an assignment is related to the client's perception of the importance of interpretation. The General Conditions of Work adopted by the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC) state, "For their technical and terminological preparation the organiser shall send the interpreters a complete set of documents (programme, agenda, minutes of the previous meeting, reports, etc.) in each of the working languages of the conference as early as possible, but not later than 15 days before the beginning of the conference." Of course this obligation is not always fulfilled at every conference, but it is accepted as standard procedure at international conferences. Conference organisers and delegates attending conferences are accustomed to this requirement, and generally they comply because they value accurate interpretation. In contrast, Tseng (1992) reports that conference interpreters in Taiwan often meet resistance when they try to obtain documentation in advance. Court interpreters also complain of the problems they have preparing adequately for their assignments (Gonzalez et al, 1991; Gentile et al, 1996). Lawyers and doctors are particularly reluctant to allow interpreters to see their files, citing confidentiality considerations, but in courts and health care facilities where interpreters are respected as professionals, their requests for documentation are more likely to be honored.

*Selection of interpreters*: In interpreting markets where clients are accustomed to working with interpreters and have high standards for their services, the profession is very competitive. To be selected for interpreting assignments, practitioners must demonstrate their competence by taking exams, in the case of organisations with interpreting staffs, or through membership in professional associations such as AIIC that require references from experienced interpreters for admittance. Graduates of recognised schools of interpreting are also considered to be members of this elite group. The status interpreters enjoy in such markets reflects the selectiveness of the employment process.

Clients who are not used to working with interpreters, on the other hand, are not selective at all because they do not know what questions to ask and have no standard to go by such as a license or degree. Tseng (1992) identifies this as a major problem in Taiwan, and many other scholars decry the lack of standards in the selection of interpreters in the markets they write about (Roberts, 1997; Nicholson and Martinsen, 1997; Martina, 1997; Szkodzinska, 1997). Tseng (1992: 100-101) also reports that out of 24 conference interpreters interviewed in Taiwan, only six had received two or more years of formal training in interpreting; 11 had received less than six months of training, and five had received no training at all.

In the absence of universally imposed academic standards for practitioners, certification programs in which interpreters are required to pass proficiency exams have been developed in many areas as a means of providing potential clients with a pool of competent interpreters to choose from. The lack of training programs to help candidates prepare for these exams results in high failure rates, however (Gonzalez et al, 1991; Lascar, 1997). A vicious circle is created, as the low pay and poor working conditions of interpreting work give prospective practitioners little incentive to invest in long training courses, and thus colleges and universities have little impetus for establishing such programs.

*Local job market*: Factors such as the economy, demographics, politics, and culture of the country or
region where an interpreter works have a major impact on the professional opportunities available to him or her. A conference interpreter with a French/German/English combination, for example, may find plenty of work in Europe, but not in the United States. The demand for Hmong/English interpreters soared in the late 1970s when refugees of this Laotian minority group settled in the state of Minnesota, but as these immigrants grow older and new generations emerge with English-speaking ability, the need for interpreters will diminish (Interpreter Standards Advisory Committee, 1998). An international conflict or the passage of a law may generate a tremendous demand for interpreting in a certain language and a certain venue, as was the case when Guatemalan refugees in the United States were suddenly subject to deportation or when the United States sent troops to Somalia; whereas the severance of diplomatic relations between two countries may cause the interpreting market in a given language combination to evaporate. When work is scarce, interpreters must find other means of earning a living, which detracts from their ability to maintain their skills and maintain contact with potential clients (Tseng, 1992; Roberts, 1997). All of these circumstances affect the demand for interpreters, the terms under which they are hired, and the status they are accorded.

**Organisation and regulation:** Finally, the degree to which interpreters are organised and regulated in a given location affects their status. Tseng (1992: 148) points out that the situation of conference interpreters in Taiwan would be much better if they formed a professional association, since "interpreters working in international conferences [as opposed to those organised by Taiwanese] are able to work under better conditions, thanks to negotiations initiated by professional associations in the past." In his discussion of professionalization in general, he notes that occupations attain the status of professions by gaining control over the market in which they work. One way of establishing this control is by forging "alliances with the state," including lobbying for government regulation of the profession. This has proven true in the case of court interpreters in the United States, where legislation requiring that interpreters working in the federal courts pass a proficiency exam brought about an immediate increase in the pay and prestige of interpreters in that jurisdiction, in stark contrast to their counterparts in the state courts (Gonzalez et al, 1991).

6. Conclusion

This analysis of the different types of interpreting has shown that regardless of the adjective preceding the word "interpreter," practitioners of this profession the world over perform the same service and should meet the same standards of competence. What accounts for the tremendous disparity in working conditions and status is not the nature of the interpreting itself, but external factors that affect the market in which interpreters render their services. The way to lessen this disparity is to recognise the commonalities in interpreters' work and to form strong professional associations and alliances that will unite practitioners striving to achieve common goals.

---

**Holly Mikkelson** teaches at the Monterey Institute of International Studies, and is a state and federally certified court interpreter. Visit her website: [www.acebo.com](http://www.acebo.com).

This article was originally presented at the 30th Anniversary Conference of the Graduate School of Translation and Interpretation (GSTI) of the Monterey Institute of International Studies (January 1999). Ten years later the editors of *Communicate!* consider the paper to be of continuing relevance and are pleased to be able to republish it.

**Bibliography**


**Recommended citation format:**