

Australian Sign Language Interpreters Association
of Australia Conference
Saturday 28th October 2000
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The word “professional” has two senses.
Best understood by their opposites.
Professional as opposed to “lay”, and professional as opposed to “amateur”.
We crave recognition as the first but only qualify for the second.

The word “professional” comes from the Latin to profess. It implies an imperative to establish one’s expertise for the benefit of the person to whom one is providing a service. It implies face to face relationship at some point, where the other face is depending on your expertise to solve some problem. A problem of some importance.

Traditionally there were three professions. Law, medicine and divinity. Matters of property, life and the soul were not only the most important, but those requiring the most learning to manage. The learning has continued for hundreds of years, and the inheritors of that accumulated wisdom, after proper training in the application of it, almost without exception at a recognised institute of tertiary education, are then cast as professionals, professing their expertise, to people who need their help, and who frankly don’t have the time, let alone the ability to learn it themselves, or even verify that the professional has a complete grasp of what they profess to know.

The word then takes on a new meaning in this day and age. Obviously, a position of power such as I have described above requires some sort of regulation, some checks and balances.

1. The institutes of learning must be recognised.
2. The professional must have graduated, and then after several years of being a clerk, a novice or an intern are then admitted to an even more tightly controlled fraternity, a professional association.
3. Legislation then says that a person may only receive a fee for service if they are members of this association.
4. If everything goes wrong and someone slips through these many layers of societal caution, and does something wrong, the matter can be brought to the attention of the relevant authorities and the person can be removed from their association, suspended temporarily from practicing their profession,

5. and even punished according to laws that specifically name their profession.

To the traditional professions we must add a few modern ones. As we now handle enormous sums of money and financial structures and public have accountability to shareholders, accountants may legitimately be in the position where their misconduct may cause severe distress to unsuspecting people in society, they are regulated and only permitted to practice after satisfying that multilayered test.

Ever since we came up with the technology to build things higher than four stories, and cheap enough for punters to live in, structural engineers and architects must naturally be added to the ranks, and accordingly they are made to pay their dues.

I am satisfied that on nearly every count I have listed here, interpreters fail the test by which we would be judged to be professionals, and by which this would be called a profession. Yet these are the steps that must be taken to secure the amount of respect and acknowledgement that the word commands.

It's hard to see where we fit in there.

- We don't have to learn what we learnt at uni. In fact, most of us didn't. And I'd argue that it is better that way.
- There is no association that we must be a member of before the state will let us practice. And even if there was, who of our clients has heard of it?
- And when people have a complaint about our work, what can they do? There are no mechanisms by which they can call us to account. Could they stop us doing what we do?

There are many other impediments to us acquiring that sort of status too.

- There are not hundreds of years of history and documented learning, in any language, interpreting.
- There aren't many famous interpreters.
- We don't enjoy the enormous architectural props that those others have with their courts, hospitals and churches.

In light of the conclusive failure of interpreters to fulfill any of these criteria I think that calling ourselves a profession at this stage is not only highly premature, it's a game. A game with words similar to the one colloquially referred to as "politically correct speech".

People are always trying to change things with words, yet the influence is always stronger in the other direction.

It is mainly a branding issue. One that deals with how others see us. These criteria by which I say the word "profession" is defined, are largely the

bureaucratic procedures we go through to acquire the cues by which other people will know what to call us and what to think of us.

Now the public don't understand what we do. And they don't respect it because they don't understand it. I think that's a serious problem and I think we have a lot of work to do before the problem is solved. But I fear that some people may have been distracted from this work, by the thought that if they simply appropriate this attractive label, (apparently without looking it up in the dictionary first), that this is something they can cross off their list.

I also think that in our effort to promote the idea that we are "professionals" we may have neglected the business of explaining what an interpreter is. It has lent a bitter edge to our work to establish our occupation as one worthy of great respect and wads of cash. Because there are already professions out there. We may envy them. They may find us amusing. We could have just promoted the idea that we are interpreters. There aren't any of them established before us. Perhaps our choice of battlefield was.....amateur.

And we have a further difficulty in that the popular perception of what we do is confused with stuff that other people do. We're a bit like little brothers and sisters wasting our whole lives proving who we're not instead of who we are.

I think that somewhere along the line we must concern ourselves with how we are known and what others think of us. But it can never be as important a problem as the question of whether we know ourselves, and what we know ourselves to be.

I'm surprised though that so many interpreters have played this game of arbitrarily naming something. Of all people interpreters should see this as a sham. More than anyone else, the division between word and underlying idea is apparent to interpreters. On an hourly basis it is our task to identify that division, and shear the word from the idea, leaving the idea intact, and represent it in the clothes of a different language. We of all people should be able to see that ideas endure while words can sprout in the cracks, wither and die, be torn up and written anew by every scoundrel that hopes to improve their lot by calling a spade, something else.

We are well equipped to ask ourselves, 'what in the way of an idea exists beneath this fancy label "profession"?'

I know there is a great deal beneath the word, and I'd like to look at it this morning. It surely can't simply be matter of liability and consumer protection or they'd regulate politicians in this way. There's something more.

To be a professional means

- To possess a unique set of skills that take considerable innate intelligence, and hard work and determination to master.
- Skills that are required to solve problems of a nature critical to basic human activities.
- To represent a body of learning far greater than can be accumulated in the lifetime of one person.
- To represent this knowledge not just to the extent of practical application, but to actually have the ability to teach and explain and justify and defend to others what you know and what you do.
- To be the place where the ethical buck stops. To be accountable.
- To be better qualified than anyone else to see where your ethical obligations lie.
- To feel personally the ethical imperative to act according to all that understanding, without reference to the expectations of others, in total isolation if needs be.

Now by these criteria, we might just be in with a chance. We might not be able to answer “yes” to all these questions yet, but the encouraging thing is that it’s all up to us. This is all work we can do ourselves. And if we achieved it all, would we care what others thought?

I was visiting a friend in Perth who was attending a N.A.A.T.I. regional meeting and she dragged me along. Got chatting to a bloke who was a sign language interpreter. Told him that I’d given a talk at the AGM of the Victorian branch of ASLIA. He says with furrowed brow “what would you know about sign language interpreting?”

Ha. I’m used to this of course. I’m an interpreter after all. Everywhere I go I meet people for whom I am to interpret who occupy a commanding position in some specialised field. And quite often you sense a certain degree of skepticism. These people are bolstered by the edifice of their own self-confidence that is firmly based on their knowledge. Took them years to collect it, and they are seemingly safe from attack, because I’ve only been there ten minutes. The scowl is because having established that, in their mind, that they inhabit an impenetrable fortress of knowledge, they are sure I won’t be able to do my job. You can’t please them. Ever met that attitude?

Well, the thing is, I can do my job. I interpret for them, and I have converted people in all walks of life, medicine, law, engineering, to people who actually admire my skills out loud. They’ll end up saying “gee how do you know so much about this? Did you study medicine, law, engineering?” etc.

This sounds like a war story of course but it’s not. I know you don’t see it that way, do you? We’re all interpreters here. It’s normal. We know how simple it is to do these things. Nothing to be proud of. It is in fact just one of those unique sets of skills that we have that make up our expertise. The short-term

acquisition of superficial specialist knowledge. Of course, they think it's amazing. Because they don't understand it.

They don't understand what we do because it is very unusual. It's one of the things that makes our skill set unusual and very useful. To explain it further I will focus on the particular problem of acquiring a workable knowledge of a specialist vocabulary.

I sometimes have people come and work for me, I spend a lot of time with them introducing them to the various ways in which we approach our work in the office and otherwise training them to be interpreters. One of the very basic talks that we have concerns this important issue of specialist terminology.

In the very first moments of a relationship, people tend to observe social conventions more strictly than they do when they know the person intimately. But as interpreters, within the first few minutes of meeting our clients, who are people perhaps under stress and who know nothing about the demands of interpreting, we have to actually smash right through one of the greatest social taboos there is. We have to start using *someone else's words*.

To explain language and why it is such a difficult thing to work with I tell this story.

A GP goes to medical school for six years I think. That qualifies them to dispense pills and patch people up and diagnose and refer. Surgeons on the other hand must study for another six years. There's a lot to learn as a surgeon. Anatomy, procedures, it takes time. But there is also something that makes surgeons different from other people, different from other doctors. A surgeon has to overcome the deep instinctive revulsion that all healthy humans have for the act of cutting someone open to see what is inside. As a matter of daily business surgeons must knowingly and willingly take sharp knives, slice through sometimes healthy skin, dig deep and find out exactly what is going on, at a very deep level. Just talking about it makes me feel queasy. It's recognised as being pretty stressful even for them. They experience heart rates of 120.

And now for the analogy.

Language is skin. It is analogous in many ways. We all have one, when we are babies, we show it off any which way but as adults we exhibit it to others only under strict control. This control is built up during childhood where we are taught through embarrassment which bits are ok and which aren't. We need to be confident about it as adults, and it is mildly threatening or annoying for someone to point out defects in it. Every one of these I think applies to both language and skin.

But most of all. People do not want to know what goes on beneath the surface of language.

I came to realise this whenever I found myself explaining my work to a client, especially when I had to explain that what they wanted wasn't possible. I felt duty bound to show precisely why in linguistic terms X should be the case, only to have their eyes glaze over. "Maybe it's me" I thought. But I think now that I'm right when I say that close examination of the internal workings of language is a deeply repellent activity to most people.

Interpreters on the other hand love it. That's where they came from. A good interpreter, in my opinion, will tell a good joke, be able to impersonate accents, will always be looking for and finding delight in the structure of language and the problems they pose. Let's be clear about this. Interpreters come across as a bunch of whingers but it's other people that annoy us. Our stock in trade delights us!

And that's what it is. Interpreters have a unique relationship with language. We look at it as the carpenter looks at wood, the chef at a vegetable. We can slice and dice without the slightest compunction. It's what we do. Now other people, regular folk, remain in the land of language voodoo.

For starters they have never learnt to understand how words can be delaminated from ideas. And a point I would like to make here is that this is a big difference between interpreters and bilingual people. They don't understand either. They don't spend hours and days and years under the stressful conditions of having to provide a service for a fee, with two other people coming up with mountains of lame ideas, which they have to work on. Pulling apart and putting back together. Bilingual people do none of that. They avoid it like all regular folk. They just have two languages, two lives, two personalities.

Regular folk therefore see language as synonymous with knowledge. They have only ever looked at their own knowledge and seen one set of words. To them that's all it is. They have not been forced, like we have, to go beyond the words and examine the structure and nature of the knowledge behind it. Oh sure, they'll say they understand what I'm talking about over dinner. But in our work, hour after hour we have wipe the words off and peer into the gloomy depths of what someone is trying to say and understand it in such a way that allows us to translate. These dinner guests don't have the muscles and blisters that this experience has given us.

They have grown up, not just having their language modified by successive waves of childhood embarrassment, but their personalities also. They come to define themselves over time, and the whole thing appears to them in one language. So they think the words *equal* it. Then as adults, with their lives, and milieu, and socioeconomic background, and education, all these things characterise their language and define the person.

And their work. Work is a major source of language. It's the source of most human experience in fact, and most spouses. Their language is how they establish themselves in that very important context.

And they all have their secret language, don't they? Doctors. Plumbers. Police. Printing engineers. Film producers. They speak to one another and use words that no one understands, and no one will pipe up and say, "what does that mean?" because it's against the rules! And everyone has agreed to the rules, haven't they? And people can use terminology special to them knowing it won't be used back at them by the uninitiated. We all treat with great respect each other's territory. We allow each other the respect that comes from mystique. The monument to many years learning and membership an exclusive secret society and being signatories to the treaty of secret wanker's business.

Except us. We don't play that game, do we? We can't! Words are what we do! We can't afford to stop at territorial markers. We see through it all!

Now is it easy or hard? On the one hand, people say "gee how do you handle all the special terminology?" Well, it's easy because, as it happens, language *isn't* knowledge, I don't have to be a doctor in order to sound like one when I'm interpreting for one. But it's hard because I'm a human subject to all those inhibitions that have been drummed into me from childhood.

In the end we can see that when it looks like they're skeptical or surprised we can do the job, they have greatly overestimated the problem of terminology, because they've mistaken it for the difficulty of mimicking the code of someone else's tribe, which is a taboo. Special terminology is not just for naming things; it is for communicating with members of your own tribe and excluding foreigners.

It is difficult to hear a word for the first time, spoken by someone you've just met, whose personality is obviously anchored to their great learning, and repeat it back to them in the next sentence. What if you get it wrong? What if you mispronounce it? Significantly you would experience the kind of mortification a child would forget in two minutes, whereas you would smart for a week. A bit like grazing your knee. The skin.....

In that respect it is hard. Well, professionals get there by doing hard things. If it was all easy, then anyone could do it.

So, the problem of specialised terminology. How do we work in areas involving complicated concepts and terminology, interpreting for people who have taken years learning how to construct the sentences that we translate in a split second?

There are three conditions you must satisfy.

1. You must already have formidable general knowledge. I was raised in a house without television, where from a young age we were quizzed on the capitals of the world over dinner and where all and any knowledge was made to sound interesting and worth pursuing.
2. You must know how to prepare. This includes knowing how to ask people for information prior to a job, in a way that doesn't threaten them and which gets you the right information. It also includes knowing how to maintain a library and use the internet etc etc.
3. Now number three. Is it the easy one or the hard one? It's the one they don't tell you about at university. You must be "over" language. "It's easy for me, because I'm an interpreter. I don't give a shit. I'll say anything. If I get it wrong, I'm not embarrassed, and I'll get it right eventually. Soon."

They couldn't do that. That's why they think it's such a big problem. That's why they think we're amazing.

(We do have moments like that where they are enlightened by what we do.)

Now this whole bit about the skin analogy and terminology. I have presented it to you for two reasons. One is that it is an example of just one of the skills an interpreter must have. There are many others.

But the second reason is that it illustrates a fact of life that will always make it difficult for us to tell the story of interpreting to people. That is the difficulty people have with examining language.

We in fact suffer from a multiple difficulty. What we do is, as the provision of a service, one of the least intelligible to our clients. In the exchange of money for goods and service in this society, by and large when it's our moolah we have some expectation that we can verify ourselves that we have received what we paid for, and if we didn't receive it, we expect satisfaction.

With interpreting it's not so easy. If they could tell we missed a word would they need us in the first place? Whilst a great deal is talked about ethics in interpreting, I haven't found one code of ethics that deals with the problem of how to confirm for your client that they got what they paid for. Now that's an ethical obligation that your local petrol station will understand. Do we just take it for granted? I think it isn't covered anywhere because our market is strongly disinclined to treat interpreting as a product in the way they would treat petrol as a product they are paying for. For all the reasons that I have outlined above.

In other settings I have spoken about the sort of methods that are available to interpreters to make themselves accountable to their clients, they are not easily imagined, especially when we get to the question of whether a translation is or isn't accurate or faithful. Leaving that whole debate aside, the question rarely gets asked because people don't want to know.

Well ethical conduct is about being good for goodness' sake, not because you might get caught being bad. In other words, "without reference to the expectations of others" it is incumbent on us to make sure our clients are able to check and be satisfied that they have received an adequate level of service. And we are faced with the compounding, confounding problem, that our clients are afraid to even discuss it in principle because it involves language.

So there we are. According to what I consider is the very basic requirements of business ethics, fair trading. We must go out of our way, to be seen, to be accountable, in the face of a deep-rooted human preference to avoid all and any discussion.

They'd better hope interpreters are honest.

In doing this, we must be prepared. To say that you represent great learning is to suggest your individual insignificance when compared to that learning. You are merely a conduit through which the expertise of many people from the past can be brought to bear on specific problems.

This is where writing becomes very important. I would imagine that for sign language interpreters there is a greater difficulty with this as for one of your pair of languages there is no ready means of accurately recording actual signing. There may be a fear that any developing narrative of the history of sign language will be weighted toward English.

But nevertheless, imagine if every job you did, you wrote notes, and you collected these notes for many years, and after that time you could see many common threads and repetitive problems which, when looked at as a whole resolved into more abstract principles, clear expression of which you could then distill, which then found places by one another in a coherent framework of ideas, familiarity with which you developed through day-to-day experience, and discussions with other interpreters, so that common words, and phrases, and extended and developed arguments, and the whole glorious story of sign language interpreting, to speak about it confidently, as an expert, as a true representative, in such a way that compels the listener to think, "hey this is more than just Meredith speaking here! There's a whole world of stuff going on through here. Wow. I can see it through her hands!"

That's what I mean when I say, "representing a body of learning greater than the individual". Fortunately, we don't have to wait hundreds of years. We have writing. Writing things makes them portable and durable. It allows ideas to multiply. A thousand people can hear you at once if it is written down. They can do so in other countries and years after you've gone. It confers a vastly magnified life on an idea by writing it down.

It also takes the ideas, which start, mind you, with your day-to-day experiences as interpreters, it takes them and starts the long process of

grinding the person off them and turning them into something impersonal and objective.

This is something else humans tend to loathe. We'd rather have flesh and blood attached to ideas so we don't have to think about them, and we can just decide whether we like the person or not. Look at Pauline Hanson. But ideas must be washed out of their human provenance, to test them. And the good ones must absolutely go on to become things in their own right. Why is this important for the development of a profession?

Because in that power structure I described earlier, when a person looks at a professional, and pays their professional fees, they want the full force of history in return. They do not want to think, "hang on, this bloke's just doing what he wants to do. I don't want to see him. I want to see his profession." They don't want their problem solved in a way governed by the proclivities of an individual. The individual might be having a good day or a bad day. This is too important to leave to humans. They want someone representing and coordinating that knowledge on their behalf. Someone who can rise above their personal situation and facilitate an interaction between the client and everything the profession stands for.

For this reason, the knowledge you represent can't have your name on it. In general, it can't have anyone's name on it. My doctor is full of statements which are just the way it is in medicine. (It's very impressive!) It has to be impersonal and objective information. And that's not easy to create. It must start with people and go through a very long and tiresome process before it gets there, before you get ideas that will stand on their own two feet, anonymously.

This is not easy for interpreters because they are generally forthright personalities who are largely sustained by their ability to make themselves known in a social setting. They usually like their ideas and want to be known as the author. You know, that's fun. But you have to keep going.

To keep going you must write. And of course that involves spilling out language onto paper. "Ooh! Might not be perfect! someone might see it! they might steal my soul!" And so on. The whole language drama.

It might be hard to see here and now the relationship between keeping a diary, and the ultimate day when each accredited interpreter is respected as a professional. But I think I can explain it.

If you experience an interesting problem on an assignment, something to do with dialogue management for example where deaf person makes statement and then two other English speakers speak over the top of one another, or where the deaf person is supposed to be present at the meeting i.e. hear everything said but people are talking of the top of others.

(Let's say as a result of my suggesting it here today), you sit down and try to write about this problem. You find that it's difficult, you can't quite explain what went wrong, can't actually put it into words, maybe you can't say exactly what should have happened.

Let me ask you this. If you can't, who the hell will?

That's not being the last place the buck stops! We are the language experts. Everyone else present is a doctor or a lawyer or a patient or a punter. They're not getting paid to solve the language problems, WE are.

I believe I've established that your work is critical to basic human activities, that it is one of the most invisible services from the point of view of the client, that they are not inclined to go looking for problems anyway, that despite this you have an ethical obligation to go out of your way to ensure quality, and that you should have at your fingertips, researched and cogent explanations of everything that can go wrong and right in interpreting or you are simply not a representative of that knowledge.

You must be able to do all of these things, on behalf of your clients, whether they are aware of it or not.

Test yourself. Everyone can debrief verbally, it's called bitching. But writing it down will reveal whether or not you actually command this information.

Whether it is at your fingertips.

To sum up

- Overcoming the instinctive problem of language.
- Developing a written professional identity.
- Promoting that among your colleagues and to your clientele.
- To know and feel your ethical obligations to be calls-to-action without reference to anything but yourself.
- To know better than anyone what these obligations are, in the face of their disinterest, their ignorance and their resistance.
- To happily and enthusiastically keep feeding the hand that bites us.

These are some of the challenges for professionals.

But even more significantly, they are the challenges for us.
