

A confidential agent: The life of a Registered Public Service Interpreter

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Public service interpreting, as many of those interpreters who are registered with the National Register of Public Service Interpreters (NRPSI) will attest to, is a fulfilling profession. Facilitating communication between two parties in often life-altering and emotionally charged situations carries with it great responsibility. Consequently, it is a role that instils in those who undertake it the feeling that they are doing something worthwhile, and rightly so.

However, it's probably fair to say that there is muted recognition by those outside the interpreting community for the contribution that interpreters make to the smooth-running of our public services – particularly in our justice, police, social and healthcare systems. Not to mention how they help to protect the public from injustice, medical misdiagnoses and maltreatment. You only need to refer to those cases where it has emerged that the family member brought in to interpret for a victim of abuse is in fact the perpetrator of said abuse to see the value that independent Registered Public Service Interpreters bring to proceedings.

And yet, as Ted Sangster, the Chair of NRPSI, stated in his preface to the most recent edition of the NRPSI Annual Review of Public Service Interpreting in the UK: "One of the things that has been glaringly apparent to NRPSI during the six years since the organisation was established as a separate, independent entity is that the profession of interpreter in the UK is not understood well by those who are not directly involved with it. Indeed, in some cases, the profession is misunderstood by some of those who actually are involved with it."

So why isn't public service interpreting better understood? Well, quite simply, the profession tends to be shrouded in mystery due to the confidential nature of the work involved. Indeed, Registered Public Service Interpreters essentially act as impartial and confidential agents. Whether participating in a police interview, court hearing or medical consultation in a hospital, their role is to interpret faithfully what is said from one language into another. It is also their professional duty to keep confidential the details of the discussions they are privy to for obvious legal and personal privacy reasons. So important are the principles of impartiality and confidentiality to public service interpreting that they are enshrined in its professional code of conduct. The professional practice of those interpreters who are registered is governed by this code. Exemplars of their profession, it is these interpreters who are prepared to be held accountable if they fall short of the high standards it preserves.

The difficulty is that those in the profession have become so good at keeping things strictly confidential that they are not very good at shouting about the positive contributions and triumphs they can talk about. This can lead to an information gap of sorts, which, in turn, can result in a lack of appreciation of the value that society gains from a highly motivated, professional, experienced and committed interpreting community. It can also result in the

failure of those working with the interpreting profession to realise the full potential of this relationship and the benefits this can bring to the public services.

This is something we at NRPSI would like to see changed. That's why we are continually working to ensure that those outside and within the interpreting community have a better understanding of the role of public service interpreting as a profession underpinned by ethics and best practice. We are also working to have recognised the valuable role that Registered Public Service Interpreters themselves play in our society.

One way in which we're doing this is by lifting the lid on public service interpreting and what it involves without, of course, breaking any confidences. To this end, NRPSI team members will be at the forthcoming Language Show Live in London (stand no 46) to answer any questions about the work of the National Register and how to become a Registered Interpreter. What's more, NRPSI Director Eulalia Pessoa-White will be giving a presentation entitled 'What it takes to be a public service interpreter' – aka a confidential agent.

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