

# Speak Up Speak Out



**NUPIT is the Translators' and Interpreters' branch of Unite the union.**

**Our aim is to ensure high standards in our profession and fair terms and conditions for our members**

**We are against exploitation by agencies**

**Having a bad interpreter can be worse than having no interpreter.**

**Why should vulnerable people have to make do with second best?**

**An interpreting qualification is usually in addition to a degree, so why are interpreters paid less than many school-leavers can earn?**

Imagine you are on holiday in France. You are having a great time, your schoolboy French is more useful than you had hoped and you are really loving it. Then you are involved in a car accident. It wasn't your fault, but when the police arrive, your French deserts you and the other driver does most of the talking. Of course he gives a version of events that puts you squarely in the wrong and you are taken to the police station.

Once there, you are given an interpreter, who helps you give your side of the story. Your version makes sense and the police realise that it couldn't have been your fault. A happy ending after all!

The same could happen to a French tourist over here. Not all foreigners speak perfect English, the French person could need an interpreter as well.

## **That is why we have a national register of interpreters**

Registered interpreters have to be upright citizens, security vetted, without a criminal record, who are trained and ready to turn out at a moment's notice to assist people in tricky situations.

They are there for accident victims, for emergency medical situations, and also to assist in criminal investigations and trials.

## ***This is known as Public Service Interpreting.***

There are many different types of interpreting – community interpreting, conference interpreting, sign-language interpreting and others – but at the moment it is about Public Service Interpreting that we are most worried.

## **WHY ARE WE WORRIED?**

Public Service Interpreting requires specialized knowledge and a high level of skill. Registered interpreters perform a valuable public service, they are available when needed, and

having the register fulfil a requirement under European law. But public bodies such as the police are increasingly of the opinion that using the register is too costly for them. It puts too much of a strain on their administration departments and therefore they want a cheaper way of doing things.

The favourite option these days is to use an agency to find an interpreter and leave all the paperwork to them.

You may wonder what is wrong with that. The answer is that whereas National Register interpreters are guaranteed to be of proven ability and good character, there is no such guarantee when using an agency, and some agencies are none too scrupulous about whom they send.

## **THE RIGHT INTERPRETER FOR THE JOB**

Many agencies have interpreters on their books with qualifications which do not match the requirements for public service work. Some even use people with no qualifications. They may well be suitable for events such as trade fairs, sporting events, company meetings etc. but not where people's freedom or health are at stake. Yet if no interpreter with the right qualification is available, the agency will simply send one of these unqualified ones instead.

Agencies have even been known to send people to court with fake IDs to claim they are registered interpreters when they are not.

## **YOU WOULDN'T WANT AN UNQUALIFIED TEACHER OR NURSE – SO WHY MAKE PEOPLE PUT UP WITH UNQUALIFIED INTERPRETERS?**

Unfortunately, when it comes to languages, people think that a qualification is a qualification. If you are qualified to teach, you are qualified to interpret. If you have a medical degree or a law degree, you are qualified to interpret.

**Would you like to go to prison because your interpreter was not up to the job?**

**The best solicitor in the world can't help you if he can't understand what you are saying.**

**An interpreter has to know words that even a lot of English people don't know.**

**Can agency staff be trusted with top-secret information?**

**People who use agency interpreters all the time often don't realise what a difference a proper interpreter can make.**

Some unfortunately think also that if you have a villa in Spain, or are married to an Italian, or are here as an au pair from Sweden, you are qualified to interpret.

But in fact, not everyone with the ability to speak two languages has interpreting ability. Moving between two languages is a skill which has to be acquired and not everyone succeeds in doing that.

The qualifying examination for the National Register is tough – only a third of the people who sit it actually pass. It has to be this hard to make sure that those who pass have the necessary vocabulary at their fingertips to carry them through a wide variety of situations. With other forms of interpreting, you get a chance to prepare, but PSIs have to be ready at the drop of a hat to go to an assignment that could turn out to be anything from an arrest for shoplifting to a serious fraud investigation, from a lost child to a reported stabbing.

Get a few words wrong in your A-level exam or your finals, you will probably still pass. Get a few words wrong in a police interview and your client could end up in court, or in jail. Do the same in a medical consultation and your client could be treated for the wrong ailment. That is why the pass-mark for PSI exams has to be so much higher than other types of language exam.

#### **WHY LET COMMERCIAL AGENCIES TAKE OVER FROM THE NOT-FOR-PROFIT SECTOR?**

***Agencies are commercial companies run for profit!***

They have overheads and running costs which individual interpreters do not have. How can it work out cheaper to use an agency rather than by contacting a registered interpreter directly at their home? By using part of the interpreter's fee to cover the agency's costs, of course.

In fact, as agencies compete with each other to win contracts for public service work, they offer lower and lower bids and pay the interpreters less and less to compensate.

It has reached a stage which can only be de-

scribed as exploitation. Faced with hourly rates not much higher than the national minimum wage, many of the best-qualified people are giving up interpreting for jobs more in keeping with their professional status.

The agencies that win the contracts tend to be the ones with the worst terms and conditions for the interpreters and the worst record for paying late or not at all. To have a decent standard of living, you need to be sure of meeting your financial commitments. Your bank or building society is not going to wait indefinitely for your agency to cough up what it owes you.

Interpreters' pay may look generous until you realise that they often don't know how long an assignment is going to last, so they can only accept one assignment for that day. For that reason, police and court services usually pay a three-hour minimum but most agencies will only pay for the time the assignment lasts – so if a hearing lasts an hour, at agency rates your day's pay would be £12!

**Unite, the Union believes in putting people before profit, human rights before big business.**

What NUPIT wants is in keeping with the Union's aims. We want the whole of the translating and interpreting profession to reflect this. We want justice for everyone, a reasonable standard of living for our members and a high standard of service to those who need our help.

We also want public services to recognize this, and public authorities to think about what they are doing. We want the Government to keep the National Register in place, and not throw public service interpreters to the wolves.

If you believe in fairness and justice, back the Union. If you believe in high standards and fair treatment, back NUPIT.

If you want a properly regulated public interpreting service, back the National Register.

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