



Irish Translators' and Interpreters' Association
Cumann Aistritheoirí agus Ateangairí na hÉireann

Submission by the **Irish Translators' and Interpreters' Association**
for the 25th Session of the **United Nations Periodic Review** Working
Group April/May 2016

21st September 2015

The Irish Translators' and Interpreters' Association

The Irish Translators' and Interpreters' Association (ITIA) was founded in 1986 as a not-for-profit organisation. It is the only professional association in Ireland representing the interests of practising translators and interpreters. The ITIA aims to promote the highest standards within the profession and to foster an understanding among translator and interpreter clients of the highly-skilled and exacting nature of the profession. To this end we have introduced translation tests for professional membership and a separate test for professional members who wish to specialise in the translation of legal documents.

The issue

An issue that is often overlooked is access of people with limited English proficiency (LEP) to all kinds of services in all kinds of settings in Ireland.

Anyone can work as a translator (written word) or interpreter (spoken word) in Ireland. There are some training courses for translators at undergraduate and postgraduate level. However, existing training courses cover a limited range of languages – typically French, German, Spanish and Italian.

When it comes to interpreting, there is one conference interpreting course but there are no courses at all to train interpreters to work in legal and medical settings. Not only is there no training, but in addition there is no testing system to establish if interpreters can carry out their work in a competent fashion. In effect, anyone who speaks English and another language can work as an interpreter. Some interpreters from other countries have qualifications in translation or occasionally in conference interpreting. Many interpreters would love to access training but there is nothing available. Many members of our association no longer work as interpreters because the rates of pay are very low while the level of responsibility is very high. The current official approach to interpreter provision fails to acknowledge the difficulty in interpreting competently in potentially life changing situations such as asylum and police interviews, court cases and medical appointments.

Interpreter provision at the Office of the Refugee Applications Commissioner, the Refugee Appeals Tribunal, Garda (police) stations and the courts has been outsourced to translation companies. There has been a bidding war with large reductions in hourly rates over recent years. Interpreters are expected to be available at all times but it is practically impossible for them to make a living from their work.

Government funded report

A government funded report 'Quality Cost-Effective Interpreting & Translation Services for Government Service Providers in Ireland' (2008) listed six areas that needed to be addressed:

- Policy
- Standards and regulation
- Education and training
- Service provision
- Monitoring and oversight
- Access to redress

The report recommended a national policy framework with practice guidelines where standards and regulations might apply to qualifications, service standards and the operation of the market. They suggested that there was a need for a new or existing body to assume responsibility for standards and regulations. They also recommended that a register of accredited interpreters be set up, something that would assume the existence of accredited courses. However, seven years later, none of the recommendations in the report have been put into action.

Settings

Asylum procedure: At asylum interviews, the interviewers watch out for discrepancies in the information provided by asylum seekers. When untrained interpreters are at work, there are issues around their behaviour (ethical or unethical) and the accuracy of their interpreting. At the Refugee Appeals Tribunal, interpreters report that they are frequently told that there is no need to interpret discussion between lawyers.

Garda Stations: Interpreters are generally called when suspects and witnesses have difficulty communicating in English. People are asked to sign statements written in English by a police officer. The statement is read out in another language by the interpreter. If interpreters do not have very good language skills and if they cannot provide competent interpreting, there is a danger that misunderstandings arise and that people could be accused in the wrong or witnesses' statements may contain incorrect information.

Courts: The work of court interpreters is even more complex with legal language and a more formal situation in a larger venue. There have been newspaper reports that some defendants' friends accompany them to court as interpreters. This could be because they had no interpreter at the police station or because they are unaware that the court normally provides interpreters.

Hospitals: Very few hospitals call on interpreters. Instead, people are expected to share sensitive information with family members, friends, neighbours, and strangers. This has clear implications for people seeking a diagnosis who may have difficulty explaining their symptoms and understanding instructions in English. Similar issues arise in the area of mental health.

A confidential Maternal Death Enquiry (MDE) report in 2013 showed that 40 per cent of all maternal deaths identified in the three years to 2011 occurred in women who were not born in Ireland. There were 25 maternal deaths in the period, and 10 of these deaths involved women not born in Ireland. The report drew attention to how women engage with Irish maternity services and the importance of the availability of interpreting services. However, two years later, nothing has been done about this.

Only after a child called Vakaris Martinaitis died after a fall from a first floor window in 2013 did the National Ambulance Service make arrangements for telephone interpreting for emergency calls.

Social Welfare: Again, people applying for social welfare are expected to bring someone along to interpret for them. There is no right to confidentiality; people have to explain their own difficult circumstances through others. It is possible that some applicants cannot access their entitlements because they do not have access to interpreters.

Conclusion

We believe that the fact that a person is not proficient in English should not be a reason for them to be unable to access services. Everyone should be treated in the same way. The only way to do that is to set up proper accredited courses and testing systems for interpreters. This needs to be done centrally; it is essential that there is some joined up thinking about the current lack of standards and regulation. Action needs to be taken immediately to improve the situation.

Mary Phelan, chairperson

Irish Translators' and Interpreters' Association
Irish Writers Centre
19 Parnell Square
Dublin 1
Ireland
www.translatorsassociation.ie