

'Raising the bar of interpreting standards'

– an interview with Ana Lavinia Coaje

'Movers and Shakers' is a series of interviews with the interpreting profession's leading lights.

In November 2018, Ana Lavinia Coaje became the recipient of the 'NRPSI Award for excellence in the Diploma in Police Interpreting (DPI)'. Presented at the Chartered Institute of Linguists and Institute of Linguists Educational Trust Awards, the NRPSI Award recognises the achievement of the DPI student graduating with the highest exam score.

Here Ms Coaje talks about her route into the public service interpreting profession, the challenges that public service interpreters face today and what changes she would like to see made to safeguard language professionals and the interpreting profession she loves.

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CIOL President Richard Hardie presenting Ms Coaje with her award

How long have you been working as an interpreter?

I started working as an interpreter three years ago, after I finished a Community Interpreting Level 3 course. I worked as an interpreter part-time at first to see if it was

something I would like to do long-term and also to see if I could make a living out of it. During my first year working as an interpreter I mainly worked for the NHS. I enjoyed interpreting in the mental health sector the most.

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How did you come to work as an interpreter?

I studied Romanian and English at university in Romania. I am a certified teacher and also a certified translator in Romania. Unfortunately, though, I wasn't able to make a living at either of these professions in Romania because neither pays very well there. To make ends meet, I had to take jobs that were completely unrelated to my studies. Consequently, I ended up working in computer hardware, in the travel industry, at the cultural marketing department in a museum and for the government. In all of these jobs I had to use my English language skills. There were many instances when I had to interpret in meetings, translate contracts or correspond with foreign clients via email.

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I came to England five years ago with the aim of staying for a long visit on the way to Toronto. I intended to apply for immigration to

Canada and to wait for the papers to come through while I explored London. When I arrived in London I got a job as a nanny. The job was supposed to pay my bills and give me plenty of time to rest after working in Romania for 17 years, fill out my immigration paperwork, enjoy London and write a book. I was working three days a week and so suddenly had all of this time on my hands that I had never had before in my life.

Around this time, a friend from high school was working as an interpreter in Norway and I was really influenced by this. As a freelancer, she was working half days and could go on holiday whenever she wanted to. She was also her own boss. I was really impressed with how she could manage her own time. I had always worked in an office of some sort in Romania and I hated every minute of doing this. I realised that I wanted a similar lifestyle to my friend and so started looking into interpreting. While I loved my nanny job, I ended up doing it for three years and I am still in contact with the family today, I was itching to study and learn new things again. I did some research and realised Romanian interpreters were in demand. The Romanian community was and still is a growing community in England, and so I decided to give interpreting a try.

What is the most rewarding aspect of your job?

The most rewarding aspect is that I make a difference. I am helping out. I have travelled to countries where I couldn't understand the language and I can only imagine the anxiety that people might feel at the doctors or in court in a foreign country where they can't understand a thing that is being said. It is hard enough to learn that you have cancer or that you are charged with an offence in your own language, let alone in a

foreign language. Also, courtrooms, police stations and hospitals are not natural habitats for any human being. Just being in one of these environments can trigger anxiety, even in the most emotionally stable person. I always do my very best to ease this anxiety by making sure that, to the best of my skill and understanding, all parties involved understand what is being said.



What do you find most challenging about your work?

I find never knowing what my next interpreting assignment is going to be about challenging. For example, at the point of being booked for a court interpreting assignment you are never advised about the type of offence involved. The offence could be anything from drinking and driving to murder. As a result, interpreters are not given a chance to prepare emotionally or to revise any terminology. We are expected to be ready and know everything at all times.

Another thing that I find challenging is that we are never offered any type of emotional or psychological support. There are times when we have to interpret gruesome details

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or be in the presence of distressed individuals. We just have to deal with this on our own.

What was your motivation for studying the Diploma in Police Interpreting (DPI)?

I had been working in court without a proper qualification for two years while preparing for the DPI. I chose the DPI because my goal is to work with the Metropolitan Police at some point when they have openings for Romanian interpreters again and this qualification is required by them.

How do you think you have benefited from studying for a professional interpreting qualification?

Sadly, when it comes to court interpreting at least, it appears that not enough people care about using only qualified interpreters. That said, one thing I couldn't do when I wasn't fully qualified was to register with the National Register, which is used by law firms, some police stations and sometimes the Criminal Prosecution Service (CPS) to source interpreters. In all honesty, I am feeling the greatest difference at a personal level rather than a professional one. This is probably because I am my own harshest critic. I am always striving to improve myself, to get better at my job, no matter what my job is. I have very strong professional ethics and working without a qualification made me feel like an impostor. Now I have the proof that I am good at what I do I can build on this. From here I can find new ways to expand my knowledge and become a better interpreter.

How important do you think it is for public service interpreters to become qualified and registered?

Interpreting is not a profession protected by statutory regulation. As far as I know, NRPSI is currently the

only body working to maintain the professional standards and status of public service interpreting, but it is doing this as a voluntary regulator. I think it is vital for the survival of the profession that NRPSI achieves its aim of statutory regulation of public service interpreting, meaning that you have to become qualified and registered to be able to work as and even use the professional title of public service interpreter. It is only by doing this that we will rid our profession of unqualified interpreters. It is the only way that we can demonstrate that we are professionals on a par with doctors and lawyers, and that we can command a rate of pay that properly reflects our specialist knowledge and skillset. I, for one, encourage every interpreter to sit a Chartered Institute of Linguists (CIOL) exam and register with NRPSI. For the more qualified and registered interpreters there are, the more chances we have to challenge the trend for using unqualified interpreters, which undermines our professional status and ability to charge the fees we should be able to charge for our expertise.

The NRPSI celebrates the 25th anniversary of its founding in 2019. The public service interpreting profession and the wider world has changed a lot since it was established. What developments will provide the greatest challenges and opportunities for the profession in the next 25 years?

Many happy returns! I think the profession is at a crossroads at the moment. Things can change for the better or the worse. I genuinely hope, for the sake of this profession that I love, that things will change for the better. The main thing that needs to happen is for the profession to become protected through statutory regulation for all of

the reasons I've already mentioned. This has the potential to solve a number of issues. I would however also like to see language agencies regulated or required to offer interpreters greater protection with regards to their working conditions.

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What do you think interpreters need to do to prepare for these challenges?

I firmly believe that interpreters must sit exams, get qualifications, register with the appropriate bodies and stand together as professionals in the marketplace. We must help new interpreters by providing them with advice and encouraging them to become qualified. As I said, I believe that it is only by becoming qualified that we can continue to raise the bar with regards to our professional standards, ensuring the services we supply are valued and appropriately rewarded. ■■■