

'Recognising interpreting excellence'

– an interview with Véronique Cubilié-Ratio

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

In November 2016, **Véronique Cubilié-Ratio** became the recipient of the 'NRPSI Award for excellence in the Diploma in Police Interpreting (DPI)'. Awarded by the Institute of Linguists Educational Trust (IoLET), the NRPSI Award is presented to the highest scoring candidate of the DPI. Here Véronique talks about her interest in languages as a career, how she prepared for the DPI exam, what she sees as the greatest

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challenges facing the public service interpreting profession, and what advice she would give to anyone starting out in the profession.



HRH Prince Michael of Kent GCVO presenting Véronique with the 'NRPSI Award for excellence in the Diploma in Police Interpreting'. Photo: © Chris Christodoulou 2016

Q. Why did you choose languages as a career?

I've always loved and been passionate about foreign languages and cultures. It was my ambition to work with languages ever since I went to high school, and my mum was very supportive of this. I did

however take a roundabout route to working in the interpreting profession.

To begin with, at home in France, I chose to study Spanish and English for a degree that focused on translation, business and economics. I later added Mandarin to my studies.

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After graduating from university with a Master's Degree (MA) in Translation Studies, I had an opportunity to go to China. I spent five years there, during which time I enrolled for a Mandarin course to continue my learning. I also worked in various roles – in public relations, human resources and account management – for a Spanish trading company, liaising with Chinese suppliers and corporate clients from Spain and France.



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During the course of my studies, I spent a significant amount of time in the UK and US to improve my English language skills, and visiting family in Spain to exercise my Spanish.

After I returned from China, I chose to settle in the UK and enrolled for an MA in Chinese Studies at SOAS University of London. I was subsequently offered the opportunity to work in the finance sector. Although this work was unrelated to interpreting and translation, the experience I gained at this time has been very helpful

to the interpreting and translation work I now do for private sector organisations. However, I wanted to make use of my Mandarin language skills and, after a few years, an opportunity arose to work for the University of Oxford on a project to get its new interdisciplinary China Centre off the ground.

I didn't actually come to interpreting until a few years later, when I was expecting my second child. I started studying part-time to obtain the Diploma in Public Service Interpreting (DPSI) in local government with French during pregnancy. I got my DPSI, then started working with various small language agencies and also volunteering for, among others, Amnesty International. Since qualifying, I've worked for both private and public sector organisations as an interpreter. Public sector clients have included the National Health Service, the Department for Work and Pensions, social services and family mediation services. All these experiences led me to decide to explore a legal interpreting qualification in order to further specialise in this field, which I found fascinating, and to take the DPI exam.

Q. Which language/s do you interpret?

I interpret French into English and vice versa. This is what I'm qualified to do. I also offer translation

services from English, Spanish and Mandarin into French.

Q. How did you prepare yourself for the DPI exam?

My existing DPSI qualification meant that I'd already been able to undertake some interpreting assignments for the police, so I knew something of what was involved in working in this sector. I also sought colleagues' advice on how to get ready for the DPI exam. The fact that I'd already taken the DPSI meant that I was well prepared for the DPI, as the format of the two exams is very similar. I read a lot of articles on criminal proceedings and cases to familiarise myself with the specific terminology, and I prepared exhaustive glossaries. Taking past exam papers helped me to time myself and provided real insight into what is expected from a police interpreter.

"I think the absence of mandatory qualifications or accountability is a challenge for the profession."

Q. For those who've not taken the DPI exam, what does it involve?

The exam involves taking a series of timed exercises over the course of half a day. These include exercises in consecutive and simultaneous interpreting for the police and a suspect, an exercise in sight translation that involves reading a short piece of text in English and verbally translating this into another language (in my case French), and a written examination that involves translating three short pieces of text.

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Q. What was the hardest part of the DPI exam for you?

For me, accuracy and speed were the greatest challenges. However, my previous experience of undertaking the DPSI gave me confidence and consequently I was able to sound confident during the interpreting exercises.

Q. How has getting qualified influenced you and prepared you to work as a public service interpreter?

As a result of qualifying, I've been made more aware of how I sound, how I'm perceived, and the need to be very precise. I think qualifying is important because it means that your knowledge and skills have been validated and recognised by your peers. It is also the means by which you can become well acquainted with the system and environment within which you will need to work. This is very important.

"I think greater emphasis should be placed on qualifications and using only qualified interpreters by the public services themselves. They need to turn away from focusing purely on cost-cutting."

However, and this is an aside, while you are prepared for certain work scenarios through various work experiences and training, and you are told to seek support

when exposed to particularly stressful or distressing situations, there is no real safety net for such circumstances. The nature of our work, the fact that we work freelance, and its complexities, the fact we must maintain confidentiality, means that we are often quite alone as professionals. When you're booked for an assignment, you aren't given the full details of the case for confidentiality reasons. Having said that, it is always possible to decline or refuse to pursue an assignment if you feel that there is a conflict of interest, or if you don't feel comfortable about interpreting in certain situations.

Q. What appeals to you about working in public service interpreting?

I enjoy helping others, particularly vulnerable people. By giving people a voice, so that they aren't bogged down with communication problems, I can be of real use. Helping someone to interact, or seek legal or medical advice, can have a real impact on their life. I like to be useful and to see tangible results. I find this very rewarding. It's why I volunteer for organisations like the British Red Cross refugee unit and Medical Justice.

In order to become a fully-fledged member of a society, people need to be able to communicate properly

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and seek to understand and fit into its culture. In the course of my work, I have met many people who have come to the UK and don't speak English. Some of them have been through so much on this journey and really need a helping hand. They should be supported so that they feel confident enough to speak our language and able to take an active role in our society. They should be given a chance to express themselves through an interpreter. If they aren't able to express themselves in their own language, important information can be left out. Consequently, they might face discrimination and be treated unfairly.

Q. What do you think are the big challenges facing the public service interpreting profession?

I think the absence of mandatory qualifications or accountability is a challenge for the profession. As a professional, you face competition from other 'interpreters' who aren't on an equal footing with you because they aren't qualified. The reputation of the profession and people's respect for it are impacted by those who are unqualified. I think greater emphasis should be



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placed on qualifications and using only qualified interpreters by the public services themselves. They need to turn away from focusing purely on cost-cutting. This has led to the deterioration of interpreting services, particularly those provided to the courts. Although before my time, it seems that there was a golden age when interpreters were sourced directly from the National Register by the courts. Reportedly, this worked well. The monopoly of court interpreting services held by language agency Capita TI in recent years has driven down the standard of interpreting services provided to the courts. It has also led me to seek more work from the private sector. Hopefully, the Ministry of Justice and others responsible for the procurement of language services for the public services will realise the importance of using only qualified interpreters.

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Q. If you could change one thing about the profession, what would it be?

I think we collectively and individually need to fight for more recognition and appreciation for our profession. We need to professionalise ourselves through continuous professional

development, defend our profession and professional standards, and ensure more people know about the work we do. People often don't understand the nature of our work. It's also common for them not to know about the qualifications that interpreters need to have, or even what the difference is between interpreters and translators. The assumption seems to be that anyone can be an interpreter. That's why we sometimes see a family member acting as an interpreter. This can have an extremely detrimental impact on the interpreting profession. It is also damaging to the reputation of professional interpreters: those who uphold professional standards such as confidentiality and impartiality.

Q. What advice do you have for anyone starting out in public service interpreting?

I think that anyone who is considering a career in public service interpreting needs to understand its challenges. If you are thinking of making a living out of this, you need to do some market research, particularly regarding the demand for your own language pair. You need to know about the type of situations that you are likely to need to work in. Interpreting work tends to be irregular. I would therefore suggest that you train and work in other areas so that you can always supplement the income you make from interpreting if you need to. Where you live also has a bearing on the need for your services as an interpreter. If you are looking for a flexible way of working, however, interpreting can offer you this. This is a great benefit, particularly if you have a young family, as I do. ■