The Interpreter – a cultural intermediary

Behind closed doors

The importance of interpreting for the rule of law and for integration, with special focus on separated minors

“Tolkprojektet”

Eva Norström – Kristina Gustafsson – Ingrid Fioretos

Department of Arts and Cultural Studies
Lund University
Medborgarskolan Syd

In co-operation with Katrineberg Folk High School and Tolkcentralen, Gothenburg
Foreword

The Interpreter Project (2008 – 2011) is based on a formal collaboration between the Division of Ethnology at the Department of Arts and Cultural Sciences, Lund University and the study organisation Medborgarskolan Syd, and on a partnership with Katrineberg Folk High School and Tolkcentralen, a municipal interpreter service in Gothenburg.

In the course of our work on the Interpreter Project we have carried out interviews and made observations throughout Sweden. We have held meetings with reference groups, run seminars, given talks and presentations, written articles and done many other things. We have been met with joy, interest, engagement and a willingness to share experiences, reflections and knowledge.

A warm thank you to all those who have contributed to our efforts to shed light on the role and work of the interpreter, the importance of interpreting for the rule of law, integration and the reception of separated minors. Thank you also to Erik Norberg for the illustrations in the present text.

Eva Norström, researcher, ethnologist, Lund University, project coordinator
Kristina Gustafsson, researcher, ethnologist, Lund University, assistant project coordinator
Ingrid Fioretos, researcher, ethnologist, Lund University
Azar Mahloujian, authorised interpreter and author (until 31 December 2009)
Elizabeta Glasnović Raguž, interpreter (survey in the spring of 2011)
Anna Norberg, project assistant
Marianne Palmgren, economist, Medborgarskolan Syd
## Table of contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>About “the Interpreter Project”</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working method and material</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpretation in Sweden</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The interpreter</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpreters’ working conditions</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Officials as users of interpreters</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Client/Patient</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interpreting agencies</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procurement</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training of community interpreters</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authorisation</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The reception of separated minors</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The significance of interpreting for the rule of law and integration – a summary</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annex 1</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
About “the Interpreter Project”

Every day, thousands of interpreted meetings take place in Sweden, meaning that the use of interpreters is an everyday occurrence for people in many professions. With time, interpreters accumulate considerable knowledge of how meetings between officials and individuals who don’t speak Swedish take place. They gain experience of how people communicate, how power is handled, what conflicts of loyalty can arise, and they learn about issues concerning the rights, legal certainty and integration process of the individual. The community interpreter’s task is to convey messages at these meetings.

We have studied how interpreters handle the situation both as passive witnesses to what is happening in the meeting between officials and private individuals and as active agents by virtue of their presence and their practice during the interpretation – for both face to face interpretation and telephone interpreting.

In 2008 we received a grant from Riksbankens Jubileumsfond (the Swedish Central Bank’s Jubilee Fund) which allowed us to begin work on a research project entitled The Interpreter – a cultural intermediary. During 2008 we sought co-financing in order to extend the research questions about the interpreter’s professional role and experience to include officials, clients/patients, interpreter training, provision of interpretation services, authorisation and the reception of separated minors, as well as the importance of interpreting for the rule of law and integration. Co-financing was granted by the European Refugee Fund III for a research project entitled Behind closed doors – the importance of interpreting for the rule of law and for integration, with special focus on separated children and young people. Work on this project began on 1 September 2008.

The Interpreter – a cultural intermediary was approved by the Regional Ethical Review Board in Lund during the spring of 2008. Behind closed doors was approved in the spring of 2009. We have integrated work on the two projects under the heading The Interpreter Project. The principal purposes of the research are to:

* analyse community interpreters’ role and their experiences of interpreted meetings and of the nature of the communication between authorities/officials and clients/patients who don’t know Swedish

* examine the importance of interpreting for the rule of law and for integration, with special focus on the reception of separated minor asylum applicants

The research team represents more than 30 years’ experience of working with migration and integration in a multicultural society. Our research has included different social institutions, ideology, values, laws, and in particular, the encounter between individuals and institutions (Norström 2004; Gustafsson 2004; Fioretos 2009). In order to understand social issues and what happens when theory meets practice we have looked primarily at the concrete

---

1 In 1962 a donation from the Swedish Central Bank was approved for the creation of the Jubilee Fund, an independent fund whose purpose is to promote research in the humanities and social sciences (www.rj.se)
The present text has been compiled for the Interpreter Project’s closing conference and consists of a series of abstracts dealing with important themes and results. These abstracts are based on longer texts which are still being edited and are at different stages of completion. A final report containing these longer texts, which comprehensively describe the different areas we have studied, will be published on the Interpreter Project’s website during the autumn of 2011.

The conference text is organised in the following way: under the heading *Interpreting in Sweden* we describe briefly facts about interpreting services in Sweden and the legislation that governs them. This is followed by three sections about each of the main participants in an interpreted meeting, *interpreters, officials* and *clients/patients*. These three sections describe and analyse individual actors’ experiences of interpreting and of communicating through an interpreter. There follows a section about *Interpreting agencies* and their task and position as intermediary between individual interpreters and the needs of officials. The three following sections are about the three “elements” the state has to guarantee to the interpreting services; *Procurement, Interpreter training* and *Authorisation* (cf. Norström, Gustafsson and Fioretos 2010). In these, the questions about how *society* facilitates the rule of law and integration become increasingly prominent. In the section about *The reception of separated children and young people* we present the main results of our subordinate study. This section analyses issues of language, identity and integration. Interpreting is placed in a well-documented, concrete context to do with individuals’ possibilities for everyday communication with officials, but also with their peers. This leads to the final section, in which we discuss the importance of interpreting for the rule of law and for integration.

**Working method and material**

The study was principally done using qualitative methods. This means we worked with interviews and observations. We carried out a survey of interpreters’ working conditions and also looked at other research. The accumulated material gained support and was further developed in reference groups and seminars. Text production, part of the method, has been continuous. It has principally taken the form of more than 30 presentations and talks, both in Sweden and abroad and also includes eight articles (Annex 1).

The field we have studied is made up of different actors, who are often unfamiliar with each other’s mandates, roles and positions, even if some networks exist. It is nonetheless apparent that they are dependent on each other for their respective activities, and that there is a need to make this visible. We have chosen to divide the various actors in the field of interpreting into five main areas with the interpreter at the centre: 1. Community interpreters, 2. Public service providers (doctors, social workers, teachers, policemen etc.), 3. Clients/patients, 4. Interpreting agencies and procurement, and 5. Training and authorisation of interpreters.
Written documents and other research

How policy in the area of community interpreting has been shaped, established and altered can be seen in *public material* such as the Swedish Government Official Reports (Statens Offentliga Utredningar, SOU) and referral comments on these, government bills, the Swedish Code of Statutes (Svensk Författningssamling, SFS), directives from ministries and government agencies, the Riksdag records, and official communications from the Institute for Interpretation and Translation Studies (Tolk- och översättingstitutet, TÖI) and the Legal, Financial and Administrative Services Agency (Kammarkollegiet, KamK). We also have access to *private archives* containing material from the 1970s and onwards, including unpublished reports, press cuttings, personal correspondence and photographs.

There is a considerable international body of research into interpretation. This research is carried out within disciplines such as linguistics, sociolinguistics, media studies and languages. It focuses on the language itself including structure, grammar and syntax and/or on the use of language and its meaning in different contexts. Significant discussions within linguistic philosophy have concerned the difference between monologic and dialogic communication and about the difference between single-language and several-language communication. Researchers in these areas include Wadensjö (1992, 1998); Roy (2000) and Angelelli (2004).

Other researchers focus on community interpreters’ professional role and ethics, e.g. Hale (2007), Lee and Buzo (2009), Pöchhacker and Schlesinger (2008), Pöchhacker (2010), Skaaden (2010). Studies have been done of community interpreting in different sectors, in particular legal interpreting, e.g. Bark-Seligson (2002) and Hale (2004), and health care.

---

2 Texts of statutes are identified by the year and order of passing into law, without the “SFS” prefix. Thus the title 1994:137, for example, means that the text is available in SFS.
interpreting, e.g. Englund (1991), Bowen and Kaufert (2003) and Angelelli (2004), or community interpreting for a specific category such as children, e.g. Nielsen (2011). Some researchers advocate a strictly impartial role for the interpreter and others advocate adapting the interpreter’s role for different sectors. How the interpreter’s role is defined affects the discussion on professional ethics. Several of the dominant researchers in community interpreting in spoken and sign languages are employed as interpreter trainers at various universities.

In Sweden there are two professors specialising in interpreting and translation, Birgitta Dimitrova Englund and Cecilia Wadensjö. Both are employed at TÖI, Stockholm University, and both have had considerable influence abroad as well, thanks to their research into interpreting as interaction, and particularly their studies of interpreting within asylum investigations and health care. Other examples of research into community interpreting in specific contexts include a dissertation (2010) by Niklas Torstensson that examines the significance of the fact that interpreters speak “broken” Swedish in court, and one by Olga Keselman (2009) that analyses interpreted asylum investigation interviews with separated minors.

There are a few more examples of other research that examines community interpreting from the point of view of other disciplines. Elisabeth Brömberg Björk (2008) has studied patients’ experience of communicating through an interpreter in health care contexts, and Nabi Fatahi’s (2010) dissertation is about interpreting in health care, with the focus on the interpreter’s role.

What is unique about our research is that it deals with the entire field of interpreting in Sweden, its ideals and practices. To that end, we have not based our research on a specific language or a specific sector in society.

**Interviews and observations**

Interviews and observations are important instruments for observing environment, structure and situation, which is fundamental for understanding experiences of power, neutrality, legal certainty and equality (Clifford 1997; Frykman and Gilje 2003; Holstein and Gubrium 2003). We have carried out close to 200 in-depth interviews. 26 interpreters and 10 individuals who arrived in Sweden as separated minors were interviewed on three occasions with different themes each time.\(^3\) The interviews were of the life history kind, with an open approach in which the interviewee is invited to speak freely about and reflect on his/her experiences. This interview technique is much like a conversation.

We have carried out silent and participating observations. Silent observation means that the researcher observes and listens, e.g. during interpreted meetings. Participating observation

---

\(^3\) The interviews with interpreters and separated children and young people are protected by secrecy. At the end of the project, interview transcripts and observation records will be entrusted to the Folk Life Archives at Lund University, uncoded with secrecy protection under Chapter 7, Section 24 of the Secrecy Act (1980:100). All material used in public contexts is de-identified. All observations and interviews were preceded by informed consent from all the parties present. For children and young people, permission was required from a guardian.
means that the researcher participates in activities and speaks to persons involved, e.g. in the activities of separated minors.

Observations have been done of interpreters during their working days, interpreters and officials during interpreted interviews, interpretations over the telephone of interviews at group homes, court proceedings with an interpreter, and of interpreting agency staff during everyday work. Observations have also been carried out of basic and further training of interpreters, exams following the various modules of basic training, and authorisation exams at the Legal, Financial and Administrative Services Agency. Observations also included following several procurement processes of interpretation services.

The room has light green and white microfiber wallpaper. The floor is covered with plastic carpeting imitating cork. Light birch wood furniture. A large curved desk by the window and some shelves. Otherwise the room is pretty bare. The official opens with a few polite phrases. Edward interprets in a low voice, keeping his eyes on those he is interpreting for. He listens intently and begins each phrase with a resolute “mmm”. He is alternately leaning forward, with his elbows on the table, and leaning back in his chair. Just like the other two. The client turns directly to the interpreter when speaking, but then looks at the official speaking Swedish and nods somewhat affirmatively. It is apparent that she can follow the Swedish to some extent. The official looks mostly at the client and sometimes at Edward. The conversation goes round in circles, with the same things being repeated again and again. The client does not want to listen to the official’s advice. Finally the official ends the discussion. She beats her chest and says, a little apologetically, that now she has spent a lot of effort trying to persuade the client, but without results. Edward interprets this, but does not imitate the gestures. He makes very few movements generally. But the gestures and the communication between the others is of course there anyway. It is an integrated interaction even if Edward seems a bit slow, and yawns some way into the discussion (Field diary).

Reference groups

In parallel with interviews and observations we have worked with five reference groups: interpreters, officials, agencies/procurers, trainers, and clients/patients. The last group consists of adults with permanent residence permits who arrived in Sweden as separated minors. The
reference groups’ collective experience and knowledge has been important since it has allowed the researchers to test and discuss various possible situations described by the interviewed interpreters, or situations they have observed. The reference groups were given the opportunity to prepare for the meetings by means of texts and questions sent to them beforehand.

**Seminars**

Further in-depth understanding of the field was generated by means of two joint seminars with all the reference groups and specially invited participants. Background texts and questions were sent out beforehand. During these seminars we worked in mixed groups and separately with the reference groups as well as in full sittings. This was the first time anyone brought all these actors together for joint meetings and in-depth discussions. Five research seminars were held during the project period: two at the Department of Ethnology at the Folk Life Archives, Lund University, one at the Department of Arts and Cultural Sciences, Lund University, and two seminars at other universities.

**Survey**

During the spring of 2011 we carried out a survey of how interpreters view their working conditions. 2000 questionnaires were sent to interpreters all over the country, of which about 600 were authorised. We received 477 replies. Processing of the survey results will be completed separately during the autumn of 2011.

**Dissemination**

Between 2008 and 2011 we have done 31 presentations about the Interpreter Project’s emerging results at conferences, seminars and meetings. Of these, seven have been in international contexts. We have participated in around ten other conferences and meetings concerning interpreter issues and/or separated minors, and in a reference group for interpreter training in sexual orientation and gender identity issues, initiated by RFSL, the Swedish Federation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Rights.

**Website**

An important way of informing about the research projects has been keeping an updated website. Until 2019 you can read about the projects, follow the researchers’ work, and communicate with them. A calendar has specified what is happening week by week, and every three months (until the first quarter of 2011) a quarterly newsletter has been published.

**Theory and method for processing and analysis**

The body of text generated by interview transcripts, observation notes, and minutes of reference group meetings have been analysed according to the cultural analysis method, i.e. by themes, contrasts and perspectives (Geertz 1973, Ehn & Löfgren 2001). Processing has been by means of continuing discussions within the research team and with the reference
groups, as well as through participation in ethnology and culture theory seminars and conferences.

In order to understand the interpreter’s position as intermediary, and how power, loyalty, responsibility and legal certainty are dealt with, it was important to examine the dynamics and social context of the whole interpreted meeting as well as the processes involved in the interpretation act itself (Angelelli 2004).

Our analysis looked at three dimensions:

· the individual
· the concrete meeting
· structural patterns and conditions in “multicultural” society

The focus of this study is on the experiences of individual interpreters, but it also considers the experiences of other actors. In current cultural theory, it is mainly phenomenologists who have taken an interest in the meaning of experience. In Swedish there is a distinction between the term *upplevelse*, which is used for a first-hand, lived experience, and the term *erfarenhet*, used for an assimilated experience, which it has been possible to think through, understand, explain and which can be seen as knowledge about the experienced moment (cf. Frykman and Gilje 2003).

It is important to document, describe and analyse the recounted experiences of individuals, as well as observations, in order to create knowledge about how interpreting happens and how different actors perceive it. This is often about knowledge that is silent or hidden, possessed by individual actors but rarely dealt with in a more systematic discussion or analysis. Our research thus generates knowledge about the interpreted meeting in practice, and it is principally this knowledge we will be writing about. In the analysis we will pick up on and examine other dimensions “outside” of the individual experience, at the point where ideal meets practice. This is to say that we look at what the intentions are on an ideological and social level, and how things can be in practice. In this text we begin with ideals for how interpreting should be done and what the law says. What happens in practice is sometimes something completely different. That doesn’t mean that what happens in practice is wrong – on the contrary, an analysis of different practices can provide important knowledge about interpretation which would otherwise remain hidden. Practical knowledge might in turn affect the formulation of the ideals, logos.

Interpreting occurs in a meeting, and it is there that the actors’ experience of interpretation is formed. The various actors’ experience of the meeting depends on its purpose and the participants’ earlier experiences and conceptions of each other’s roles. This means that what an individual does and says during the conversation is dependent on the position and mandate he or she has in the context of the meeting (Norström 2004; Gustafsson 2004; Fioretos 2009).

In the concrete meeting the focus is on the interpreter’s experience, and here we have used the term *a cultural intermediary*. This term has been used analytically in cultural anthropology
and ethnology to understand the position held by interpreters or other persons who are in an intercultural context (Szasz 2001; Gustafsson, Norström and Fioretos 2011). The term *culture* is a complex one, often described as something that *is* or that people *have* and which is linked to ethnicity or nationality. In ethnology, culture is instead used as an *analytical tool* to explore all those parts of shared human life that are collective and have to do with everyday life, the creation of meaning, lifestyle, values, manners and customs. Culture in this sense is about a particular way of understanding all the areas of life, from politics and legislation to emotional life and morals, and how culture is being continuously *produced* in the interaction between people (cf. Eriksen 2004; Öhlander 2005; Hastrup 2010). The intermediary position of the interpreter constitutes a cultural analysis tool with which to study the production of legal certainty, equality and integration in practice, but also the meaning of ethnicity, gender, age and education level as well as power relations and different forms of representation and positioning.

In order to understand the conditions of the concrete interpreted meetings and the experiences of the individuals involved, a broader structural and social perspective is needed, and here we have ultimately applied central terms from integration and migration research, and which affect a multicultural society. The understanding of how the social function of interpreting works is a key to many factors, such as how resources are managed, how legislation is interpreted and implemented, how interpreting services are organised and what sort of service is ultimately produced in the form of interpretation in different situations (cf. Hale 2007). It is also a key to understanding national self-images and how a society deals politically, culturally and socially with issues of integration, pluralism, globalisation, multiculturalism and multilingualism (Kymlicka 1998, Taylor 1999).

The three dimensions individual, group and diversity are used in the analysis to obtain different perspectives on the interpreter’s role and the significance of interpretation for legal certainty and integration, and at the same time to show how these perspectives are linked. Each concrete interpreted meeting is dependent both on the actions of individual participant in the meeting and on social and structural conditions in the form of legislation and economic resources, for example.

**Interpretation in Sweden**

Following the regulation of immigration to Sweden in 1968, it became increasingly clear that, in order to guarantee legal certainty, trained community interpreters were needed in the communication between officials and individuals with no knowledge of Swedish (SOU 1972:83). Access to an interpreter is a right that is free of charge and based on the principle that every person has the right to make themselves heard and freely express themselves in the encounter with representatives of different authorities, municipal institutions, health care and the judicial system. The basic principles are equal treatment of all, and participation.

Within the public sector in Sweden, employees have the right to request an interpreter if they cannot communicate with the client/patient because they have no language in common. If the patient/client has impaired hearing or is deaf, a sign language interpreter is called in, and if
the client/patient does not speak Swedish, a community interpreter is called in. The client/patient cannot book an interpreter on his/her own initiative, even if bookings are often done following consultation (Access to an interpreter 1999).

2004, the total number of interpreted hours within the public sector in Sweden was estimated at 650 000 hours in more than 120 languages (SOU 2005:37). The annual number of interpreted hours has undoubtedly increased since then, and we estimate, based on figures from Gothenburg, that in 2009 the total number of interpreted hours for the entire country was between 1.2 and 1.5 million hours in about 170 languages. There is also the fact that many interpretations are carried out by untrained interpreters, family members including children, and friends, which adds up to a considerable hidden statistic. The biggest interpreting languages in 2010 were Arabic, Somali, Dari and various Kurdish languages.

Interpreting is financed with public funds. Aside from the supervision of authorised interpreters carried out by the Legal, Financial and Administrative Services Agency, there is no scrutiny of interpreting activities in Sweden. This makes it difficult for the client/patient to assert his/her rights and for the user of an interpreter to make a proper comparison of the quality of the various interpreting agencies.

Laws in Sweden that regulate use of interpreters

In Sweden, government agencies, courts and other public institutions have a statutory responsibility to resort to interpreters when necessary. This responsibility is regulated in several statutes. Here we will look only at the most important ones.
If a party, a witness, or any other person who shall be heard by the court is incapable of understanding and speaking Swedish, an interpreter may be engaged in accordance with the Swedish Code of Judicial Procedure (1942:740, Ch. 5, Sections 6-8 and Ch. 33, Section 9) and the Administrative Court Procedure Act (1971:291, Section 50). If a party or a party’s representative has the right to use Finnish, Meänkieli or Sami in a trial, the Act on National Minorities and Minority Languages (2009:724, Section 16) stipulates that an interpreter shall be engaged in accordance with the dispositions in the Swedish Code of Judicial Procedure (Ch. 5, Sections 6-8 and Ch. 33, Section 9) and the Administrative Court Procedure Act (Sections 50-52).

Citizens of Nordic countries have special rights in respect of interpreting and translation services. These rights are specified in the Nordic Language Convention (SÖ 1982:93).

The Administrative Procedure Act regulates how processing is to be done by government agencies, specifying that an agency should use an interpreter when needed (1986:223, Section 8).

Neither the Health and Medical Services Act (1982:763) nor the Social Services Act (2001:453) specifies any rights concerning community interpreting. However, the Health and Medical Services Act (Section 2) stipulates that health care must be provided and that care and treatment shall as far as possible be designed and conducted in consultation with the patient with respect for the equal value of all human beings and for the dignity of the individual.

By passing laws, the state establishes that the right to an interpreter is a social responsibility. These laws, however, contain nothing about competence requirements.

The interpreter

An interpreter conveys information between people who do not share a language. The most common specialisations within the profession are community interpreter, sign language interpreter and conference interpreter.

The interpreting situations of community interpreters vary enormously. A working day can begin in a maternity ward with an ultrasound examination, continue with a custody matter at the social welfare office and then end with kidney stones in a hospital, or at a police interrogation. The following day might be taken up by a drugs case at the district court. Interpreting can be done face to face or at a distance by means of telephone or video interpreting. Different situations demand different forms of interpreting, e.g. consecutive interpreting, dialogue interpreting and simultaneous interpreting. Interpreting face to face and

---

4 For changes to Ch. 5, Sections 6-8 of the Swedish Code of Judicial Procedure, see Act (1975:589), Act (1975:1288) and Act (1984:131).

5 In consecutive interpreting, the interpreter listens until the speaker has finished and then interprets him/her into the other language with help of notes taken during the speech. The international literature makes a distinction between dialogue interpreting and consecutive interpreting (Lee & Buzo 2009). “Dialogue” then means that the interpreter interprets into and out of both languages.
at a distance puts slightly different requirements on the interpreter, but the fundamental competences are the same.

Exactly what competences a community interpreter of spoken languages must have has not been stipulated in any policy document in Sweden, but is described in detail within international interpretation research (cf. Pöchhacker 2010). Various actors in the field regard the most important competences to be language, knowledge of realia, terminology and knowledge of interpretation ethics and technique. Added to this are desirable personality and character traits. We have spoken to interpreters about what it is they do when they interpret a conversation and what competences are required in order to be able to interpret (interpreting practice). In a few seconds you have to listen, receive and send messages, find the right technical term, but also choose the right word for the right person. How does a teenager, a three-year-old, an academic or a farmer express him or herself in his or her mother tongue, and what do the expressions become when they are interpreted in a correspondent manner into Swedish? The interpreter must possess knowledge of the subject of the meeting, its specialist language, rules and regulations – but also of social and cultural codes and how to handle taboos, emotions and fears.

Interpreters’ role and professional ethics

Rules of professional ethics for interpreters are compiled in the document Good Interpreting Practice (2010). This describes the interpreter’s role and ethical compass. Good Interpreting Practice is “principle-based” guidance for authorised interpreters, but all the interpreters we have been in contact with know about this document and try to observe the rules in it. Good Interpreting Practice is also used by interpreting agencies and in interpreter training. The main rules are to interpret everything that is said in the room, to interpret in the first person, to remain neutral and impartial, and that the interpreter is bound to professional secrecy. All the interviewed interpreters, however, have given accounts of when the interpreter’s role has been challenged due to the situation or to interaction with the other parties. When the interpreter’s role is challenged, the ethics are tested.

I interpret everything that is said and I interpret in the first person

The interpreter must inform the parties beforehand about his/her role. Ideally this is done by giving the interpreter the time to open the meeting by introducing him or herself, explain that interpreting will be done in the first person and that the interpreter is neutral and impartial and bound to professional secrecy regarding everything that is said. The first person format is important for maintaining neutrality and impartiality. By using the first person, the interpreter “erases” his or her own person and opinion. This is usually a reflex on the interpreter’s part, and most don’t reflect on it unless the parties don’t understand.

The presentation is not without its complications, however. Some describe it as a rigmarole they deliver at the beginning without really going into what it implies. Others instead attach a

---

6 Interpreting technique involves mastery of turn-taking, making notes, using dictionaries in a fast and effective way, memorisation technique and being present in a situation without influencing it.
lot of importance to properly explaining how professional secrecy works, for example. It depends a bit on the situation and on who you are interpreting for. Several interpreters have pointed out that when they introduce themselves to elderly people and children, they have to explain things extra carefully. Exceptionally they feel obliged to deviate from the first person format. It can furthermore be important in some cases to think about which language you introduce yourself in first. During the observations we discovered that interpreters do not always introduce themselves. A common explanation for this is that the interpreter in principle does the introduction the first and possibly the second time he or she meets an interpreter user or a client, but not every time. That becomes too repetitive and uses up valuable time.

What seems most difficult to understand for both officials and clients/patients is that the interpreter interprets everything that is said and uses the first person to do so. These two particular dimensions of the interpreter’s role have brought about many situations which may afterwards seem comical. But there are also situations in which the first person format becomes heavy to bear. The interpreter may be delivering messages he or she finds embarrassing or offensive.

And then there’s also the thing of belittling people. Like this old man who was at the doctor’s, and the doctor asked: “How long have you been living in Sweden then?” “Well, forty years.” “And you speak no Swedish?” Then this man said: “No, I came here to work, not to talk rubbish.” (Laughter) But that was an unusual man. Because most people say, how long have you lived in Sweden? Then they say “I’m ashamed to say.” That is the more common response. So then they shrink a little (Interview).

In other situations interpreters might deviate from the first person, perhaps unconsciously. This happened during an observation of an ongoing asylum interview with a young boy. One hour into the interview, the interpreter switched to the third person and thus began to talk about the boy. From having been about what “I experienced” the account was suddenly about “he says he has experienced”. A shift like that can affect how officials perceive client’s/patient’s trustworthiness. Above all, it sounds like the interpreter doesn’t trust the boy and therefore distances him/herself by switching from the first to the third person.

Interpreters have told us that they sometimes, in the course of interpreting, feel obliged to remind clients that they are interpreting everything that is being said. This happens when they suspect that the client has not understood what was said in the introduction and that they are about to say things that they may not want conveyed. Insults and swearing are examples of this. Abdel describes how he still, despite the many years that have passed, regrets being cowardly in a situation where two young boys were threatened by a policeman. The boys

\footnote{Fatima recounts how she was interpreting at a police station and the client didn’t understand the first person concept. The policeman said: How could you be so daft as to steal that chicken? Fatima interpreted this. The accused glared angrily at the interpreter and said: Are you a policeman or what? Fatima interpreted this. The policeman replied: Yes. Fatima interpreted: Yes. It then took some time before the misunderstanding about who thought who was daft could be cleared up (Group interview).}
were caught shoplifting and were taken to the police station, to which Abdel was also summoned.

I felt I should say something. I should tell that policeman off, but I didn’t / … / He threatened the boys that they were going to be “Sent back home! Home to Burundi. Home to Africa.” / … / I thought that what I have here is a very difficult situation for me. I am here to earn money (laughs). I work here, I’m going to be paid. But I know that the significance of the policeman’s behaviour is not consistent with his tasks. Only the Migration Board sends people back. Not the police. The role of the police is just to write a report about what happened. Not to shout and threaten. But I was a coward, I did nothing. And that still makes me angry when I think about this. Why wasn’t I able to tell him that: “You know that’s enough now. You don’t have to shout at them. But I didn’t (Interview).

Interpreters describe how almost all the exchanges they interpret are unequal in some respect. The client/patient is in a weak position in relation to the official. This is inevitable since one party represents a government agency, the legal system or health care system, while the other represents him or herself and most often is the one who needs something from the other. This unequal situation, which is described as fundamental in the encounter between the parties, may be counterbalanced or strengthened depending on how the parties interact. It is in this balancing act between strong and weak positions that the interpreter’s role is challenged and the interpreter begins to consider whether he or she should intervene. This brings us to issues about the interpreter’s neutrality regarding content and impartiality.

**Neutrality, impartiality and bias**

Whoever uses an interpreter must be able to trust the interpreter not to favour or disfavour either party. A prerequisite for this trust, from both parties, is that the interpreter maintains a neutral attitude to the content of the interpretation. In other words, the interpreter may not let his or her own opinion show when carrying out the interpretation. This applies from the moment the interpreter is hired and until the job is completed. Further, the interpreter’s personal attitude to the parties may not influence the interpretation (Good Interpreting Practice 2010).

In the situation described by Abdel above he is balancing between partiality and impartiality. He is faced with ethical dilemmas on several levels. The situation is unequal, and he feels that there has been enough shouting. As interpreter, Abdel here becomes an “accessory” to the shouting and threats which are unjustified and make the boys very frightened. He is made an instrument for these threats, and it is there his reflection that he is actually doing paid work comes in. At the same time he perceives that the job turns unethical in that he is contributing to an unfair situation. Moreover, the policeman is making threats that contravene the law and exceed his authority. Abdel feels that he should somehow stand up for the rule of law and the boys’ rights (cf. Camayd-Freixas 2010). The interpreter ends up on the front line between different interests. In this example, it is not just the threatened individuals the interpreter feels loyalty towards, but also to fundamental ideas about the rule of law and human rights.
Neutrality is about not letting personal opinions on matters of fact influence one’s interpreting. Interpreters introduce themselves by saying that they are going to be neutral, but what does that mean in practice? The term has many dimensions which we feel that interpreters have not really thought through. What does it mean that you have a gender, a class, nationality or religion? Ideas about the significance of the fact that an interpreter is originally from the same country as the client can lead to severe conflicts of loyalty.

There is a notion that neutrality increases when using telephone interpreting. However, several descriptions by interpreters were of situations in which they experienced the same dilemmas on the telephone, and possibly even more so than if they had been in the same room as the interpreted parties. Daud had this account:

This was health care for asylum applicants, and it wasn’t a doctor but a nurse. The patient, a lady, was complaining of a recurring heart condition. The nurse asked her a few questions and concluded that it wasn’t anything acute. The woman said, again: “No, wait, I am saying that I have a heart condition and I am very worried. When I get it, we’re talking about real pains. Sometimes they’re so bad I can’t stand them.” The nurse replied: “According to the regulations and laws there are this is not an acute problem and therefore the health care system is unfortunately unable to help you as long as you are an asylum applicant and don’t have a residence permit.” I thought: “You’re a nurse and you have a patient in front of you who is ill. You could at least examine her. She has complained of pains and you have received her.” Here I wanted to use the language to persuade the nurse to go further, to help the lady… (Interview).

Daud felt that the lady was weak and in a disadvantaged position, and if he had been there and not on the telephone the nurse may not have been able to turn her away as abruptly as she did. Several interpreters mention the fact that things become “a bit more pleasant” when an interpreter is there, that all parties make an extra effort. But perhaps this is not the case when interpreting is done by telephone.

The examples that Abdel and Daud give are about how neutrality can be challenged and how the interpreter, willingly or not, can become a party to the situation. If Daud had been in the room for the interpretation, a bias situation could have arisen if he had taken the lady’s side against the nurse. Just as he describes it is the system, the fact that asylum applicants are denied health care, that most upsets him and thus it is his own point of view he would like to express by siding with the lady. Bias as it is described in Good Interpreting Practice is otherwise mainly about those occasions when the interpreter’s impartiality can be questioned beforehand because:

The matter concerns the interpreter him or herself or a close relative. The interpreter is in debt to or in some other way financially dependent on either of the parties. There is some other special circumstance that can call the interpreter’s impartiality into question (Good Interpreting Practice 2010).
There are dimensions to language which are important to understand and which mean that interpreting can never be neutral no matter how well the interpreter can handle situations such as the ones described above. This is because the process of translating one language into another reveals cultural conceptions. Language is a medium by which thoughts, ideas and emotions are represented within a culture (Hall 1997). In other words, things are given different meanings in different contexts (different times, places and people) and this is expressed via language, which therefore is never culturally neutral. By means of his or her choice of words or phrase emphasis, the interpreter can alter messages and the various parties’ positions. If the doctor says faeces and the interpreter interprets it as poo, something happens – the doctor appears childish.

**Professional secrecy and obligation to witness**

When the policeman threatened the two boys, Abdel held a silent dialogue with himself and decided not to step out of his interpreter’s role. Afterwards he felt he had been cowardly and had not stood up for their rights. Alternatively, he could have reported the policeman after the event – but then there would have been the problem of professional secrecy. Professional secrecy is more strictly regulated for interpreters than neutrality and impartiality since the Secrecy Act encompasses all interpreters, not just authorised ones. Good Interpreting Practice makes reference to the Secrecy Act and states:

An interpreter who has learned certain information in the course of interpreting at a government agency is subject to the Secrecy Act and has the same freedom of speech – and is bound to the same professional secrecy – as a civil servant (Good Interpreting Practice 2010).

Professional secrecy is never negotiable, yet at the same time it is perhaps the ethical rule that makes the interpreter most vulnerable. And it is regarding professional secrecy that clients and patients in particular show most suspicion. How is a person supposed to trust the interpreter not to tell anyone else? Interpreters who work in smaller towns describe how professional secrecy has to be constantly defended and how sticking to it makes you a winner in the long run. Getting there, however, can imply both hatred and isolation. You can’t socialise with your countrymen. Some solve this difficulty by interpreting in a different location from where they live – or the other way round, that they have friends in another location. Several interpreters describe how they never greet a client privately before he or she has greeted them. A client who is with his family or friends must never be put in a position where the interpreter greets him or her and the others ask who that is. Others describe how clients test the interpreter by asking questions such as: *My wife was at the doctor’s yesterday and I heard you were interpreting. Was it anything serious?* The interpreter then replies that *I may have been interpreting, but I can’t remember.*

Good Interpreting Practice states, with reference to the Swedish Code of Judicial Procedure, that interpreters have the obligation to witness just like every other citizen. *When one is testifying before a court of law one is obliged also to give information that would normally be covered by professional secrecy* (Good Interpreting Practice 2010).
Kim told us how she, against her will, had her professional secrecy suspended by a court. She had interpreted in a criminal case where one of the victims suddenly changed their whole story and claimed that it was the interpreter who had invented everything. This was at the end of a long police investigation and Kim was called as a witness to what she had interpreted over the months the investigation had been going on. Another discussion among interpreters concerns the limits of professional secrecy. In the reference group with interpreters, one particular event has been brought up on several occasions. This concerns an interpreter at a police interrogation who was left alone with the suspect, whereupon the suspect confessed to the interpreter that he was guilty. The interpreter said nothing to the policemen when they returned, but later telephoned the prosecutor. In the end the interpreter was called as a witness in the investigation.

People who interpret without pay

As a separate category from professional interpreters, we would like briefly to mention the phenomenon of “volunteer” interpreters. This includes all those – children, relatives and friends – who offer to interpret for family members and friends. By using volunteer interpreters the interpreter user undermines his or her own responsibility and exposes the client/patient to the risk of not being treated correctly. A professional interpreter can be held accountable for an interpretation, while a volunteer interpreter is not neutral and impartial but rather in a biased position. Volunteer interpreters can intervene in the conversation and do not always interpret everything that is said. Officials cannot expect volunteer interpreters to be knowledgeable in realia and terminology or, for that matter, to possess more than a passing knowledge of the language.

There are situations in which volunteer interpreters, professionals or amateurs, are used because there are no funds to pay for the service. One example is doctor’s surgeries for hidden refugees, which exist in various parts of Sweden. A nurse who works on a volunteer basis at such a surgery describes how each work shift ends with everyone meeting and “getting it all off their chest”. During these work shifts there are often discussions about how various problems have been solved, and in many cases interpreters have asked questions of or given instructions to physiotherapists, doctors, nurses etc. Just as frequently they have themselves received feedback. The nurse cites an example where she had an interpreter who interfered by giving personal opinions. She let it pass at the time, but afterwards they discussed why this was not so good (Field notes).

What the interpreter should/can do

When studying what governs the interpreter’s role and professional ethics we have set out both from the ideals, formulated in Good Interpreting Practice which specifies what the interpreter should do, and from practice – the situation and interaction with those one is interpreting for. On the one hand, every interpreted situation is unique and cannot be described in general terms except in its routine parts. The parties (sometimes more than two) have different expectations on and conceptions of the interpreter and the interpreter’s role. Several dimensions of the interpreter as person are highlighted, e.g. gender, class, ethnicity and age. On the other hand, a picture has increasingly emerged of how the ethical dilemmas
that arise in connection with interpreted meetings are not as unique and specific as they can seem at the time. Neither are they tied to certain people, to a particular sector or situation. The same ethical dilemmas, in essence, can arise in the courtroom just as well as at the health centre.

In addition, interpreters share many of their problems with officials. In order jointly to increase the understanding of and possibilities for dealing with what happens, it is important that ethical issues are discussed in consultation between interpreters and officials. In the example above, the nurse perceived her dialogues with interpreters as instructive. Similar dialogues very rarely happen in publicly funded interpreting, but could perhaps lead to a mutually increased understanding of the other’s job. Increased understanding by the interpreter user of what interpreting implies could perhaps lead to insights into why volunteer interpreters should not be used by public institutions, what one can expect of a professional interpreter, and also bring mutual respect for the other’s role, task and professional ethics. Such a dialogue, however, is made more difficult by the strict rules in Good Interpreting Practice.

The British researchers Kredens and Fowler (2010) have studied what kinds of ethical dilemmas a community interpreter faces in everyday professional practice, and how he or she handles/solves them. They have “collected” dilemmas much in the same way we have through our interviews, and compiled and categorised them in order to establish general examples from which they have then created a classification of problems, e.g. unsuitable confessions from the client; conflicts of interest; sound the alarm, tell the authorities; interpreting lies and mistakes; and gender related issues. General examples and a classification of dilemmas might facilitate the dialogue between interpreters and officials, since they would help in keeping the discussion on a general level.

To conclude this section, let us return to the question of the interpreter’s role and how to delimit it. Angelelli (2004) writes that rather than prescribing what the interpreter’s role should be during an interaction based on an ideal model, a new theory could describe the interpreter’s role based on situational practices in different workplaces. It would also consider the interpreter as a visible, forceful individual with the possibility of influencing the meeting. If, in line with this, we are to regard interpreting as something situational and relational, that means we cannot compare e.g. health care interpreting with legal interpreting or conference interpreting. One possible conclusion is that different competences are required in different sectors and that this also affects the interpreter’s role. In court the interpreter has to be completely neutral and impartial, interpreting everything that is said without adding or omitting anything. At a doctor’s appointment in which care is based on an exchange of information, the interpreter could possibly take on a greater responsibility by serving as intermediary. Veilleux (2010) writes about interpreters used in human rights interviews to find out if human rights have been violated. She asserts that a prominent characteristic distinguishing the interpreter’s role in human rights interviews from e.g. that of legal and health care interpreters is the interpreter’s special function as trust builder. The interpreter is often the one who makes contact first, and without the interpreter the interview would not be possible.
A discussion of this sort, about specialising and training interpreters for various roles with different ethical requirements depending on the type of exchange or which sector of society they were interpreting in, is missing in Sweden. Precisely for that reason, it might be constructive to look more closely at international ideas for how interpreters might become specialised. Based on that, a critical analysis could be made of the more rigid and uniform interpreter’s role that exists in Sweden. In light of terms such as cultural intermediary, detective, lawyer or gatekeeper, the neutral and impartial position advocated by Good Interpreting Practice becomes clearer, as do its limitations and, above all, its possibilities.

**Interpreters’ working conditions**

Apart from the interpreter’s competence, personal and professional experience, and attitude in terms of professional ethics, other factors that influence the interpreted situation and make it complex include working conditions and dependence on other actors. These factors are also decisive for which interpreter arrives for the interpreted meeting, what competences he or she has and what state he or she is in. Interpreters’ working conditions will become clear in the reading of other parts of this text, and here we will only briefly sum up the most important points.

In most cases the interpreter is a freelancer who is loosely tied to one or more interpreting agencies. Typically the interpreter him or herself seeks out and registers with an agency. Some of those we interviewed had been tested before beginning to interpret, others not. There are considerable differences in how interpreting agencies deal with the interpreters on their books. Communication between interpreter and agency mostly occurs via the telephone, internet or text messaging. On the whole, the agency takes care of planning interpreters’ jobs and schedules. Interpreters who work for several agencies, however, have to make their job plan themselves, as well as arrange travel and make sure that invoices are paid on time and correctly. Interpreters work under time pressure, and they exemplify this by describing how they only find time to eat in the car, or that they don’t have time to find legal parking spaces and therefore have lots of parking tickets. The stress that this causes affects their interpreting.

For commonly occurring languages, interpreters high on the agencies’ priority lists have fully booked working days. But interpreters with fewer bookings may have difficulties supporting themselves on interpretation alone. An interpreter is paid on a time-unit basis. The fee is governed by the contract the agency signs with the buyer following procurement. The interpreter also receives some travel and idle time allowances, but typically no compensation is paid for preparations. As employees, interpreters do not have a pensionable income, and many interpreters say that their income is too low to set aside money for holidays or insurance. The conditions for unemployment benefits are worse for part-time interpreters, which makes many of them give up interpreting altogether. This in turn leads to a disappearance of interpretation competence in less common languages. The situation as

---

8 An exception is Västmanlands Tolkcentral, which employs seven interpreters of seven different languages, and Transvoice, which has 50 interpreters, employed at its two call centres.
employee at several different agencies often causes difficulties with sickness benefit payments (cf. SOU 2004:15).

The fact that interpreters are loosely tied to one or more agencies affects loyalty, development possibilities and morale. They often stay with an agency that supports them with professional guidance, further training, authorisation and shared influence even when it does not manage to secure a contract. At agencies that don’t support the interpreters, loyalty and morale can be undermined. It happens that interpreters cancel an interpretation at short notice when they have had a “better” offer from another agency. Some agencies only invest small sums in interpreters, which they say is a consequence of the current competition situation, with prices being pushed downwards in the race to win contracts.

Government agencies, county councils and municipalities purchase the provision of interpreting services. Procurement of interpreters’ work is thus done above the heads of interpreters. Many interpreters say that they are listed at agencies with which they have never registered. Even those interpreters who are loyal to their agency are often forced to register with the competitor who won the contract, even for a lower fee, in order to maintain their income. The system makes it difficult for both interpreters and agencies to create continuity.

The Swedish National Courts Administration is the only authority that uses a fixed fee for interpreting services. This fee is tied to the general salaries index. There are several cases in which agencies have won contracts although they have quoted fees so low that if a court interpretation were to be given to an authorised interpreter, the agency would lose money. This has led to a situation in which authorised interpreters are without work while non-authorised and even untrained interpreters are given work. Güle, who is an authorised interpreter with specialist competence as health care interpreter, describes how in the course of a procurement round with the Stockholm county council she voluntarily turned down all appointments within health care. She realised that she would cost the agency more than it would be receiving under the contract. Interpreters describe this as a waste of resources and say that such negotiations come at the cost of patients’ legal certainty.

Interpreters talk about the lack of transparency and supervision of agencies’ activities, and about their own vulnerable position. Their descriptions of their situation, in which the competence they represent is traded above their heads and beyond their influence, sound like exploitation and like proof that society accords the interpreting profession a very lowly status. From their point of view, both agencies and buyers of interpreting services treat them as “potatoes”, “clothes” or “wear and tear”. They use a variety of metaphors.

Despite these criticisms there is little interest among interpreters in unionisation. Batu explains in an interview that this is because interpreters are vultures. Essentially this is about the fact that interpreters compete for work in an unregulated market. In order to understand

---

9 A 2004 report, *Tolkförmedling – kvalitet registrering tillsyn* (SOU 2004:15), proposed a law on registration and supervision of interpreting agencies, meaning that they would be operating within a framework of government rules and regulations. This proposal has hitherto not led to any changes.
interpreters’ working conditions it might be useful to look at what issues have been pursued by the professional associations and such unions as exist.

In 1975 the Swedish Association of Interpreters (STOF, Sveriges Tolkförbund, www.stof.se) was formed. During its first years, the association focused above all on training, further education and authorisation, guidance and improving interpreters’ psychosocial working conditions. It also drew up cooperation agreements with SKTF and ST, two national trade unions. STOF was also involved in the production of Good Interpreting Practice, together with representatives from the Advisory Board for Interpreter and Translator Issues (1978).

STOF has engaged interpreters all over Sweden. In connection with the deregulation of interpreting agencies in the 1990s, attention turned increasingly to problems with reduced pay and worsened working conditions, which are both deemed to be a consequence of how procurement is done. The association was a prime mover behind the public report on the provision of interpreting services (SOU 2004:15), and also participated as expert adviser in the interpreter training report (SOU 2005:37). In its role as trade association, STOF has also supported individual members with problems involving agencies or interpreting jobs. In 2001, STOF’s cooperation with SKTF led to the forming of SKTF-Rikstolk (national interpreter). Active STOF members were then given the possibility of trade union training, and could hand over the task of monitoring procurement rounds to SKTF.

Other professional associations include Authorised Interpreters West (AUTOR, Auktoriserade Tolkar i Väst) and Authorised Interpreters Uppsala (ATUL, Auktoriserade Tolkar i Uppsala). In 2010, ATUL formed Authorised Interpreters Sweden (ATIS, Auktoriserade Tolkar i Sverige). And in 2011 the Association of Legal Interpreters (RT, Föreningen för Rättstolkar) was formed. These professional associations work in various ways to defend authorised interpreters’ professional, economic, trade union and social interests.

A representative of SKTF Rikstolk explains that their most important task is to monitor procurement. He sees the fact that they belong to the same trade union as the biggest officials, the municipalities, as an opportunity. He further believes that county councils need to be informed that trying to push prices down when procuring interpreting services is counter-productive if interpreter competence is to be maintained. STOF has carried out several boycotts in which authorised interpreters and interpreters with health care competence have taken part, e.g. in Malmö in 1999 and in Helsingborg and Stockholm in 2006. Also in 2006, Authorised Interpreters West threatened to boycott the Migration Board and the Gothenburg and West Götaland county councils. The result of this was that contracts were annulled, but it did not lead to improved conditions. SKTF Rikstolk also pursues issues to do with guidance for interpreters, further education and interpreters’ relations with interpreting agencies. Their goals include more employed interpreters and increased labour rights security in respect of such things as retirement annuities and holiday pay.

A large number of active interpreters work part time, which means they are often members of other unions than SKTF. As a result SKTF is unable to give them support in their interpreting work. Interpreters employed at the Transvoice call centre can join Unionen. One problem is that most interpreters don’t act as if they belong to a profession, which contributes to the
difficulties in improving conditions. SKTF has no more than 300 members, and Unionen has even fewer interpreter members.

**Possibilities and obstacles**

The interpreters we have talked to have a fundamentally positive attitude to their work. The urge to professionalise comes from the interpreters themselves. Still, many of their reflections concern all the things that undermine professionalising and professional pride: bad working conditions, low pay, the feeling of being as replaceable as “a potato” and the feeling that the profession’s status in society is low. Several interpreters with extensive experience and who have in various ways been involved in developing and improving interpreters’ situation – via their agency, via the unions, via training or something else – have become resigned. They feel unable to change things, unable to make themselves heard, unable to earn the respect that the profession ought to have. Like the interpreting agencies themselves, they are critical of the lack of transparency and supervision in the provision of interpreting services. Market conditions, with everything from the agencies’ profit motive to the constant fluctuations in demand for different languages, seem from the interpreters’ perspective to be getting more attention than their views and wishes. This makes capable and well-trained interpreters quit the profession. The turnover of interpreters increases, and conditions for the interpreting profession lead to de-professionalising. That is a problem of resources as well as a societal problem.

**Officials as users of interpreters**

Official users of interpreters work in different areas – the courts, health and medical care, the social services etc. That means their needs vary. Interpreters are primarily hired when a user thinks it necessary in order to be able to communicate with a client/patient. In most cases, the meeting will be taking place in order for a client’s/patient’s problems and needs to be examined and a decision made regarding them. The meeting between the interpreter user and the client/patient can be described as unequal, with the client/patient in a weaker position in terms of language, knowledge etc. (cf. Arnstberg 1988; Hertzberg 2006).

The interpreter is expected to know the specialist language as well as the realia to do with the area. In this section we have brought together officials’ experiences of working with interpreters, and how they themselves see their role and the interpreter’s role in the interpreted meeting.

**The role as an official interpreter user**

An investigator at the Migration Board asked the question: *It has to be said that the question can be asked – what is a good interpreter user? Is he or she good for the interpreter or for the applicant, or good for the specific situation?* A good interpreter user has to be open and attentive to try to ensure that everything is correctly translated, and even if the focus is on the client/patient, it is important that the interpreter, who spends all his or her working time with various officials, comes away with a good impression too. A nurse with extensive experience
of working with interpreters offered the following advice regarding the role as interpreter user:

First of all you have to have a lot of respect for and humility before the interpreter’s profession, their knowledge of languages and communication, and you need to know that it takes longer to speak through an interpreter. It is also important to think through the meeting afterwards and bear the interpreting in mind when you consider the next step. The seating arrangement is significant and requires some thinking through, too. As user it is also important that you are clear about who is going to participate in the conversation and to what extent (Nurse).

The interpreter’s role includes competence in turn-taking in conversation, but it is the interpreter user who has the main responsibility and who takes command of the meeting:

It’s that simple: I’m in charge of the interpreter. I tell him or her: I want you to interpret brief passages, I want you to interpret verbatim. If there is something that cannot be interpreted verbatim, you have the possibility of explaining to me that this can be said in different ways, without adding any value judgements of your own, you are only to interpret what is being said, it doesn’t have to do with you, you are not allowed to have any opinions, nor are you allowed to add or withhold anything, instead you have to stick to what is being said even if it sounds strange, and even if you don’t understand I want you to convey everything to me (Lawyer).

Several officials also describe how they prepare for an interpreted meeting. A doctor told us that he makes sure there are chairs for everyone. A policeman questioning a child will normally sit in an armchair, as will the child, while the interpreter sits on a low chair some distance away. An investigator at the Migration Board uses a low, kidney-shaped coffee table where the client and the interpreter can sit next to each other and still be able to look at each other. For telephone interpreting arrangements are different. Since the interpreter cannot see the room and those present, the interpreter user introduces the interpreter to the meeting by explaining where it is being held and who is present. Only then is the interpreter asked to introduce him or herself.

Very few officials say that they carry on a dialogue with the interpreter, even if they think it might be a good idea. Some officials say they praise interpreters when the interpretation has gone well, while others say that they only comment if there is something that did not go so well. Regarding what happens to interpreters during difficult interpretations, officials say it is an issue for the employer. Officials simply don’t have the time and space for an “after-game chat” with the interpreter, as a nurse puts it. There are exceptions to this, particularly in interpretation in the psychiatry area.

Similarly, there are few possibilities for “pre-game chats” which could involve announcing beforehand what a meeting is going to be about. Only court interpreters are given the opportunity of “reading up” by being shown the summons which specifies what kind of crime
the case concerns and who is involved. Many officials agree that it would be good to announce what the subject of the matter is. Sometimes, however, this may be difficult due to secrecy regulations, e.g. in connection with police interventions.

Sometimes it becomes necessary to interrupt an ongoing interpretation. Most often this is because the client can’t understand the interpreter. Most officials are reluctant to interrupt – it takes up too much time, or they don’t want to criticise the interpreter in front of someone else. Sometimes a deviation report is submitted to the agency, but many officials say they don’t really have time for that either.

**A good interpreter?**

Officials appreciate interpreters who stick to their professional ethics. Interpreters’ skills can be very varied, and which interpreter works well with a certain user is in many ways a subjective assessment. Officials employ a number of metaphors about interpreters. *The interpreter should be like a wave between two pillars in the sea, Interpreting is really a mechanical service.* Expectations on interpreters extend beyond professional ethics. *The interpreter must be prepared to sound the siren when things go wrong.* ... a little basic empathy is necessary.

A nurse who carries out difficult interviews about torture and persecution, about children who have died and about rapes, says that facial expressions and body language are very important. If she lowers her gaze and begins to write and indicate that this is getting too difficult to listen to, the client will stop speaking. The same thing can happen if the interpreter indicates that he or she is having difficulties taking the account in. A good interpreter must be able to hold and convey very difficult information – *the strength to listen to atrocities* is a competence that is specifically requested in e.g. psychotherapy and in connection with asylum investigations.

A doctor brings up two terms that capture the difficult balancing act between being there and being invisible, and at the same time dealing with one’s feelings and reactions. He talks about interpreters who were “too little”, or passive, and interpreters who were “too much”, or too active. One that is “too much” becomes an obvious actor and allows personal opinions, experiences and actions into the interpreting. This can happen unconsciously, e.g. if the interpreter has to *plough his/her way through the Swedish language, speaks in a shrill voice, reeks of perfume* or does not remove his or her coat. The criterion for what is good enough is that the interpreter should not be perceived as a limitation, so that ambitions have to be lowered.

But that’s extremely rare. Because you feel quite elated when things have just flowed on, become a continuous flow where the interpreting doesn’t break up the conversation (Psychotherapist).

**Choosing an interpreter?**

There are differences between those professional categories that are free to hire an interpreter from whoever they like, and those that are bound by procurement. Many lawyers choose interpreters that they think work, which means that criteria such as authorisation may not be a
priority. Health care staff, who also want to choose the interpreter themselves, are normally bound by procurement contracts, but if they cooperate with the agency they can usually fill their need for an interpreter with the necessary competences and for continuity in patient treatments.

The client may also have specific wishes. One lawyer says that the interpreter is there to allow him to do a good job in the best interests of the client. He usually tries to get his clients at least to try the interpreters he suggests.

The majority of officials work in institutions that are bound by procurement. They might not even book the interpreter themselves, but instead via an ordering service which is not integrated into the staff’s everyday activities. The distance this implies makes it difficult to monitor what requirements are specified in an order. I assume that all of them are fully qualified, a social welfare officer says.

Other issues that come into “choosing an interpreter” have to do with interpreters’ languages, dialect, ethnicity, religion and gender. Choosing the right language and dialect is obviously very important. Choosing an interpreter of a specific gender is also quite common – usually this is about specifying a female interpreter. A lot of consideration is given to this, mainly with the clients’ wishes in mind. A psychotherapist describes how she always specifies a female interpreter for the first encounter with a patient if that patient is a woman. A physiotherapist tells us that she always uses a female interpreter for her own sake, irrespective of the patient’s gender. Ethnicity and religion are not things that the agencies register, but they often know these details about their interpreters. In some cases, therefore, it is possible to get an interpreter whose religion or ethnicity matches the client’s wishes. The opposite situation also occurs, in which a client absolutely does not want an interpreter who is a part of the client’s own “exile group”. Perhaps you need to tell the nurse that you’ve been unfaithful and that you’re worried that you’ve been infected with HIV is an example a nurse gives of when a client has to trust the interpreter completely.

When an interpreter is called to a meeting, the interpreter can be present in different ways – physically (face to face), present with his or her voice via telephone or with voice and image via a picture telephone or a video link. In the latter case, the interpreter can see the room in which the meeting is taking place and the people present. Some officials insist on having the interpreter face to face, questioning telephone interpreting for serious issues that include emotions and difficult stories.

Others see only advantages with telephone interpreting, claiming that the situation becomes more neutral, that interpreters can be hired from farther away and that the interpreter never needs to know who the client/patient is. When the interview is about sensitive issues, distance can actually facilitate things. A policeman told us:

To have to sit in the same room with an interpreter, who may be a man to boot, and where a woman is supposed to recount things that people don’t even talk about, to someone else. In those situations it can be easier in one way to talk/…/ that is, interpret, via the phone.
The telephone ties official to the place where the equipment is available, which is a reason it can be difficult to use telephone interpreting in e.g. health care, but trials are being carried out at various hospitals. An economic advantage of telephone interpreting is that travelling times and costs between interpretations are avoided. Transvoice has built up a call centre for telephone interpreting. Officials can order interpreters and also get an interpreter “on demand”, which is a service the Migration Board has purchased. But even those who prefer telephone interpreting say that there are situations that require face to face interpretation:

… it might be a situation where we have to go and enforce a leaving order…, most often it’s some family we …, knock on the door early in the morning and pick them up, pack their things and go, everything is ready. Then we get to have an interpreter with us (Policeman).

In some cases those who prefer face to face interpretation have to use telephone interpreting, e.g. because it is impossible to arrange an on-location interpreter with a certain language or because the client does not want an interpreter from the local area.

The most important argument many interpreters give for wanting to interpret on location is that the prerequisite for doing an interpretation which is as close as possible to the original language is to be present in the situation, see the body language, the facial expressions and the parties’ interaction. Officials mention this less, but there are a couple who have said that they feel inhibited in their communication with the client if interpreted by telephone. Another objection to telephone interpreting is that the risk of misunderstandings increases. If the client/patient says I don’t understand it can be difficult for the interpreter to distinguish if it is the user or the interpreter that client/patient does not understand.

One dilemma in telephone interpreting is the question of confidentiality and professional secrecy. Officials have described how an agency gave them the name and telephone number to a female interpreter. When they rang the number, a man answered. When the user asked for the interpreter, the man replied I’ll interpret instead because my wife is busy breast-feeding. Another user describes how, in the middle of a telephone interpreting, she heard the interpreter ask the question ketchup or mustard? So the guy was actually selling hot dogs at the same time, or She happened to be sitting on a bus, you know. So I said: but surely you can’t interpret, you’re bound to professional secrecy, surely you can’t…, that made me angry with the interpreting agency as well. That sort of thing just can’t be allowed to happen (Policeman).

Specific problem

In every interpreted meeting, something we call “the dynamic of the room” is created. The term has to do with how different dimensions of the interpretation affect each other. In face to face interpreting, the furniture is often arranged in a triangle to allow the interpreter user and the client/patient maximum eye contact with each other while the interpreter can observe both speakers for maximum transference of the entire content of the exchange.
Normally the official takes charge when the client and the interpreter arrive for the meeting: he or she greets them, shows them their seats and lets the interpreter make his or her introduction. This taking charge seems natural when the user is in his or her office, but can be more difficult to accept when the interpretation is being done somewhere else. An example from an interview with an interpreter user describing a home visit to a family she had previously met in her office, with the same interpreter:

… it was interesting to see how the interpreter behaved. She was very different when we visited their home compared to how she had been when she was here. /…/ here in my office, I’m the one in charge /…/ But when we were on a home visit, she was…, then she was completely different. /---/ Then she was more like an acquaintance who sat there being sociable, laughing in that sociable way (Psychotherapist).

A psychotherapist brings up the point that it becomes more difficult when the interpreter engages with the client, which is a very clear when it comes to children.

… and then you still get something about the tone of voice, about posture and eye contact that changes when you speak to children. I don’t know if it might be some kind of sense of responsibility that’s awakened, maybe the interpreter thinks that in order to understand the child fully he or she also has to participate. But I’m thinking that I’m the one who has to understand the child, it’s my responsibility, so sit back and remain where you are (Psychotherapist).

Other factors that affect the room’s dynamics are time, class and education level: that the doctor uses technical jargon and difficult words which the uneducated patient does not understand, or that the interpreter perhaps simplifies the doctor’s language or improves on the patient’s.

One problem that officials have mentioned is the feeling of being limited by the competence of the interpreter. As a professional, you are limited to doing what the interpreter is capable of interpreting. The most common limitation is that the interpreter’s Swedish is not good enough
in general or when it comes to technical terms. In addition to this, some interpreters may have problems memorising and thus forget to interpret certain things. It also makes a difference if the interpreter owns up to his or her shortcomings and therefore contributes to security. Interpreters sometimes leave their role as interpreters and enter into conversations to explain, ask the client questions or inform officials that they are giving the wrong information. Officials notice this in different ways. *I think the mistake that interpreters most often make is that they break the promises they made at the beginning, I will interpret everything that’s said, I am impartial and that. And then they don’t interpret everything that’s said. Instead they... well, they add a little and remove a little* (Psychotherapist).

The interpreter user most often does not speak the client’s/patient’s source language, which makes it difficult to judge whether the interpreter is sticking to the rule of only interpreting what is said and everything that is said. *If I say just a sentence, “where do you live?” And then they [interpreter and client] talk for maybe a minute and a half, and you get the reply “X”. Then I think “so, all that chat just to get this”* (Policeman).

In other cases the interpreter interferes by sharing, unbidden, his or her knowledge. One example is an interpreter who kept saying to a lawyer *you have to understand how things work in my country*. On the other hand, as we have described above, officials are interested in learning about interpreters’ knowledge in other ways, e.g. information that the interpreter has which could be important for a correct diagnosis or for care. Officials feel that interpreters could, after the interpretation is over, speak in general terms such as: *Have you thought about the fact that in our homeland you couldn’t ask a woman a question like that?*

One advantage of interpretation mentioned by many is that it gives the opportunity for reflection, time to think. This gives both officials and clients/patients space, but it also creates a distance. The metaphor “an interpreter as a buffer” has been invoked primarily in health care contexts. A paediatrician points out that the buffer function is also to do with not being the person who directly gives the patient possible bad news. Officials do not know how the interpreter handles this, but there are examples from the interviews that show interpreters’ strategies. One example is to stop using the first person when the content becomes too difficult. The interpreter, who is supposed strictly to interpret everything that is said, can feel this buffer function as a pressure from the user’s side. In the quote below we can see that it is no simple issue when different actors want to use the interpreter for their own purposes. The example is about a lawyer who is preparing interpreters for a court hearing. If the lawyer knows that the witness is going to lie, he is careful to ask the interpreter to follow the instruction to stop when he stops. If the witness says *I didn’t understand the question*, the lawyer does not want the interpreter to repeat the question, but to interpret what the witness is really saying.

If for example I know that a witness is going to lie in response to my questions, it may be that the interpreter unintentionally frees him or her *because there is time think* while the exchange is being interpreted. The witness *has time to do things* which are not totally transparent to the court (Lawyer).
Professional interpreter use

When one looks closer at officials’ experiences of working with interpreters, a few themes stand out. One is that an interpreter is a necessity, an important tool, but also associated with quite a few problems. The most immediate of these is that the user becomes limited in the exercise of his or her profession because the interpreter does not possess the language, terminology, knowledge and competences that allow for everything to be interpreted. Another problem is that interpreting is always associated with some uncertainty since the user does not understand the source language and cannot know if everything is being interpreted correctly. A third problem is that the dynamics of the room change and that the relationship with the client is affected by the interpreter’s presence, especially if the interpreter is “too much” or “too little” in his or her approach.

Most officials possess considerable knowledge about how they want things set up in the room, how they want to lead the conversation, where they want to place the interpreter and the client, when it is all right to interrupt and when it is not. However, more general knowledge – about interpreting services in society, what qualifications and working conditions interpreters have, and what sorts of demands one can make on an interpreting agency or an interpreter – is lacking to a great extent.

Client/Patient

Clients/patients are a heterogeneous group with differing needs, experiences and backgrounds. There is no umbrella organisation that acts in the interests of “non-Swedish speakers” like there are organisations that represent the needs and demands of e.g. people with speech or hearing impairments.

Interpreters are primarily hired when the user or official considers it necessary. In most cases it is an individual’s problems or needs that are being examined or decided about. At the same time it is difficult for the patient/client to influence the hiring of an interpreter for the meeting.

Access to an interpreter – a right

During an observation at a group home for minor asylum applicants, a group of boys went off to play football at a location where there were already boys from another residence. The arrival of more boys was not welcome. There was a scuffle which centred on a boy called Hassan. Eventually someone called the police.

The police were there within a few minutes, and when two policemen enter Hassan is on the threshold with the wall behind him and the policewoman directly in front of him. Several of the boys point him out as the perpetrator. He immediately says: I want an interpreter (Field diary).

Hassan in the account above knew his rights, but the normal thing is that the client/patient is not aware of the right to an interpreter. This is problematic. The report Access to an interpreter – a social service (1999) shows that those non-Swedish speakers who had been received in Migration Board facilities more often knew about their right to an interpreter than
those who had not been received in Migration Board facilities. The majority of those interviewed in the report, however, were family member immigrants who stated that they rarely or never had an interpreter when they were in contact with authorities, and that if an interpreter was necessary it was always a family member who did the interpreting. These people had no knowledge about the interpreter’s role and professional ethics and described how they had difficulties trusting interpreters in general. Two well-known cases where individuals were the victims of incorrect decisions and abuses because they were unaware of their rights can serve as illustrations here. A woman in Malmö went through an abortion against her will after her husband had interpreted for her. In another case a woman had paid with sex for interpreting services since she had been told that she had to pay the interpreter but had no money.

The interpreter as possibility

It was the first time I met an interpreter when I was at the Migration Board. I didn’t know there were interpreters. It was fantastic! I was so nervous and the interpreter was really nice. He comforted me and said that everything will be all right, don’t worry. He spoke my language.

Tareq here describes his first encounter with an interpreter and the feeling of being able to express himself fully. *If you can’t speak, it’s very difficult to show who you really are*, he says, *Being able to speak through an interpreter has helped me a lot.*

Shamsi, too, describes how his first meeting with an interpreter, shortly after he had arrived in Sweden, was very good. He was worried about how he would be able to explain his thoughts to the staff at the Migration Board. Having access to an interpreter can be described as a possibility. It gives the person who cannot speak Swedish the possibility of saying not just what he/she is capable of saying, but everything her/she wants to say. Karim talked about this in a meeting with his contact person following a fight with some other young people at a group home. The conversation ended up being about more than the fight, and Karim showed that he was a philosophical and reflecting boy with a sense of humour. When the time booked with the interpreter was over and the conversation ended, it was apparent that Karim went back to a more limited way of expressing himself, poorer in words. He was diminished and became “mute”.

The interpreter as obstacle

During an observation of an asylum interview a young girl, Aisha, describes how she was kidnapped in her home country and how she was forced under threat to renounce her Christian faith. When she was released her family had disappeared. In the course of the interview, Aisha understood that the interpreter belonged to the majority ethnic group that had forced her to flee. She pointed this out to the investigator and asked to be given another interpreter. Her request was not met, and she questions whether the interpreter even translated it. She felt insecure throughout the interview and dared not describe everything she had been subjected to in her homeland. For Mirza, too, it was hard when he realised that the interpreter did not belong to his own ethnic group: *I wasn’t completely comfortable when I understood that* /.../
if I say that they hate me, then I don’t know if the interpreter will interpret that. In the same interview, he brought up the dilemma of not wanting to hurt the interpreter. Examples show that the interpreter can become a muzzle for the client/patient and that this can happen in several ways. The fact that a lack of trust for the interpreter is a problem has emerged in various reports. Often this has to do with the interpreter’s nationality, political or religious background, or gender (Access to an interpreter 1999, Som man frågar får man inte alltid svar 2004). However, while it is rarely the case regarding political or religious affiliation, it is not uncommon for authorities to ask clients about preferences regarding interpreters’ gender.

Clients/patients also see the interpreter as an obstacle because of the difficulty of knowing whether he or she is interpreting everything that is being said. I can’t know if the interpreter is translating what I’ve said in exactly the way I want it said. I can’t know if they translate something else.

On 29 October 2010, three patients from the county council in Dalarna made revelations to the press. They described incorrect treatments due to poor interpreting and questioned the use of bad interpreters. One of them had been prescribed medication for diabetes that ruined her kidneys. It turned out that the interpreter did not know the terms “kidneys” and “insulin” in the source language. The patient said: Our lives are in the interpreters’ hands. If the interpreter can’t convey my worries, how can I be cured? (Brodin 2010). In asylum investigation interviews as well, single words can be important in describing the asylum applicant’s need for protection and credibility. Difficulties can occur when people have lived for many years in a country where they have not spoken their mother tongue in a long time and have not been able to follow the development of the language in their former home country.

One problem that can occur is that the interpreter speaks a different language from the client. Either they’ve ordered an interpreter for the wrong language, or else the interpreter has said that he speaks my language. On two occasions, the conversation has had to be interrupted and they’ve had to arrange a new interpreter. It wasn’t good when we didn’t speak the same language (Shamsi).

During one asylum investigation interview there were problems with poor language and outright misinterpretations:

The boy is eager and talks a lot, several sentences follow on each other without the interpreter interrupting. When the interpreter does take over, translating what the boy has just said, we are served up a few sentences in imperfect Swedish. Something isn’t right. What did the boy actually say? On several occasions the interpreter uses the word “grejer” (“stuff”) in translating what the boy says. When the boy describes what happened when his father was killed, the interpreter uses the wrong word and says that a “granatäpple” (“pomegranate”) was thrown at the family’s house when in fact it was a “granat” (“grenade”). None of the other people present in the room react to this error. It is only when the interpreter makes the same mistake a third time that the investigator calls her attention to it. A subdued giggle his heard in the room when the mistake is
revealed. The boy is never told why the investigator giggled when the boy described the course of events leading to his father’s death (Field diary).

The asylum investigation interview ended with the investigator asking the interpreter to make a direct translation of the minutes she had written during the interview. Going through the minutes thus became a matter between the boy and the interpreter only. Translating the minutes took about thirty minutes, during which time no-one else in the room had any insight into what was being said between the boy and the interpreter.

We have an interpreter but no time to speak to each other

The investigator in the above example delegated some of his tasks to the interpreter, who agreed to step out of her role as interpreter in order to be a translator. It is remarkable that the translation took place without anyone else’s insight despite the fact that the interpreter had shown a lack of professionalism earlier. The actions of the investigator are an example of when the client/patient does not get access to the professionalism and legal certainty they have a right to. In this case the responsibility is the investigator’s. She withdrew and left the child to ask an interpreter who was short of the mark both in terms of language and of ethics.

The patients interviewed by the Dala newspapers mentioned the fact that interpreters are pressed for time. We have observed that there is often a time factor that causes not just the interpreter stress, but the interpreter user as well. Perhaps that is what makes an investigator choose to let the interpreter go through the minutes without taking part.

One of our observations took place in a social services office. In addition to the social worker, there were four people present who work in youth care plus the client, the client’s mother, a friend with a child, the observer and the interpreter. The matter concerned a boy who was to be placed in a supervised residence. The social worker is about to go through the care plan, which is full of expressions like “build one’s identity”, “think long-term”, “assume responsibility for one’s own situation”, improving one’s “self-image”, as well as references to the methods which will be used to achieve this. The boy’s mother does not understand why the child cannot carry on living at home, asking questions and talking via the interpreter.

The social worker and the others listen. She looks at her papers and at the time and says that she is going to continue going through the plan, and then they can ask questions afterwards. The boy’s mother doesn’t agree. Again she speaks for a long time, she is upset and sad, but when the interpreter begins to interpret, the social worker interrupts straight away. She is not listening to any more now. The exchange is repeated a few times. But the social worker no longer takes the time to finish listening when the interpreter is conveying what the boy’s mother is saying. The situation begins to feel strained, and the interpreter makes a point of wanting to interpret everything that is said. At that point one of the participants from youth care interrupts, asking the interpreter to interpret what he has to say. Then he answers the mother’s question (Field diary).
Afterwards the social worker defended her actions by referring to the lack of time. She said that they had only booked the interpreter until a specific time and she had to have time to go through certain things. Undoubtedly there were legal certainty reasons for not leaving out any information about the care plan, but what difference did that make when neither the boy nor his mother understood the most fundamental parts or got any answers to their questions?

It takes longer to speak through an interpreter, and stress occurs when not enough time is allocated to interpreted meetings. Under the circumstances, the clients’ needs become subordinated.

**Unequal meetings**

An important dimension of clients’/patients’ relationships in an interpreted meeting is the fact that they are in a situation which can be strengthened or weakened by the interpreter. Benjamin read the record of his asylum investigation after it was completed. He noticed that the interpreter exaggerated what he said. *I also exaggerated quite a lot during the interview, to make my need for protection clear. But I can see how the interpreter was exaggerating my exaggerations.* If the interpreter empathises with the client during the interview, this can clearly be reflected in the interpreting. Benjamin’s view is that it may have been to his advantage, but that it still feels uncomfortable not to have complete control of what gets recounted and written down in such a charged situation.

The reverse might just as well be the case. Goran describes how the interpreter harassed him during his asylum investigation without the investigator understanding what was being said. *The interpreter told me I was an idiot. Can’t you understand that you won’t be allowed to stay? You’re being stupid, you’re lying of course, she said to me. Without anyone else in the room understanding what she was saying.*

Tareq and Titos have similar experiences: Tareq was given a dressing-down by the interpreter in their shared language during an interview with a psychologist. *The interpreter said to me in low, hissing voice: Stupid boy, now you’d better shut up! Don’t sit here making shit up! When Titos wanted to buy a bicycle, the staff at his group home were unsympathetic. He insisted, since he had saved his own money to buy a bike. The staff called in an interpreter, who also had things to say about Titos’ wishes. I was very upset with the interpreter. He should just interpret, not offer his own opinions.* In the following example it is not the interpreter who is going beyond the limits, but the client who is turning the interpreter into an “ally”.

The head teacher, a Swedish teacher and teachers of other languages, a maths teacher, and a year four mentor are all present, plus the special needs teacher, a secretary and the observer. When the interpreter arrives the client, a young father, is already there. The head teacher directs us to a small conference room dominated by a large oval conference table and ten chairs. The head teacher sits at the head of the table and the teachers and secretary along either side. At the opposite end, next to the door – which furthermore opens into the crowded room – is the father. He is wearing a knitted cap which he doesn’t remove. The interpreter sits next to him at the end of the table. */…/ the power display implicit in all this was very noticeable, and it was clear that the father was trying to protect himself and shake off the
“accusations”. At one point, when one of the teachers was speaking in Swedish and the interpreter was listening intently in order then to convey the words to the father, the father leaned even closer to the interpreter, and with a little smile extended his hand to pick an imaginary hair off the interpreter’s shoulder (Field diary).

The father created a brief moment of intimacy with the interpreter. He did not succeed in redressing the balance of power, but he did instil a sense that he had someone on his side.

An infinite need for interpreters

We have noted that the encounter between the interpreter user and the client/patient is an unequal one. Separated minors can be said to be at a triple disadvantage: in language terms, in age terms and as asylum applicants (Keselman 2009). They may not know what their rights are, they have not had time to establish any network and they lack knowledge about how society is structured and how it works.

The biggest problem for clients/patients is in trusting the interpreter’s role and professional ethics. Many interviewees express worry and describe concrete experiences of how interpreters’ gender or religious or political background have had an effect on what they dared say and on what the interpreter conveyed. Further, clients/patients express uncertainty regarding interpreters’ competence, in particular their linguistic competence but also their professional competence. We have seen examples of interpreters whose Swedish has been scant, who have misinterpreted, and who have breached the interpreter’s set role in different ways. These interpreters do not attain the minimum requirements for a good interpreter.

In the ideal meeting between official, client and interpreter, a relationship is established based on confidence and trust. If the client can feel that he or she trusts the interpreter and the official, the conversation often goes smoothly and the interpreter’s presence is hardly felt. Several clients/patients describe how the trust, or lack of trust, that they feel for the interpreter can end up having an impact on legal certainty.

There is an almost infinite need for interpreting services on an everyday basis, which is difficult to provide for. Interpreters often end up in situations where they are asked to answer questions or interpret even though they were not hired for those things. As soon as I turned up at the reception between booked sessions, clients would approach me and ask for help with booking appointments, leaving messages and explaining things to the receptionist. Interpreters describe how they are almost “eaten up” by all this extra work. At the same time they can see the need for it, and that it is difficult to avoid.

Interpreting agencies

Interpreting agencies for community interpreters were established in the 1960s in Sweden. In most cases the agency was part of the municipal Immigrant Services Bureau. With the regulation in 1968 of immigration came the creation of the Swedish Immigration Board, which took on a large part of the responsibility for training interpreters. The interpreting agencies that developed at the Immigrant Services Bureaus cooperated through the National Association of Immigrant Services Bureaus, among other bodies.
In 1992 interpreting agencies were deregulated, and since then the number of private agencies has grown. The three largest private agencies are Semantix, Språkservice and Transvoice (Transcom). These agencies offer interpreting all over the country based on those procurement rounds that have led to contracts. Transvoice also runs a call centre for community interpreting. They have developed their activities under different circumstances – Språkservice has grown from a small family business, while Semantix and Transvoice are part of large companies with other activities.

The Interpreting Services Council (Tolkservicerådet, TSR), a trade association of interpreting agencies, was formed in 1996 with the primary goal of developing interpreting services in Sweden. TSR runs training courses and functions as a referral body for interpreting service matters. The majority of its members (21) are municipal agencies, and two are privately owned.

Regardless of size and turnover, each interpreting agency has two “main customers”: officials and interpreters. Their main task is to mediate services between these two.

**Two main customers – interpreters and the public sector**

Some interpreters describe themselves as “customers” in relation to an interpreting agency, because they turn to the agency to get work. The majority of active interpreters are registered with one or more interpreting agencies. The way recruitment happens is most often that the interpreter him or herself contacts the agency. If he/she is interesting to the agency (i.e. interprets a language they need) and appears competent, appointments are made for an interview as well as a realia and language test. If the test goes well, there is a further interview and a run-through of the agency’s rules. Some agencies have the new interpreter follow an experienced interpreter who then mentors the new interpreter on his or her first independent jobs. We have discussed the recruiting procedure with both interpreters and agencies. The agencies themselves say that they always test new interpreters, while interpreters give examples of both very serious testing and no testing at all. This applies to both private and municipal agencies.

The newly recruited interpreter is included in a priority list. At the top of this list are interpreters with specialist competence in legal and/or health care interpreting. They are followed by authorised interpreters, interpreters who have done the new basic training programme, and all other interpreters – who may be anything from very experienced, with thousands of interpreting hours, to beginners. Many agencies choose to raise the priority rating of interpreters they recognise as skilled, irrespective of training and authorisation. The interpreter is paid by unit of interpreting time at a rate determined by the agency. The rate varies with the competence level – authorisation and specialist competence have the highest rates. A court interpretation is paid at a higher rate than other jobs. Some agencies pay travel and idle time allowances. No other compensation is paid for the interpreter’s extra work time, e.g. on preparations. The National Courts Administration is an exception.

Interpreting agencies arrange their own training programmes for interpreters, both to introduce new interpreters to the agency and to ensure that they know and accept Good
Interpreting Practice. Another reason is that there are not enough trained interpreters to meet demand in various sectors. Interpreters may not count this training as part of the state-financed basic training programme, and the same applies to courses run by educational associations. The reason for this is that the consolidated training programme is supervised by TÖI.

Each individual interpretation must be completely professional, whether the interpreter works full time or just occasionally. As mentioned earlier, the way agencies treat the interpreters on their lists varies greatly. There are agencies that have set up interpreters’ councils that pay for training, further education, authorisation, coaching and professional guidance. And there are agencies that do none of these things.

The other customer is the public sector and all its officials. Agencies’ contacts with the public sector is through procurement as well as on an everyday basis through bookings, deviation reports, invoicing etc. Interpreting agencies are actively involved with training programmes and dialogues with officials and purchasers.

Agencies are generally critical of how procurement of interpreting services is carried out. Their view is that purchasers typically do not know enough about how interpreting and the provision of interpreting services work. Among other things, this leads to unreasonable imperative requirements, such as the one that the agency must name their most qualified interpreter within two hours. Another criticism concerns how the price/quality ratio is weighted. Agencies say that purchasers have difficulties determining what represents value for money. An example of this is the municipality that signed a contract with an agency that offered interpreters at SEK 98/half hour, a charge which does not even cover the interpreter’s fee for an interpreter with only basic training. The agencies further point out that purchasers normally are not specific enough about what they mean by quality, nor do they follow up and evaluate quality against what was promised.

Agencies are also critical of the insufficient contact between purchasers and agencies. Some agencies feel that purchasers don’t know how agencies work, and that there is therefore no room for negotiation in order to create a win-win situation (Agency). A particular difficulty in procurement is that agencies are not obliged to say which interpreters are on their lists.

Agencies’ contracts with officials include the reporting of deviations, which is an important part of quality improvement efforts at agencies. Different types of deviations are given different codes depending on whether they are due to the interpreter, the customer or the agency.

**Agencies’ work – the right interpreter for the right job**

The principal activity is to act as a link between a buyer of interpreting services and an interpreter.\(^\text{10}\) Interpreting agencies offer face to face interpreting and telephone interpreting.

---

\(^{10}\) The agency’s other tasks include recruitment, training and guidance of interpreters, payment of interpreting fees, personnel management (unlike the interpreters, planners and other agency personnel are employees),
Some offer video possibilities and picture telephones. The provision of interpreting services is based on two elements: the reception of orders and planning. Agencies use advanced computer systems to receive orders, plan interpreting jobs and follow them up. The system also facilitates fee calculation, invoicing and dealing with deviations. Statistics can easily be called up, e.g. on the number of orders, and objectives, activity plans and schedules can be drawn up to measure quality and make improvements. The overall goal is to deliver interpreters with the right competence.

Orders, availability inquiries and confirmations from interpreters are usually done via email or a special website that customers and interpreters are directed to. Communication can also be via telephone, fax or text messaging.

**Coordination of bookings**

At the hub of the agency’s activity are the bookers and the planners. The bookers work with everything from orders to delivery. They have two main tasks: to receive calls from customers and interpreters, and to plan interpreters’ work schedules. Voice mail is checked first thing in the morning, and throughout the day email, phones and fax are monitored. The person answering the telephone is meeting the customer, and so needs to know how to be the agency’s public face. The planner needs to be knowledgeable about languages and know the interpreters well enough to determine who is suitable for a specific job. The planner also needs to know local geography to determine distances the interpreter will need to travel and predict possible traffic problems.

**Supervision and quality assurance**

In December 2001, the government issued directives for an inquiry into the need for supervision and quality control of interpreting agencies’ activities. The inquiry led to a report: *Interpreting agencies – Quality Registration Supervision* (SOU 2004:15). The report was critical of the current situation, with a problematic shortage of authorised interpreters and the lack of a shared code of honour for the interpreting services business. Additionally, the report emphasised that interpreting agencies will have to deal with more stringent procurement requirements, an increased demand for competent interpreters and improved possibilities for individuals to request an interpreter in administrative matters. The report consequently recommended that state supervision of interpreting agencies’ activities be introduced.

The report has not given rise to any measures. Agencies, however, are themselves involved in change and development processes. The Interpreting Service Council (Tolkrådet) has been active in developing a business-adapted quality system for interpreting services. ¹¹ A search of invoicing, marketing, training of interpreter users, making tenders in connection with procurement, and otherwise working on the standard required for quality certification.

¹¹ This system is called *FR2000 Activity management for Interpreting services* and includes portions of ISO 9001, ISO 1400 and SS 624070. It places demands on the agency regarding objectives, plans, margins of error, personnel information, quality, purposeful change processes, the environment, competence supply, and health and safety.
FR2000.se shows that nine municipal/county council-owned agencies and one private agency are certified. The three largest private agencies are, according to their websites, quality certified: Semantix and Språkservice under ISO 9001:2008 and Transvoice under ISO 9001:2000.

Other areas of development include market analyses and making agencies more efficient to improve the odds that the right interpreter arrives at the right place at the right time. A third area of development is that the interpreting profession is undergoing change, not least in technical terms. Telephone interpreting at a call centre, or via a video screen, places other demands on the interpreter than interpreting face to face. Interpreters who are going to do distance interpreting need competences such as telephone communication, voice ergonomics and secrecy routines. These are areas not currently dealt with in basic interpreter training, but there is a great deal of international research about them, not least within sign language interpreting.

A fourth area of development is the labour legislation situation for interpreters. It is a recent development that interpreters have been given employment contracts. Many agencies, in line with interpreters’ demands, are calling for a fixed national rate similar to the interpreting rate applied by the National Courts Administration. Agencies are also calling for increased possibilities for training, further education and authorisation.

**Lack of continuity**

The main thing that both agencies and interpreters are calling for is the report’s (SOU 2004:15) proposal for a law on registration and supervision of translation agencies. TÖI and the Legal, Financial and Administrative Services Agency have, after biding their time for a few years, brought up the problem in a joint letter to the Minister for Integration where they emphasise that the increasing deficiencies in the provision of interpreting services must be dealt with by means of registration and supervision of interpreting agencies (Letter of 22 September 2009, reg. no. 82/09 at TÖI).

In a motion (Sf379 claim 1), the Social Democrats underline that supervision of interpreting agencies is an obvious need, suggesting that the Discrimination Ombudsman (DO) should analyse whether the lack of it can be regarded as discrimination of both interpreters and of those who are dependent on reliable interpretation services (Report 2009/10:AU7). The committee recommended the rejection of the motion with reference to the Evaluation report (SOU 2009:56). The political will has hitherto not been forthcoming.

---

12 The Evaluation report (SOU 2009:56) argues that the Migration Board and the courts should have clear and consistent requirements regarding interpreting agencies and make a point of complaining about errors and shortcomings. In future procurements, more stringent requirements should be made regarding the interpreters that the agencies employ, whether they are authorised or have a basic training certificate. Competence in interpreting children should also be considered. A central register of interpreters should be set up, and registration and supervision of interpreting agencies be introduced. The matter is being drafted by the Government Offices.
The loose relationships that currently exist between agencies and interpreters can become a problem due to the agency’s position as intermediary, e.g. when interpreters wait until the last minute before accepting a job from agency A because they would rather work with agency B. Another problem is the lack of continuity in the procurement contracts, since this can make it difficult for an agency to guarantee work and thereby retain interpreters.

Interpreting is undergoing changes in several areas, regarding both technical development and the future demand for specialisation of interpreters’ competence. Changes in interpreting services may also create new needs in terms of agencies’ activities.

**Procurement**

The public sector buys goods and services in accordance with the Public Procurement Act (2007:1091). The state, regions, county councils and municipalities all procure services and products separately from each other. There are three main rules that public procurement must follow: there must be competition between several providers, tenderers and tenders must be treated objectively, and the procurement must be businesslike. The tenderer may demand that the prices in a tender be kept secret. The purchaser makes his or her evaluation of the received tenders. Insight into this process is limited. For all procurement it is important that the purchaser is knowledgeable about what is being procured and what is possible. How the procurement is framed and what requirements are placed on the service are very significant for guaranteeing the quality of the purchased service. Under the Public Procurement Act, contracts must be written with the tenderer whose tender is most advantageous in financial terms, following an assessment based on price and quality criteria. Purchasers are free to let quality outweigh price if this is judged to be an important aspect of the good or service being bought. A procurement can be examined by a court of law.

**Procurement of interpreting agencies’ services**

Procurement of interpreting agencies’ services is a result of the 1992 deregulation of interpreting agencies. The authority responsible for framework agreements on the provision of interpreting services used to be the National Police Board; the Legal, Financial and Administrative Services Agency took over that responsibility in 2011. With regard to the procurement of interpreting agencies’ services, we have identified three principal problems: price/quality, the product/service and follow-up/evaluation.

**Price/quality**

When procuring the provision of interpreting services, the purchaser draws up a reference document. This describes the activity on whose behalf the procurement is being done and also specifies the purchaser’s requirements vis-à-vis the agency. The purchaser has quality

---

13 The National Procurement Assistance and Development Unit at the Legal, Financial and Administrative Services Agency procures and manages framework contracts for government agencies. Framework contracts have been written with a total of nine interpreting agencies (2011).

14 Extensive examples of such reference documents can be found on the Migration Board’s website.
requirements and naturally wants the interpreters provided by the agency to possess a minimum quality level. According to the purchaser it is up to the interpreting agency not to offer too low a price in its tender.

I think the agencies have a responsibility. Because the price they offer should in some way be accepted by the majority of interpreters. Otherwise they can’t provide any interpreters. They can win a contract if they dump their price, but then they won’t get any interpreters whose services to offer, and of course that doesn’t work (Purchaser).

Stockholm County Council completed a procurement round in 2006 and wrote a contract for a flat rate with one agency and a contract for variable rates with another. The prices in the tender were so low that the agencies would be making a loss, and there was no room for negotiation in the contract. SKTF, a union, warned that health care interpreters would not accept any jobs and the whole procurement process was seen as discriminatory against interpreters, patients and health care staff, and also led to protests by health care staff.

The affair ended with health care interpreters in Stockholm refusing to do interpreting jobs for the county council. The health care services landed in a dilemma they felt they were not responsible for, since the interpreters’ fees are determined by the agency. This is true, but at the same time interpreters are not a party to the procurement negotiations and have no possibility of influencing the tender price. Neither are interpreters under any obligation to accept jobs that they don’t want. If you pay too little you will not have access to the most qualified interpreters. The county council had to make do with non-qualified interpreters, who may not have been familiar with medical terminology and may have lacked fundamental factual knowledge.

The product/service

A purchaser with extensive experience of purchasing interpreting agencies’ services explains:

The most important thing is the availability of interpreters. Availability and certain delivery, as I’ve said. We need to be sure that we have an interpreter and that he or she is good. Good quality, availability and certain delivery. That the agency has a lot of interpreters, that they’re good and that they arrive at the agreed time. Those things are very important, I can tell you (Purchaser).

The agencies state in the tender how many interpreters they have listed, sometimes in an irresponsible or deceitful way. One agency in western Sweden, for example, stated that it had more than 900 authorised interpreters, which is more than the total number of authorised interpreters there are. Demanding lists of interpreters is not a given, and when the Migration Board did so in a procurement round in 2010, it was ordered by a court to redo the procurement. Arguments against listing include that it ties agencies to what is available at the time of the application when they should instead have the possibility of recruiting interpreters if the procurement leads to a contract. That way both the buyer and the agency are dependent on whether interpreters actually want to take jobs under the conditions the buyer and the
agency have agreed on – as in the 2006 example with Stockholm county council above. In Borås (2007) there were problems when the winning agency won the contract on information about a certain number of authorised interpreters. As in Stockholm, the interpreters refused to work for the agency. The City of Borås wanted to break contract, and the matter went first to the county administrative court, where the city lost, and then to the administrative court of appeal, which overturned the judgement. During the course of the legal process, the authorised interpreters had written to the court emphasising that they were not going to work for the agency in question and that they had never intended to in the first place.

Follow-up/evaluation

That’s something you have to expect during the initial phase with a new supplier and a new contract with new conditions, that it can’t work perfectly from day one. It doesn’t. Instead, like in all relationships, you have to talk to each other and have a dialogue so you know what the expectations and needs are on both sides. Otherwise it won’t work out well (Purchaser).

Both purchasers and agencies think it is important that there is a follow-up between the purchasing authority and the purchased service. Agencies argue that purchasers cannot judge what is and what is not quality. Purchasers, for their part, argue that there must be a working dialogue with the agency and that it is important to get statistics showing how large a share of jobs were provided with an authorised interpreter, as well as the number of deviations in various categories. The purchasers’ follow-up here is about checking how the agency handles deviations, and the quality of the agency’s competence improvement efforts.

When price comes before quality

Existing legislation, and the rules that have to be followed for procurement, can be seen as an instrument with which the state ensures that good interpreting services are acquired through competitive negotiations. In practice, however, the Public Procurement Act has led to lower-quality interpreting services and worsened working conditions for interpreters. The main reason for this is that interpreting agencies compete and push down prices at the expense of quality. These agencies are not under any form of supervision or subject to any requirements for guaranteeing quality other than those defined, but rarely followed up, by the purchaser. Interpreters are severe in their criticism of how competent interpreters are treated unfairly when purchasers accept the lowest bid. That undermines quality, which by extension threatens legal certainty. If purchasers want to have access to interpreting services at the lowest possible price, this will also eventually have an adverse effect on the level and spread of professional skill. Many agencies argue that the Public Procurement Act is unwieldy. Constant procurement rounds, agencies that sometimes win, sometimes lose contracts undermine continuity and tolerable working conditions. If follow-ups and evaluations are really done, they will create a know-how among purchasers which will allow them to make relevant demands and be at the cutting edge of developing interpreting services. When the Migration Board procured interpreting services in 2010 it divided the round into two – one for community interpreting and another for telephone/distance interpreting. As technology develops and demands and routines at authorities change, there will be a greater demand for
more differentiated types of interpreting services and competences. Another type of differentiation has to do with the possibility of not procuring on a national basis. Supply and demand of interpreting competence and languages is different in different parts of the country. With time, more knowledge has been generated among the big purchasers who have more refined criteria for measuring the quality of interpreting agency services.

An often repeated wish from both agencies and interpreters is for a national rate, a nationally determined fee for interpreting services. This could lead to interpreting agencies only competing on their commission.

Training of community interpreters

Interpreter training programmes have existed in Sweden since the end of the 1960s. It was the Swedish Immigration Board and the municipalities’ Immigrant Services Bureaus that led the development of these programmes, initially at the Nordic Folk High School on Biskops-Arnö and then at folk high schools and educational associations all over the country. Interpreter training has been an “immigrant issue” in line with the immigration policy goals of equality, freedom of choice and collaboration (cf. Niska 2004). Eventually interpretation came to be seen as something government authorities needed as well, in connection with the introduction of the Administrative Procedure Act in 1971, in which a section referred specifically to the need for interpreters.

In 1986 the Institute for Interpretation and Translation Studies (TÖI) was established at Stockholm University with the task of coordinating issues regarding interpreter and translator training. From 1991 TÖI is responsible for the allocation of government grants for this training as well as for training for interpreting teachers. The mission also includes training supervisors, pedagogic development, producing teaching materials and interpreter dictionaries, promoting research and collaborating with the other Nordic countries.

Evidence that authorities’ needs are paramount can be found in the report Interpreter Training – new demands, new forms (SOU 2005:37), which was carried out in connection with the establishment of migration courts. The National Courts Administration demanded higher interpreter competence and resources were allocated to TÖI specifically for carrying out training for more in-depth knowledge within court interpreting.

Before the report (SOU 2005:37) community interpreter training in Sweden was characterised by being run by educational associations, which meant that there were no instruments for controlling admissions, having syllabuses, and doing tests and evaluations. In contrast, the Swedish National Agency for Education and then TÖI give advice about curricula, literature, tutoring and exercises. Statistics were collected. The training was based on needs assessments using questionnaires and meetings with e.g. interpreting agencies.

---

15 From July 1, 2012 the allocation of government grants is the responsibility of the Swedish National Agency for Higher Vocational Education.
Interpreter training has been built with a clear connection to society’s needs in areas such as social insurance, the labour market, health care and court interpreting. By contrast, current interpreting research, e.g. in linguistics, didactics and communication theory, has been given markedly little space.

The new consolidated basic training programme

The training of competent community interpreters is one of society’s principal instruments for ensuring that interpreting services are carried out by interpreters who are well qualified for the task (SOU 2005:37). The report led to the creation of a new, state-financed consolidated training programme carried out within adult education and under the auspices of TÖI. The basic training programme, which is equivalent to six months’ full-time studies, is offered at seven different educational institutions and folk high schools. Community interpreter training is also offered at Stockholm University. Important new elements included the introduction of prior knowledge testing, exams and assessment of interpreter candidates. Compulsory language supervision in every featured language with links to every subject area was introduced, as were asylum interpreting and a reading list that was the same for the whole country.

The basic training programme is made up of six modules. The introductory module is about the interpreting profession, ethics and technique. This is followed by modules in social, insurance and labour market interpreting, health care interpreting, jurisprudence basics, supplementary jurisprudence, and asylum interpreting. All modules include realia/subject knowledge, interpreter ethics, interpreting technique, interpreting exercises, terminology, and language guidance. Each module is followed by written realia tests and oral interpreting tests.

In order to be admitted to the basic training programme, applicants should have completed at least upper secondary education or the equivalent. A selection is made from the languages applied for and then those selected are called for one day of prior knowledge testing. After a few years’ experience of the consolidated basic training programme, a discussion began about increasing demands on the interpreter candidates. Too many of them have too low a level of education, insufficient knowledge of Swedish and bad study habits. The throughput on the interpreter training programme is low, about 50 per cent. Interpreting is done in about 170 languages in Sweden. Due to a high application rate and an economical situation which does not correspond to the extent of the training and the number of languages cuts have been made during 2010/2011. Among other things, this has led to changes in admission policy such that educational associations can only offer training in one language at a time. These limitations cause considerable problems in terms of access to trained interpreters, which has been noted by agencies, as well as meaning that interpreter training is arranged on the basis of the

---

16 Katrineberg, Härnösand, Wik and Åsa folk high schools, Folkuniversitetet in Gothenburg, Medborgarskolan South and Vuxenskolan in Botkyrka.

17 The prior knowledge test consists of four parts: written questions about politics and society in Sweden; translation of phrases from Swedish to the source language; an interview in Swedish to test active and passive language use; an interview in the source language to test language level and aptitude.
languages that applicants have and not on the basis of the languages being demanded in the interpreting market.

**Interpreter candidates**

An important change in the new training programme was the introduction of admission tests in order to raise and control the level of applicants. We have met interpreter candidates with very different backgrounds, most of them women, many of them parents of young children. They included municipal employees, truck drivers, hospital caretakers, teachers, home help assistants, primary teachers, cooks, secretaries, a department store manager and an ex-teacher candidate. All were of working age and no-one had a Swedish ethnic background or was born in Sweden. A handful were already active as interpreters when they started. The majority had decided to try interpreter training on their own initiative, most often because they needed work and because they already had at least two languages “for free”. Some of them began interpreting while the programme was still going on and saw no reason to complete it. Others realised that their language(s) were not in demand enough for them to be able to support themselves as interpreters, and so they dropped out for that reason.

**Teachers**

Realia teachers and language supervisors teach on the community interpreter training programme. Often the realia teachers serve as language supervisors as well. There is no specific training programme for interpretation teachers. Supervisor courses and other pedagogic programmes are sometimes arranged, and in order to create continuity and uniformity, language supervisors and realia teachers get together once a year to participate in lectures and discussions. In terms of training, then, conditions for teachers vary. Conditions for language supervision, in particular, also vary depending on what language it is. For many languages there are no dictionaries in to or out of Swedish. That puts very high demands on the language supervisor. A language supervisor of Somali showed us a compilation of terms for the “supplementary jurisprudence” module. It contained 2180 terms. A few years ago, the language supervisor and some education providers were in Somaliland visiting judges and lawyers, listening to court proceedings and collecting material to compile into lists of terms. In other words it has taken many years to put together useful materials, while teachers of other languages have access to materials from the beginning.

**Teaching**

Teaching is done partly according to the traditional model, with lectures and literature, and partly on a more experimental basis with what is known as the peer group method. This is the chosen method for the distance learning programmes, which are the ones we primarily describe here. Each course begins with a physical meeting that includes lectures and realia. After that the candidates study and complete tasks via the internet-based First Class. Each module ends with a physical meeting and language supervision. One of the most important teaching methods is interpreting exercises using prepared role plays connected to the subject area. Most of the role plays are written by a teacher with extensive experience of working both as an interpreter and as a teacher. All role plays are written in Swedish in the original,
and the writer makes a point of including current terms from each subject area, as well as idiomatic expressions and various types of jargon which can be linked to e.g. age, gender or level of education. The role plays can also be used to talk about ethical dilemmas or discuss practical experiences. We have noted that teaching is dominated by realia, terminology and language exercises, and that very few discussions about ethical issues occur after the introductory module.

**Exams and assessment**

Following the completion of the training programme, and after having passed the exams, students receive a training certificate. The exams held on the basic training programme include written prior knowledge tests, realia exams, terminology exams and oral interpreting exams. These exams are in many ways similar to those used by the Legal, Financial and Administrative Services Agency, which is seen as natural by some interpreting teachers since the basic training programme is intended as a preparation for authorisation, whereas others question whether it is reasonable (Wadensjö and Englund 2010). A big and perhaps decisive difference between the educational associations’ exams and authorisation is that for authorisation the examinees are assessed by an anonymous assessment group, while in basic training they are assessed by their realia teachers and language supervisors.

**Other state-financed interpreting training programmes**

Sign language training has been built up around the demands of those who need sign language or deaf-blind interpreting. This training programme is run by the educational associations. It is four years long and is classified as post-upper secondary vocational training. No prior knowledge of sign language is required.

Since 1957, the Armed Forces Interpreter School (part of the Armed Forces Intelligence and Security Centre) in Uppsala has been training interpreters for the specific needs of the armed forces. No prior knowledge of other languages than Swedish is required. The programme comprises three years’ full-time studies, of which the third involves special training for field work in areas of the world where the language in question is spoken. Currently, interpreters are trained in Russian, Dari and Arabic. Military training is also included. Students apply via the National Service Administration on the basis of their upper secondary certificate.

A conference interpreting training programme is offered at Stockholm University. It gives special competence for interpreting at public events with many participants.

**Demand outstrips supply**

The state allocates funds to TÖI, which TÖI in turn distributes to interpreter training programmes. The improvement of the basic training programme has been very significant in raising community interpreters’ professional competence and status.

We note, however, that the resources are insufficient for training interpreters to match the needs of the market. Interpreting services are closely tied to migration to Sweden, and it is
difficult to anticipate which languages, dialects or variants will be in demand in the future. This also means that interpreters are being trained for a very changeable labour market.

The market – mainly interpreting agencies, but also government authorities and professionals – thus has a greater need for interpreters than the training programmes can meet. The shortage of interpreters in certain languages means that several interpreting agencies “patch and mend” by running their own training and testing, without any quality control or right to award certificates. There is a risk of training “second rate” interpreters for temporary needs instead of planning for the longer term – problematic from the interpreter’s perspective since he or she will not have a recognised qualification, and perhaps more seriously, second rate in terms of competence, which jeopardises both officials’ work and clients’/patients’ legal certainty.

Another difficulty is that the selection of languages in which training is offered is based on the applicants’ languages and not on market needs. In spite of recruitment actions by TÖI it is difficult there are not always applicants for languages where trained interpreters are needed. It is, however, possible to prioritise languages among those who apply. But a closer dialogue with agencies and cooperation on training possibilities would be welcome.

It has not been clearly formulated what the interpreter should know on completion of the basic training programme, nor what a “good minimum standard” is. The different circumstances for those who attend interpreter training programmes at universities and those who do basic training run by educational associations is an important matter for discussion, where lessons can perhaps be learned by comparisons with other vocational training carried out by both educational associations and universities, e.g. recreational pedagogue and journalist training programmes.

If one area needs development, it is research in the interpreting area – in particular didactics and education. TÖI receives no special funding for this. For example, in Sweden there is no systematically formulated text about what is fundamental for interpreter training and how interpreter trainers should work. How do you teach, and what and why? We would argue that existing research on interpreting should recur in basic and further training. Literature of this type is included in the university programmes. Research shows that interpreter teaching cannot become effective if it is not based on theories about interpreting and takes research results into account (Hale 2007).

The present basic training programme for community interpreters can be seen as a foundational course in which there is insufficient time to develop the skills required to deal with matters of professional ethics and the interpreter’s role. It is important that issues concerning values and human outlook be addressed in all forms of education, otherwise issues of equality, equal opportunities and discrimination risk becoming marginalised (Bondestam 2004). This is particularly important in training programmes that involve responsibility towards other people (cf. Prasad 1997). Self-reflection and knowledge of one’s own values

---

18 Internationally there is much research on this, and more resources are also allocated to training community interpreter teachers.
gives one tools with which to deal with one’s feelings and prejudices towards other people. This increases the scope for being able to distance oneself, for understanding one’s own reactions and those of others, as well as one’s capacity for being neutral and impartial as an interpreter. Regarding issues of racism or discrimination due to ethnicity, we perceive a greater awareness than for e.g. gender or sexual orientation and identity issues. This is probably due to the fact that the interpreting profession is made up of migrants with personal experiences of discrimination and racism. In the interviews with interpreters there are several examples of this, while gender related issues are just about nonexistent.

To conclude: the consolidated basic training programme provides a fact base in various subject areas as well as the basics of interpreting. It can also be described as a first step, an introductory course. The big problem is that there are no further courses being offered that would lead to a full qualification as community interpreter. Comparisons can be made with e.g. sign language training and the armed forces interpreter training programme. In terms of volume, the demand for interpreters in spoken languages is greater than for sign language or military interpreters. On that basis it is reasonable to ask why the consolidated basic training programme is the shortest and least funded one.

Authorisation

As the need for interpreters grew in the 1960s and 70s, so did the need for quality assurance of “good interpreting”. In the interim report on interpreting services and Nordic language convention from the Immigrant inquiry (SOU 1972:83) it was proposed that a board be appointed for the task of authorising interpreters. In a memorandum entitled Authorisation of interpreters and translators (DsA 1974:9) it was suggested that interpreters might have their competences tested by means of an authorisation exam. An ordinance (1975:589) on the approval of interpreters and the authorisation of translators entered into force on 1 January 1976, with the National Board of Trade (Kommerskollegium) being charged with testing interpreters (SOU 2005:37). In 1994 the activity was transferred to the Legal, Financial and Administrative Services Agency, which is currently responsible for the authorisation of interpreters and translators.\footnote{Ordinance (1985:613) on the authorisation of interpreters and translators and Ordinance regarding the alteration of Ordinance 1985:613 (SFS 2007:718). In discharging its duties, the Legal, Financial and Administrative Services Agency is obliged to follow Directive 2005/36/EG of the European Parliament and of the Council of 7 September 2005 on the recognition of professional qualifications. This has been adapted by means of Council Directive 2006/100/EC.} Authorisation applies between Swedish and another language, among which Swedish sign language is also included. The intention is to guarantee a good minimum standard among authorised interpreters.

Exams for authorisation and special competence

The Legal, Financial and Administrative Services Agency (KamK) determines exam and application periods and announces on its website and in daily newspapers which languages, exam locations and dates apply for each individual exam. Applicants for authorisation as interpreter have to fill out a special application form for KamK, enclose a copy their birth
certificate and pay an application fee. An interpreter who has completed basic interpreter training at Stockholm University can apply for authorisation at any time throughout the year.

The authorisation exam consists of two parts: one written realia and terminology exam held at different locations in Sweden and one oral exam in Stockholm. The written exam includes subject areas such as health care, social insurance, the labour market, everyday jurisprudence, migration, general social studies, and interpreter ethics. The terminology test consists of 100 specialist terms to be translated into Swedish and 100 specialist terms to be translated from Swedish. For a pass grade, the interpreter must have at least 80 per cent correct answers in each part of the exam.

If the interpreter passes the written exam, he/she is called to the oral exam. This exam consists of three or more role plays that test the interpreter’s ability to carry out a technically acceptable interpretation with a good transfer of information. The interpreter must have a very good knowledge of vocabulary, grammar and means of expression in Swedish and the interpreting language, good reading comprehension and writing skills, and be familiar with Good Interpreting Practice. The role plays are carried out as realistically as possible in front of an assessment panel. The interpreter is allowed to use aids such as dictionaries, a computer, paper and pen. Those who fail the oral exam can reapply within 18 months for a second oral exam. The assessment panel is made up of an exam coordinator from KamK, a specially enlisted language expert, a language assistant and a professional actor who plays the parts of the interpreter user and client in the role plays. Oral exams are always about face to face interpreting situations; there is no separate exam for telephone or video interpreting.

Exams for special competences consist of written exams, oral questions and role plays. The role plays are done in realistic settings in a court of law or at a hospital, and the assessment panel includes professionally active experts. If the assessment panel gives the interpreter a pass grade, KamK obtains information from the Enforcement Authority and the police to confirm the interpreter’s integrity, and then issues a certificate of authorisation or of special competence.
An authorisation certificate is valid for five years. When applying for an extension, the interpreter must account for his/her activity as authorised interpreter. For special competences, the authorisation certificate is automatically extended by five years.

In 2009 KamK carried out an evaluation of the authorisation exam, drawing attention to the fact that there was a shortage of questions in some areas, e.g. asylum processes and pension rules (*Finding out what others say* 2009). Further, some questions were too detailed and therefore not relevant for an interpreter. A third criticism was that interpreter ethics were not tested either in writing or through role plays. The evaluation also looked at the assessment of exams and what competences it requires. Finally, greater transparency was called for as well as assessments that can be fully understood by those doing the exam.

**Supervision of authorised interpreters**

The Legal, Financial and Administrative Services Agency (KamK) is the supervisory authority for authorised interpreters. An authorised interpreter who is in breach of Good Interpreting Practice can have his/her authorisation withdrawn. Anyone who is dissatisfied with an interpreter can report this to KamK. In recent years, reports on interpreters falling short in their professional role have increasingly come from other interpreters. KamK also answers queries on factual matters, such as how bias or professional secrecy should be handled in a specific situation.

**Authorisation – a limited possibility**

There are authorised interpreters in 38 languages, while interpreting is done in at least 170 languages. There were 1,023 authorised interpreters in January 2011, of which 155 were sign language interpreters and 868 interpreters of spoken languages. However, the actual number of people authorised is lower, since some interpreters are authorised in several languages. There are 134 authorised interpreters of Arabic, 95 of Spanish, 91 of Balkan languages, 81 of Finnish, 76 of Russian, 57 of Polish and 56 of Persian. The languages most in demand for interpretation are Arabic, Somali and various Kurdish languages. KamK does not have sufficient resources to hold authorisation exams more often than once every two years in most languages, nor to develop the contacts needed in order to increase the number of languages in which authorisation is available. For smaller languages, for instance, it can be difficult to find language checkers in Sweden.

An important question concerns why certain interpreters do not become authorised. There are several answers to this. One is that authorisation is not available for the language in question. Another is that many interpreters have little faith in the language experts. One area of development for KamK is therefore to review its language expertise and the credibility of the assessment panels. Should there be nothing to fault, then at least the myths about injustices and foul play will have been exploded, which in turn should mean that no more interpreters decline authorisation on those grounds. Some interpreters choose not to become authorised because they believe that it makes them less attractive in the market since authorisation gives them the right to a higher fee.
Many interpreters think that the exams are too detailed and not adapted to the reality of interpreting, and therefore decline to try to become authorised. This critique of the exams’ composition and questioning of what they actually measure coincides with KamK’s evaluation (2009). Just as with the basic training programme, KamK needs more resources in order to develop their activities and allow for more frequent authorisation exams in more languages.

In a government decision of 16 December 2010, the Swedish Agency for Public Management (Statskontoret) was instructed to identify advantages and disadvantages of the current division of responsibilities and organisation for the authorisation of interpreters and translators, including responsibility for the interpreter register, and to present possible alternatives to the present structure. Statskontoret is also to analyse how the supply of authorised interpreters and interpreters who have passed the consolidated basic training programme might be increased.

The conclusion in the interim report from the Immigrant inquiry (SOU 1972:83), that an authority is needed to guarantee competence, still stands. KamK has contributed to giving purchasers and officials knowledge about and access to “qualified interpreters” by means of the register of interpreters that was created in 2011. It would be welcome if interpreters with the basic training qualification could also come under KamK’s supervision. Finally there is the question of establishing a supervisory authority for the provision of interpreting services (cf. SOU 2004:15).

The reception of separated minors

In this section we return to the main themes from three articles we have written about the reception of separated minors in Sweden. We write about migration, identity, language, homesickness and belonging, and will not specifically touch upon the significance of interpreting here. By the term “separated minor” we mean persons under the age of 18 who arrive in Sweden to apply for asylum unaccompanied by their legal guardian. This does not have to mean that the person arrives completely alone. Many arrive together with siblings, others are accompanied by adult relatives or friends. The majority of those who arrive currently are young people between 16 and 18 years old, and about 80 per cent are boys. What these thousands of minors have in common is that they have been forced to flee because of war, violence and a lack of possibilities for the future in areas of conflict (cf. Ayotte 2000).

A dignified reception – about separated minor asylum applicants in Sweden

Summary of the article To receive with grace (2010)

The reception of separated minors in Sweden is based on rights laid down in international agreements such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and the recommendations of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in Geneva. National

---

20 In 2004, 388 separated minors arrived in Sweden; in 2006 they were 816; in 2008, 1510 and in 2010, 2393 (www.migrationsverket.se).

The system that entered into force on 1 July 2006 means that Sweden’s municipalities and county councils, together with the Migration Board and the National Board of Health and Welfare, share the responsibility for separated minors according to a special agreement with a clear division of responsibilities. Secrecy applies between the various authorities. The Migration Board is responsible for examining the child’s case for asylum, and for issues regarding assistance and repatriation. The Migration Board is also responsible for drawing up agreements with municipalities about receiving separated minors. Those municipalities that are willing to receive these children are paid compensation to cover their costs. On arrival in Sweden, the minor is first placed in what is known as a transit home. The stay there is meant to be brief, and the Migration Board must as soon as possible refer the minor to a municipality with which there is an agreement.

The municipality that receives the minor is then responsible for providing the support and help prescribed in the Social Services Act. These obligations include analysing the needs of the minor and deciding about suitable accommodation and schooling. Accommodation might be a place in a group home run by the municipality, or else a family or a relative, if there is one in Sweden, might be the best option. Group homes are intended as short-term accommodation since asylum applications of minors should normally be processed within three to six months, but it has happened that minors have remained in a group home for more than two years. The municipality must also appoint a guardian ad litem, who takes the place of both custodian and guardian. The guardian ad litem is responsible for the minor’s personal circumstances, but does not have a maintenance obligation. The appointment as guardian ad litem ceases when the minor turns 18 years old. The minor is also appointed public counsel, whose task it is to represent the minor in the asylum case. If the minor is granted a residence permit, the municipality is responsible for long-term planning of the minor’s continued upbringing and for creating the conditions for integration into Swedish society.

The minor may have a family, and it is the Migration Board’s task to investigate that matter as long as the minor is applying for asylum, after which the task is taken over by the social welfare committee in the municipality where the minor is living. On a more general level, it is the Migration Board’s responsibility to plan for the need for municipal places for separated minors, and also to be prepared for reception, for signing agreements with the municipalities and for administering compensation to the municipalities. The county council also has responsibilities with respect to separated minors. They must be offered health care and dental care to the same extent that other children in Sweden are.

The Liljan group home – municipal reception in a community home

The Liljan group home is on the third floor of a block of flats on the outskirts of the town. Up to eight young people live here at a time, boys and girls. Children under the age of 12 are normally placed in family homes, but if they have older siblings they can also be living in a
group home. Girls and boys live along separate corridors. Each minor has their own room, but shares a toilet and shower with other children. Sometimes siblings share a room.

The home is sparsely furnished, but clean and pleasant. There are a few decorative items, such as a vase or candlestick, but on the whole no unnecessary objects. The kitchen, dining room and living room are the group home’s shared spaces. In the living room there are sofas, a TV, a small number of parlour games and a football game. Otherwise it is empty. In connection with the child’s registration a list is made of belongings such as the number of towels, underwear, jeans etc.

Liljan is staffed around the clock. During the day there are at least two staff members there, and at night one who sleeps there. The home is locked, and the children do not have their own keys – they have to ring the doorbell to enter. Breakfast, lunch, snacks and dinner are prepared and served at fixed times which have to be observed by everyone unless school hours or leisure activities interfere. On the locked larder door is a note: *Sweet almonds only on weekends and cereal only for breakfast*. There is free access to fruits in a fruit bowl and drinks in the refrigerator.

The daily routine begins with the minors going to school after breakfast. From around 13.30 they start arriving back from school. Afternoons and evenings are mostly spent with friends outside the group home, at the library, the indoor swimming pool or at a leisure centre. The minors have to be home no later than 22.00 on weekdays, and in bed by 23.00 – at weekends this is extended to 24.00. Several of the boys go to football practice or to a gym. On Saturdays and holidays the staff and the minors usually plan outings and activities together – everything from outdoor activities that involve grilling hot dogs and fishing to going to the Laserdome. Once per term staff and minors take Liljan’s minibus to a shopping centre to stock up on clothes and other things.

When a minor arrives he or she is registered according to the following routine: Each minor is provided with two contact persons among the staff. They are then responsible for introducing the minor to the group home and explaining rules and practical matters. This is done by means of two introductory meetings which are generally held in a separate room and telephone interpreted. Under ideal circumstances, the matter of the guardian ad litem will be solved already by the third meeting, and after that the guardian takes over many of the practical concerns, in particular finances and things to do with the asylum examination. Ideally the guardian ad litem will visit the minor at least once a week. The contact persons have weekly chats with the minor during which they make sure that everything is working as it should. In addition to this, a social worker is responsible for analysing placement and the need for assistance.

As soon as possible after arrival, the minors go through medical examinations by the refugee health care services. Prior to the examination each minor has to provide a stool sample. Before the minor has been declared healthy he or she may not participate in the preparation of food. Each minor must, in consultation with the contact persons, begin to fill out an “individual development plan” during the second introductory meeting. This is a plan that contains some overall points about accommodation, school, health and identity. Based on that,
the minor and the contact persons set up goals. These goals are often very concrete. They might be about cleaning up one’s room once a week, asking the staff for help with homework, or to exercise once a week. The question of identity is a little more complicated, but might for example include a vision about becoming a car mechanic in the future.

Staff on duty have to keep a daily journal for each minor and his/her state of mind. In the journal they note primarily if there has been anything special, e.g. some request from the minor or if anyone has been to ask for the minor. Occasionally staff also make a note of their own reactions. *I’m sick of all the fussing about food,* was one entry after a weekend of long discussions at every meal with one of the minors. Food and cooking are also subject to rules and routines. All food that is cooked must be possible for everyone to eat, and for that reason pork is avoided, for example. The minors have to be involved in the cooking of their meals.

There are thus routines for cooking; cleaning and washing that involve everyone. There are rules for computer use, access to swimming pool cards, trips to see friends on holidays and weekends, visits by friends etc. There are rules regarding hygiene, both personal and for kitchen cloths. In summary, the routines could be described as devised so that nothing is forgotten. The child’s rights and the various parts of their lives, such as accommodation, health, school, free time and personal development all need to be covered. The rules are there to foster the minors, to make them punctual and capable of looking after themselves, whether they are allowed to stay in Sweden or have to return to their own or a third country. Interpreters are used primarily to inform, as during the registration meetings at the group home, or to ask questions, as when going through the development plan. General, everyday conversation about trivial matters has to be done in halting Swedish and through body language. What does all this “organising” do to the minor? What happens to dimensions such as the child’s right to be seen, heard and acknowledged when he/she lacks real opportunities for expressing him or herself freely about thoughts and emotions?

A dignified reception

The reception of separated minors is based both on the child’s rights such as they are defined in the Child Convention and on the asylum applicant’s rights under the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, the Geneva Convention. At a home for separated minors, where these rights are the basis of reception, a series of rules and routines are established to guarantee that these rights benefit the minor. When put into practice, rights ethics thereby create a moral system, and as a consequence of this accommodation takes on a fostering aspect. Rules and routines say something not just about how we should act, but also about how we should be. The ambition of living up to the child’s rights thereby also leads to moulding him or her. We will conclude by asking some central questions about ethics and fundamental values in reception. The reception of separated minors follows a legal-ethical approach, and in material terms Sweden lives up to its commitments very well. It is our view that discussing the material reception is unproblematic as there is a language and measurability for this. When it comes to concepts such as equal worth, love and spiritual development, however, this becomes more difficult.
Separated minors – being allowed to be who you are
Summary of Separated children and young people – being a person (2010) and Separated children and young people – being allowed to be who you are (2011)

In meeting adults who arrived in Sweden as separated minors, we have had to face a number of linguistic but also profoundly existential questions. They are questions about losing one’s language, about shifted frames of reference, about acquiring new ways of speaking and of looking at the world, but also to be seen by others in new ways.

To speak is to live

Many minors describe the lack of opportunities for communicating in their own language, and how the limitation of not mastering the foreign language Swedish, causes a sense of loss and incompleteness. One is unable to produce what one wants to say in a sensible way, which leads to a crisis of representation. Added to that is the feeling of infantilisation, of only being able to act in society in a limited and childish way (cf. Costa 2008). Infantilisation also occurs in the way that people speak to those who do not understand Swedish. This leads to a terse, over-explicit language accompanied by big gestures. And even if the sender, e.g. the contact person at the group home, does not think the minor is less than normally intelligent, the recipient (the child) can perceive it that way when communication only occurs via body language, single phrases in English, and by pointing at things. Do you want a cup of tea? the group home contact person asks, pointing at a cup. But it is difficult to get any further than that. The minor can’t go into describing his or her longing to drink a certain type of tea, or comparing the cup to one they used to have at home. Neither can the minor talk about what worries him or her most.

Losing the natural

Aisha came to Sweden together with her younger brother almost a year ago, and they live together at a group home for young people with residence permits. Aisha had spent several years at a private English school in her homeland, and she describes how her parents encouraged her to study. For them it was important that Aisha got a good education, and her mother used to say: you have to have a good education in order to be able to get an interesting job. These words have become an important guiding principle in Aisha’s life.

Aisha is attending IVIK, a preparatory class for upper secondary education, and has Swedish, English and maths classes. She feels that the school in her homeland was much more challenging and describes her current school situation as boring, very boring. If I compare with my old school, I’m not learning anything here. Aisha feels stressed out by the passage of time, and she is afraid that she will be delayed one or two years in her education.

The principle behind the reception of separated minors is that all of them should be given the same opportunity of attending Swedish school, of learning the Swedish language and about Swedish society. But this might not suit everyone. Aisha has on several occasions asked her teacher if she might change to an education programme taught in English, in an IB (International Baccalaureate) class. She feels that no-one sees that she actually has the
capacity to do that. The ideas about education that she previously felt proud about suddenly lose their value.

People are born into, and become socialised into, different economic, cultural and social contexts. This entails the individual getting or acquiring different types and degrees of economic, cultural and social capital. It might be a title, property, education, profession or social network, but also ethnicity, gender, religion and class. All this capital means that the individual – just as the word capital indicates – actually has access to something valuable which can bestow power and influence. Or, instead, lead to powerlessness and alienation. The value depends on what is regarded as good and important and valuable by the surrounding society (Bourdieu 1991). In her encounter with Swedish society, all that which is natural for Aisha, everything she is capable of and knows, becomes invisible. Her symbolic capital is devalued. In what way are her individual competences and characteristics, and those of other minors, acknowledged and furthered?

To be a person

When Tareq arrived in Sweden he was under a lot of mental strain. He did not know where his family were and he was worried about them. Where were they? Were they alive? I had worked several years to help out with money. Would they manage without me? he wondered. During the first period of his stay in Sweden he lived in a transit home, but that did not work out well for him. He did not want to spend time with the other young people, and kept to himself. In the end the staff at the home suggested that he move to a family home. Tareq thought this sounded positive and saw it as a good alternative to the group home. His hopes were that he would feel better if he lived with a family, and that he would learn Swedish faster and build a bigger network in Sweden.

Tareq describes how his first meeting with the family happened. His guardian ad litem could not attend, neither was there an interpreter present. Instead someone else’s guardian ad litem came, and it was he who interpreted the conversation. During the meeting Tareq felt that he did not like the family. The family only talked about food, what kind of food I liked, if I liked beans and falafel. Tareq did not find this an interesting topic. He did not care about what kind of food he was going to get. I said: I haven’t come to Sweden to eat food. But that was never translated.

This first meeting with the family was a failure, according to Tareq, and he did not want to move in with them. The staff told him that it is difficult to arrange family homes and that if he wanted to live with a family, this was his only chance. I didn’t want to live with them! But that wasn’t translated either, Tareq says. He was angry and sad. And he becomes upset again in retelling the story. For him this was about not being given the opportunity to express his view. He felt both powerless and insulted. Tareq moved to the family home.

It was the staff at the transit home together with the municipality’s social welfare officer who determined that moving to a family home would be favourable to Tareq’s situation. Either they did not listen to his objections or else they were not translated, which is what Tareq suspects. They think we don’t understand anything. We come from a bad country, that’s why
We don’t understand anything. We just want to eat and sleep, they think. They see us as merchandise. An easy business, you can make money on us, Tareq says. He feels that he becomes reduced as a person and that he becomes an object that others can make money from.

Being allowed to be who you are

Children’s experiences are created where their personal experiences and the attitude of those around them intersect. The reception system, as described here, can perhaps seem square and with some lack of understanding. It is therefore important to point out that we highlight certain parts of the minors’ experiences and interpretations of the system. They do feel that many things are good and that they are met with both goodwill and care during their reception. And yet the dimensions they describe that have to do with language and communication are important.

Being allowed to be who you are is about living with existential questions and about minors being able to show who they are and want to be. It is further about giving them the opportunity to formulate this in interaction with their surroundings, and to get the chance to be acknowledged. The discussion about being a person is ultimately about the status and position these separated minors have in society.

To be young and live like a stranger

Summary of Separated minors in Sweden – Experiences and possibilities (in preparation during 2011)

“What does Aisha mean by the words Now my life is on hold? How do she and other minors feel about their situation and about migrating? What happens to their own identities? How is integration in the new country and into adult life affected? It is important to explore these questions in order to understand the existential aspects of migrating as a minor. That understanding in turn will give receiving countries tools for further developing the reception of minors who arrive as refugees and who migrate alone.

In this section we will focus on experiences of continuing one’s life based on what has been, and at the same time building a new one during a period of transitions between different countries and societies, and between childhood and adulthood. Over the past few years, paediatricians and others who deal with separated minors in Sweden have pointed out in increasingly alarming reports that it is often during their flights that these minors have their most traumatic and damaging experiences. These are minors who have been imprisoned or subjected to trafficking and kidnapping. The flight brings constant fear and constant exposure, with the risk of exploitation, not least sexual, of both girls and boys.

These are realities for all the people we have interviewed and write about. Their experiences are not, however, the focus of this article – instead it deals with experiences that always arise because migration is about departure, about meeting the new and experiencing alienation.
Themes that the article analyses include migrating, becoming an immigrant, not owning anything and not having the power to make decisions about your own life. It is about living with homesickness and searching for belonging.

The quote now my life is on hold can be described as a key to the way separated minors describe the situation they are in. Arriving in a new country brings big changes that they will not really have been able to anticipate. In addition to the difficult times and the traumas that most of these minors have been through as a result of their experiences of war, conflict and flight, suddenly being a “stranger” is a shock. A prominent feature of several of the accounts is precisely this feeling of being a stranger, both to one’s surroundings and to oneself. Everything is different – the language, the way of life – and even the unfamiliar physical surroundings make it difficult to orient oneself (cf. Brekke 2004; 2010).

We have chosen to explore postcolonial theoretical themes about home, belonging and power relations, super- and subordination, and we are thereby making an addition to postcolonial theory, which has occasionally been accused of being gender blind. Perhaps it has been age blind as well, and perhaps the situation for those who migrate as minors is more complex since children do not have the same power as adults, or at least have less power over their lives, than adults do. Important results include young people’s feeling of abandonment/homesickness, which are strong emotions that they bear throughout their lives. Another result has to do with the problem of how to define children. Separated young people often have experiences that are more like adults’ experiences than children’s, and they also have experiences of war and other traumas. At the same time, they are children in the midst of a transition between different countries, societies, environments, and in the process of becoming adults. A rigid and ethnocentric view of the concept of childhood and children will lead to problems in the reception of these young people. The reception system in Sweden makes high demands on them. They are given many possibilities, and freedom of choice. Still, there are also obstacles in the form of structural limitations in e.g. finances and accommodation/ideas of fostering/views on human nature. These young people are aware of their position as a minority, and that as such they are marginalised on several levels – migrant, asylum applicant, child, language – and they pointedly describe being received with stereotyped attitudes about “how the other half lives”. The results show aspects of migration that are obvious on one level, but which perhaps become overshadowed by other, clearer and more evident, problems. In order to receive these minors properly, it is important that we understand the existential aspects of migrating as a minor, e.g. homesickness, belonging, alienation and powerlessness. This understanding is the basis for developing the tools to support the minors in their development and integration, so that they can develop their potential and their goals in life.

The significance of interpreting for the rule of law and integration – a summary

Since the 1970s, Sweden has been pursuing what is termed a multicultural policy. This means, among other things, that each citizen and inhabitant, irrespective of gender, geographical domicile, socioeconomic situation, and ethnic, national, cultural, religious and/or linguistic
background, has the same rights, the same opportunities for participation, influence and equal treatment. Overall integration in society is dependent upon citizens feeling like full and equal citizens. This in turn means that citizens who have a mother tongue which is not Swedish should be given support to maintain it, but also to communicate on equal terms with authorities, health care, the judicial system, schools etc. (cf. Borevi 2002). As part of guaranteeing those people who don’t speak Swedish equal rights, a number of laws have been passed about the right to an interpreter when meeting authorities, municipal administrations and health care. Additionally, public funds pay for about 6 000 hours of interpreting every day, basic training for interpreters, training programmes at Stockholm University and authorisation of interpreters.

Besides legislation and state resources, there is an involvement among people who work with interpreting issues which has led to developments in the area. Training and quality have been improved through authorities such as TÖI and the Legal, Financial and Administrative Services Agency, knowledge about the interpreting profession has spread through the involvement of individual interpreting agencies, and interpreting has developed towards being a proper profession through the extensive work on competence and labour market issues by interpreters. The title authorised interpreter is a protected professional title, and in the future it will perhaps not be possible to call oneself an interpreter without having been trained as one.

The interpreters we have worked with during the course of the Interpreter Project have emphasised the advantages of the profession. An important one is that interpreters perceive themselves as helping others through their work and by means of their competences. On the personal level, they gain considerable insight into how society works because they are allowed in behind closed doors: they are present at deliveries, heart surgery, family counselling, cancer care, police interrogations, trials, and at all kinds of meetings. Interpreters’ collective knowledge about how the encounter between individual clients and patients happens is vast.

In this conference text we have described what the interpreting field looks like and what the possibilities are for promoting the rule of law and integration, and we have also identified problems. Below we will outline these problems, which are to be regarded as areas for development.

**Qualified interpreters**

Every day, thousands of conversations are carried out between clients/patients who do not speak Swedish and officials in various sectors. At each interpreted meeting, the interpreter user must be able to do their job correctly and the client/patient must be allowed to present his/her problems and wishes, have his/her needs seen to, and participate in the decisions that are made – all to the same extent as in single-language meetings and conversations.

An interpreted meeting can also be regarded as important for the participants’ integration process. Often the meetings are about everyday communication between people in different roles; the conversation helps in working out problems and making decisions, and at the same
time there is a possibility for mutual knowledge and understanding to develop. Based on meetings with different officials, the person who does not know Swedish draws conclusions about Swedish society, while the clients and patients convey their own view of the world and of who they are via the interpreter. This exchange is important for the integration process.

Regardless of whether interpreting is about legal certainty or integration, it is based on officials and clients/patients being able to trust each other, and the interpreter’s qualifications, completely.

The interpreter’s professional role is formulated in Good Interpreting Practice, and it is the guidelines in this document that interpreters and officials have to refer to in order to guarantee that an interpreted exchange occurs in a legally certain way. Only authorised interpreters are bound by Good Interpreting Practice, but most interpreting agencies require all interpreters who receive work to follow the same rules. These rules serve to help the interpreter to remain within his/her professional role and not to encroach upon the interpreter user’s responsibilities.

Since most interpreted meetings today take place with interpreters who are not authorised, a broadening of the control over who interprets would be welcome. In 2011 the Legal, Financial and Administrative Services Agency is compiling a register of interpreters who have completed the new basic training programme, which could be a first step towards proper supervision and a definition of those who, in the first instance, are qualified to interpret.

The possibility of building trust

There are a number of factors, in addition to those dealt with in Good Interpreting Practice, that affect legal certainty in an interpreted meeting. These include the interpreter’s knowledge of the source and target language, realia and terminology, as well as mastery of necessary skills such as interpreting technique or dealing with emotions, silence, taboos, loyalties and postures that occur due to gender, ethnicity or religious affiliations, among other things.

All in all, the various actors’ descriptions of their experiences provide information about different insecurity factors and limitations. For example, interpreters face ethical dilemmas in connection with the abuse of power, or unreasonable demands from officials or from clients/patients. Officials can sense that they become limited in their professional role because the interpreter does not have the necessary knowledge of language, terminology or realia, which may in turn be because the interpreter is not following the ethical rules or does not master interpreting technique. Clients/patients are often in the most vulnerable position, and there are many stories about situations where for various reasons they have not dared trust the interpreter as a person, or his/her competence.

These examples show that the trust which is fundamental in order for the right information to be transferred and the right decision made is often undermined by non-professional interpreting and interpreter use. The responsibility for this is shared by the interpreter and the interpreter user. Their relationship is crucial to successful interpreting. However, our analysis shows that officials and interpreters do not know enough about each other’s professional roles
and competences. Officials know how they want to arrange the room and what they want out of the meeting, but have little knowledge of other things that affect the interpreting: how interpreting service is organised, what the working conditions for interpreters are, and exactly what demands they should be making on themselves, and that they can make on the interpreter and the interpretation. Interpreters, who can end up in difficult situations or ethical dilemmas that really have to do with the interpreter user’s role and mandate, have nowhere to turn with their questions and frustrations.

We can see that arenas are needed for dialogue between interpreters and officials. Such arenas could be developed in cooperation between interpreting agencies and the public institutions that buy their services. Dialogue of that kind would not just increase mutual knowledge about and respect for the other’s professional role, but could also be a way towards developing methods for clients/patients to feel greater trust. Clients/patients cannot themselves order an interpreter, which is significant for the reception of separated minors. An interpreter is often called in so that the interpreter user will be able to give information or make enquiries, but the child’s opportunities for expressing him or herself freely are otherwise limited. This is obviously a question of resources, but also a matter of understanding the plight of not owning the language.

We therefore see it as important for officials to be trained in how to speak through an interpreter. Such training, which would ideally be included in all basic training programmes for professions that involve meeting people in day-to-day work, should teach what interpreting is, what the interpreter’s role is, and techniques for interpreter use. Training of this kind does not exist today, other than as short, voluntary elements of various basic training programmes. A compulsory module included in professional training programmes would be good not just because the doctor, social worker etc. needs to know how the interpreter “tool” works, but also because such knowledge would give them a sense of security about the interpreted meeting that they as interpreter user are responsible for.

**Interpreters’ working conditions**

The majority of interpreters work as freelancers. This is a problem because the freelance format is not always a voluntary option. On the whole there are currently no alternatives in the form of e.g. employment contracts and the security that these would provide. Most interpreters’ incomes are too low for private insurance policies, saving towards holidays etc. Due to the current procurement system, there are constant changes for interpreters that they themselves have no part in shaping. These changes concern revised fees, what type of jobs the agency has to offer, and if there are any jobs on offer at all. Many interpreters who work with several agencies and interpret minority languages rarely have a full working week. This, in combination with the mental and physical stress of constant movement, new environments and jobs with varying degrees of difficulty, means that the working situation is difficult. Some agencies offer support in the form of guidance and counselling when needed. But even the most ambitious agency comes up against difficulties since the financial room for manoeuvre is limited and the relationship with interpreters a loose one. Add to this the fact that interpreting in many ways is a lonely profession and that interpreters are constantly
competing. It has been difficult to bring interpreters together in unions. A few interpreters have been working a long time to improve conditions, but without gaining a hearing for their right to take part in influencing their working conditions. Labour market problems have led to many qualified interpreters leaving the profession.

Working conditions as they are today – in terms of fees, labour rights and competition – do not encourage interpreters to further training or authorisation. As discussed in the section on interpreter training, one might say that either the interpreter candidates are looking at a professional career where their working conditions and pay will be bad, or else they are not looking at any professional career at all.

The insecurity that surrounds interpreters’ work situation does not just affect the individual interpreted meeting; working conditions also mean that there is a constant interpreting competence drain, and that clients/patients and officials rarely or perhaps never get access to the really qualified interpreters. These issues are not just a concern for the individual interpreter and the other actors in the interpreted meeting – ultimately they are about legal certainty and also about the national economy.

It is thus very important to conduct a review of interpreters’ working conditions with the aim of ensuring that interpreters remain in the profession and see it as productive to devote time to gaining and developing competence. Such a review should include employment conditions, influence during procurement and the development of further training possibilities.

The state’s responsibility

Training and authorisation

We have previously referred to the interim report on interpreting service of the Immigrant inquiry (1972:83), in which it was established that the state had a responsibility for guaranteeing access to qualified interpreters. To this end, the possibility of authorisation was instituted along with some public funding of community interpreter training. The Interpreter Training Report (2005:37) also notes that the training of competent community interpreters is one of society’s principal instruments for ensuring that interpreting services are carried out by properly qualified interpreters.

The possibilities of interpreter training and authorisation, such as these have been financed by the state since the mid-1970s, can be described as unique for Sweden. They have served as an inspiration for countries like Norway and Australia. So while there is much that is good, there is also a need for development. First and foremost, current community interpreter training and authorisation possibilities do not cover society’s need for trained and authorised interpreters. Agencies are forced to arrange their own training programmes, but these are not supervised by TÖI and are not recognised in connection with training certificates from the basic training programme.  

---

21 TÖI’s responsibility for interpreter training, which it has had since 1986, is threatened by govt. bill 2009/10:149 in which the Government argues for the phasing out of special institutes at universities. No impact
Our description and analysis of the community interpreter training programme shows that in comparison with other interpreter training programmes, and in relation to the status of the interpreting profession, it must be regarded as a basic training course in its current form. It offers the equivalent of one term of full-time studies, and considering the large body of knowledge to be assimilated, the techniques to be practised, and the requirements above all for neutrality and impartiality of the interpreter’s role, that is not sufficient. Interpreter training has to be supplemented with further training if the goal that clients/patients and officials have access to qualified and legally certain interpreting is to be achieved.

Authorisation is an important instrument for guaranteeing good interpreting service, but the possibilities for authorisation are insufficient due to a lack of resources. Arranging authorisation requires a considerable amount of work and with the resources available today authorisation is only possible in barely a quarter of all interpreted languages. And even when authorisation is possible, there are insufficient resources to arrange authorisation exams often enough. Another difficulty is finding language experts for the exams. Developments are also necessary in terms of the relevance of what is being tested, and of how correct language should be weighted in relation to interpreting skills.

Supervision of interpreting agencies

In addition to the measures described above, the investigator in Interpreting agencies – Quality Registration Supervision (SOU 2004:15) suggested that an authority be created for supervision of the provision of interpreting services. We agree with the investigator that supervision of service provision and procurement are necessary measures for guaranteeing quality and continuity. That would be a good way for the state to ensure that interpreting agencies followed a kind of “Good Interpreting Services Provision Practice”. This is also about not using taxpayers’ money in a price war where agencies make a profit at the expense of clients’/patients’, officials’ and interpreters’ legal certainty.

Supervision of procurement of the provision of interpreting services

The way in which the Public Procurement Act (2007:1091) is applied when the provision of interpreting services is purchased is an important key to understanding how interpreting services have developed since the deregulation in 1992.

Today it is difficult for serious agencies to invest fully in quality-enhancing measures because of the competition system that has developed. Agencies have a sensitive relationship with interpreters and really no guarantee that they actually have interpreters whose services they can provide. Even agencies that invest a lot in “their” interpreters and who have loyal interpreters risk losing even them due to work shortages. This implies that agencies’ quality improvement efforts need to count for more and be better followed up in the procurement process.

Analysis has been carried out for interpreter training, which was called for by TÖI in an official letter of 16 May 2011, Reg. no. 63/2011.
The purchaser must be able to specify requirements regarding the competence and precision of the interpreters provided, the agency’s working methods, how deviation reports are handled, the accuracy of the information in the tender – and must be able to check these requirements are met. Additionally, the purchaser must be able to follow up and carry on a dialogue with the agency during the period of the contract.

Our conclusion is that purchasers have generally valued price before quality. They have not been prepared to pay for competence. In several high-visibility procurement processes this has led to the health care services, in particular, not getting access to qualified health care interpreters. SKTF, interpreters’ professional associations and agencies believe that one way of protecting the qualified interpreters would be to introduce a national rate similar to the one applied by the National Courts Administration. That way, procurement could not be done at the expense of interpreters’ fees.

A further problem is that state authorities purchase the provision of interpreting services at a national level, and that this reduces the likelihood that the winning agency will be able to provide qualified interpreters. Matching the right interpreter to the right job usually requires knowledge of both the interpreter and the interpreter user, but no agency knows all of Sweden’s interpreters and officials, while at the regional level it is possible for an agency to develop such knowledge.

Interpreting service – personal, local, global

An individual interpreted meeting can perhaps be seen as a small affair, but it deals with such foundation stones of democracy as individual participation and equality before the law, and interpreting services are an important instrument for guaranteeing these rights. In our research, interpreting service in all its component parts has been a prism through which we can describe and analyse Sweden as a receiving country in a global world, and how society regards legal certainty and integration – ideally and in practice. In ideal terms, integration has been described as a mutual process which in turn promotes diversity and a multicultural society. In practice the focus has been primarily on integrating people with a foreign background into Swedish society by giving them access to the labour market and the education system. For both of these things, knowledge of the Swedish language plays a central role (cf. Bevelander et al 2009; Olwig and Paerregaard 2007). Learning Swedish becomes the favoured goal, coming before the promotion of multilingualism and the right to express oneself in one’s own language. Our description of the implications of this has been based primarily on the reception of separated minors. Interpreters are mainly used on the authorities’ terms, when information is to be imparted or decisions made. For these minors access to an interpreter could be a tool also for understanding the people and society that surround them, as well as for expressing who they themselves are.

In analysing the view of interpreting services and the significance of interpreter use, we can see that the transformation into a multicultural society is not fully integrated as a natural basis for authorities’, municipalities’ and county councils’ activities, or within higher education (cf. Borevi 2002). Instead of seeing the interpreter as a guarantor for the fair and equal exercise of public authority, he or she becomes a problem, and the fact of not mastering the Swedish
language is turned into an individual problem. Interpreting issues are thereby reduced to being perceived as an “immigrant problem” rather than something which has to do with democracy, the rule of law and the individual’s rights. The low status of the interpreting profession, which is part and parcel of the lack of further training, supervision and quality requirements, can also be seen as undervaluing those who do not speak Swedish (cf. Taylor 1999). More radical voices within the interpreter camp, and some other actors as well, maintain that the lack of higher demands on interpreting services and of the supervision of interpreting agencies actually amount to a discrimination of individuals who do not speak Swedish.

Our view is that each area of the interpreting field has its share of the responsibility for guaranteeing legally certain interpretation by means of collaboration and dialogue, but we can also see that this is not enough. Interpreting issues, through their connection with the practice of democracy, are very much issues of political responsibility.

Our final report is published on www.tolkprojektet.se.

References


Ayotte, Wendy 2000: *Separated Children Coming to Western Europe. Why They Travel and How They Arrive.* London: Save the Children.


Brekke, Jan Paul 2004: *While We are Waiting. Uncertainty and Empowerment Amongst Asylum seekers in Sweden.* Oslo: Institutt for samfunnsforskning.

Brekke, Jan- Paul 2010: “Life on Hold. The Impact of Time on Young Asylum Seekers Waiting for a Decision”. I: *Diskurs Kindheits- und Jugendforschung* 2:159 -167

Brodin, Jerry 2010: Tolkar farliga i sjukvården. I: *Dala tidningar* 20101029.


SÖ 1982:93 *Nordisk språkkonvention*

SÖ 1996:21 *Nordisk språkkonvention om socialt bistånd och sociala tjänster*


Annex 1

Published/accepted articles
Sex artiklar publicerade/antagna för publicering (fyra i internationella fora, en nordisk och en svensk). Två artiklar är insända för forskningsgranskning till internationella tidskrifter.


IMER (Borea förlag): Artikel ” ensamkommande barn och unga – att få vara den man är”. Ingår i en antologi med arbetsnamnet Barndom och migration i nordisk.

**Articles submitted for research review:**


Tolkprojektet

Lunds universitet
Projektägare av Tolken – en kulturell mellanhand

Medborgarskolan Syd
Projektägare av Bakom Stängda dörrar – tolkningens betydelse för rättssäkerhet och integration, med särskild inriktning på ensamkommande barn och unga

Katrinebergs folkhögskola
Tolkcentralen i Göteborg
Samverkan

Tolkprojektets adress:
Institutionen för kulturvetenskaper
Avdelningen för etnologi med folklivsarkivet
Lunds universitet
Biskopsgatan 7
223 62 Lund
046-222 75 63

Administration:
Medborgarskolan Syd
Hans Michelsensgatan 6A
211 20 Malmö
Marianne Palmgren
040-936 453

E-post:
info@tolkprojektet.se eller
förnamn@tolkprojektet.se

På webben:
www.tolkprojektet.se
www.kultur.lu.se

Administrativt verktyg
Pärmen.se