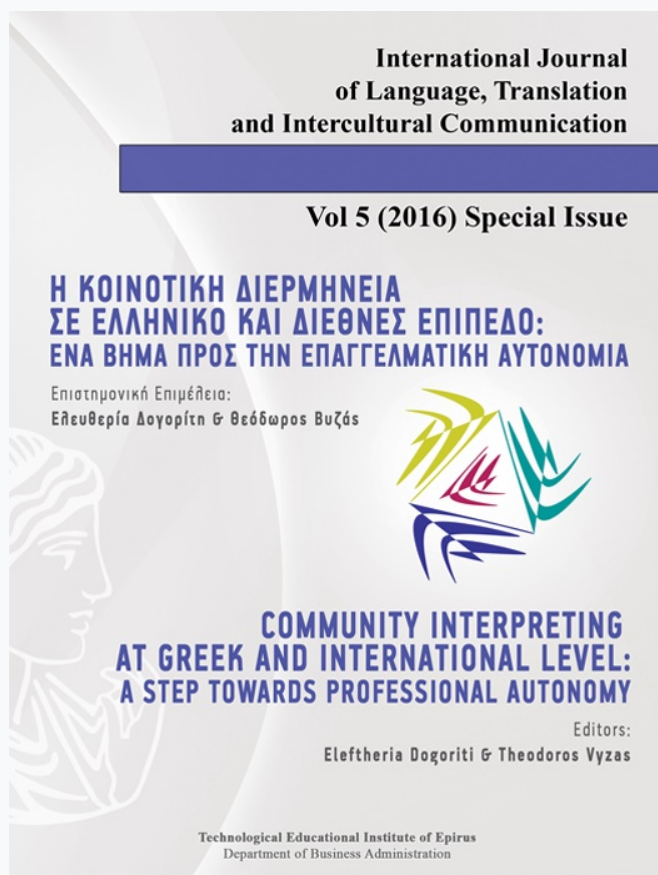


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Community Interpreting at Greek and International Level: A Step Towards Professional Autonomy



Professionalization and trust in public sector interpreting.

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Professionalization and trust in public sector interpreting.

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Abstract

This article approaches interpreting in the public sector or “community” from the vantage point of the sociology of professions. The aim is to examine the interpreter function in light of the process of professionalization and concepts such as professional trust and the exercise of discretion. How well does the interpreter function fulfill the criteria of being a profession? What is holding the process of professionalization back? In exploring these issues, I observe the interpreter function through the prism of a model of professionalization outlined by a group of Scandinavian sociologists (Molander & Terum, 2008; Grimen 2008ab; Grimen & Molander, 2008). The model divides professionalization into performative and organizational aspects. What is the professional status of the interpreter in the public sector in terms of these aspects? The empirical data originate from chat discussions where students with different working languages (WL) who are going through a blended course (30 ECTS) on interpreting, discuss issues of professionalization. The analysis shows that the interpreter function fulfills the criteria of the performative aspect, while the organizational aspect is less developed.

Keywords: public sector interpreting, professionalization, the exercise of discretion, professional trust

1. Interpreting in the public sector or community

What is often referred to as “community interpreting” in English, refers to interpreting as practiced in the *public sector setting*. These interpreters, thus, work within *institutional discourses*, i.e. encounters where “one person who represents an institution encounters another person, seeking its services” (Agar, 1985: 147). Interpreting in this setting enables practitioners of other professions, such as medicine and law, to inform, guide and hear the parties in spite of language barriers (Skaaden, 2003: 74). Evidently, in institutional discourse problems are associated with the control of interpreting quality due to the confidential nature of the encounters (Gentile, 1997: 113). At the same time, few countries offer training for interpreters in the language pairs where interpreting is needed in the public sector (Ozolins, 2000: 22, 2010: 7; Giambruno, 2014: 149ff, 189). As a result, the interpreter function is often taken on by unskilled practitioners both within legal and medical settings, as illustrated in empirical research (see Barsky, 1994; Morris, 2008, and Meyer, 2001; Merlini, 2009, reflecting the situation in legal and medical settings, respectively). In fact, Hale (2007: 44) notices a number of studies where those who perform the interpreter function “are for the most part completely untrained in interpreting”. Since the interpreter in the public sector setting serves professionals within law and medicine in their institutional discourse, the current situation concerns not only on the professional status of the interpreter, but also has bearing on the professional integrity of the established professions (Felberg & Skaaden, 2012: 108). With this in mind, let us next examine the professional nature and status of the interpreter in the public sector setting. How well does the interpreter function fulfill the criteria of being a profession? What is the professional status of the interpreter function in the public sector with regard to performative and organizational aspects?

2. The process of professionalization

The American sociologist Talcott Parsons, who in many respects fathered the sociology of the professions, states that professions are:

Occupational groups that perform certain rather specialized functions for others ('laymen') in the society on the basis of high-level and specialized competence, with the attendant fiduciary responsibility (Parsons, 1978: 40).

Parsons' interest was in the development of professions in general as established for the classic professions of medicine, law and theology. Of particular interest to Parsons were the professions of medicine and law. Since these are professions that the interpreter often encounters in the public sector setting, we note Parsons' emphasis that "the institutionalization of medicine as a profession, like that of law, was a process beset with serious difficulties" (Parsons 1968: 540). Parsons (ibid.: 536) who recognizes that professionalization is a *process*, furthermore, emphasizes the importance of *organized training*, for a societal function to develop into a profession.

Since Parsons' time, numerous professions have seen the day of light and the sociology of professions has grown into a branch of science in its own right. Elaborations on Parsons' definition above divide the phenomenon of profession into a *performative* aspect and an *organizational* aspect (Molander & Terum, 2008: 18-20). First, we shall examine the interpreter in light of the *performative aspect*, before we return to the organizational aspect in terms of *training*, below.

The *performative aspect* of a profession is described by Molander & Terum (2008: 20) as "what 'practice' means in the sense of professional activity"¹. They list several criteria that an activity must fulfil to be labelled a profession. In essence, the professional *offers a service, for clients* who depend upon the professional's specialized skills *to solve a «how to»-problem*, by applying his *specialized skills in unique situations* that are difficult to standardize. Hence, the professional *exercises discretion* (ibid.: 19-20). How well does the interpreter's task or function coincide with sociology's requirements for professional performance?

2.1 The performative aspect and the interpreter

When we juxtapose the activity of the interpreter with the characteristics of the performative aspect just described, we see that the interpreter fulfills the performative criteria of "'practice' in the sense of professional activity" with good margin, as displayed in Table 1. Accordingly, the interpreter (1) *offers a service* by rendering and coordinating someone else's talk in another language (2) *for clients*, i.e., speaker and listener alike (3) who both *depend on the interpreter's specialized skills* to solve their *problem of how to communicate verbally* (4) by *applying his/her specialized interpreting skills in unique situations* that are difficult to standardize. Hence, (5) the interpreter *exercises discretion* (Skaaden, 2013a: 219). The criteria in table 1, accordingly, elaborate on Parsons' delineation of a profession above.

Table1: The performative aspect of a 'profession' vs the interpreter

	The professional	The interpreter
1	offers a service	offers a service by rendering and coordinating someone else's speech in another language

¹ Author's translation from Norwegian: «hva 'praksis' i betydningen profesjonell virksomhet betyr» (ibid. p. 20).

2	for clients who depend upon the professional's specialized skills	for clients , i.e., the speaker <i>and</i> listener, who both depend on the interpreter's specialized skills
3	to solve a « how to »- problem	to solve their problem of how to communicate (<i>verbally</i>)
4	by applying his specialized skills in unique situations that are difficult to standardize	by applying her/his specialized interpreting skills in unique situations that are difficult to standardize
5	Hence, the professional exercises discretion	Hence, the interpreter exercises discretion

In the following, we shall take a closer look at the second and fifth criteria. Before returning to these criteria, it is worth noticing that Molander & Terum (2008: 19-20) list three additional, but partly interrelated and overlapping, criteria with those already described. First, professional activity is “change oriented” in the sense that the activity should promote change, e.g., from sick to healthy, from non-functioning to functioning etc., Molander & Terum (ibid.: 19) argue. The activity of interpreting fulfills the criterion of *change* through the transition from “non-communicating” to “communicating (verbally)”. Secondly, the professional “*applies a systematized amount of knowledge onto unique cases*” (op cit. 19)². Since the systematization of knowledge is a process, I would argue the criterion cannot be absolute (Skaaden 2013a: 218), and below we shall relate this factor to the organizational aspect. Finally, Molander & Terum (ibid.: 20) argue that professional activity is carried out according to a “norm” and is, thus, “fallible”. The final factor elaborates on the *exercise of discretion*. Let us therefore consider what *the exercise of discretion* in professional activity means, before we turn to the nature of the interpreter’s exercise of discretion.

Professionals, who apply their skills in practice, constantly make judgements and decisions on the spot in situations that are each unique. All professionals therefore *exercise discretion* in one form or another, Grimen & Molander (2008: 179) state. Discretionary powers come into play because the norms of action do not cover every detail. In terms of *applied knowledge*, the exercise of discretion is “an evaluating enterprise under the conditions of vagueness,” Grimen & Molander (2008: 182) explain. Consequently, they continue, all professional activity is *fallible* and therefore characterized by a certain degree of *indeterminacy*.

Interpreting is clearly a *fallible activity*. But what might the exercise of discretion look like in the case of the interpreter? An example from a Norwegian courtroom, illustrates the nature of the interpreter’s *exercise of discretion*. The incident in example 1 bears witness to the narrow, and yet complex, domain within which the interpreter must exercise discretion. The “norm” in the case of interpreting, is designated not only by the code of ethics and its principle of accuracy, but also by the conventions of the interpreter’s working languages instantiated in a given context:

Example 1: The interpreter’s exercise of discretion

² Author’s translation from Norwegian: “*anvender en systematisert kunnskapsmengde på enkelttilfeller.*” (loc cit.)

1. Prosecutor: hadde du et kallenavn? -- *hadde du et kallenavn?* (did you have a nick name? -- *did you have a nick name?*)
2. Interpreter: jeste li Vi imali kakav nadimak? (did[-Polite] you[-Polite] have[-Polite] some kind of nick name?)
3. Witness: Dada
4. Interpreter (to the court): Ja, ja (Yeah, yeah)
5. Interpreter (to the witness): Dada?
6. Witness (confirming): mhm
7. Interpreter (to the court): Dada. Tolkenes feil, *Dada* (Dada. Interpreter's mistake. *Dada*) (Skaaden 2013: 152).

The linguistic unit that illuminates the interpreter's exercise of discretion here is the witness' nickname, *Dada*. In the source language, Bosnian, Croatian or Serbian, this linguistic unit coincides phonetically with a very frequent SL unit, where [da:da], also means "yes, yes", or *yeah, yeah* as in "naturally". In the actual instantiation, the more frequent unit also happens to be a logical answer to the prosecutor's question: "did you have a nick name?" The interpreter's first reaction to the witness' response in line 3, the translation "ja, ja", meaning *yeah, yeah/naturally* in the target language Norwegian, is therefore a plausible choice and not a "mistake". The interpreter's quick response and repair here, rather, illustrates this interpreter's resourcefulness (Skaaden, 2013a: 152). In essence, as example 1 illustrates, the outcome of the interpreter's exercise of discretion rests at the multifaceted interface between the interpreter's *cognition*, the *conventions* of his working languages and the specific *context* (Skaaden, 2013a: 214).

2.1.1 The interpreter's exercise of discretion and trust

The exercise of discretion is closely associated with the phenomenon of *trust*, as was pointed out already in Parsons' delineation of the concept 'profession'. We seek the services of a professional, because we trust that the professional will make better judgements in solving our how-to-problem than would a layperson, who by definition lacks the virtues that the professional possesses through his specialized skills. Grimen (2008a: 199, 207) who differentiates between *personal* and *professional trust*, states that while the former type of trust is emotionally founded, professional trust is impersonal and based on knowledge that is attested through license and mandate (ibid. 197ff). *Professional trust* thus relates to the organizational aspect of the professions through society's measures for assigning "license and mandate" to individuals who conduct a specific task according to certain standards. Like the exercise of discretion, *trust* is an abstract phenomenon that is rather difficult to delineate, Grimen (ibid.: 197) admits. In his approach to the phenomenon, he chooses a definition from political science, stating that:

trust involves a judgement, however tacit or habitual, to accept vulnerability to the potential ill will of others by granting them discretionary power over some good (Warren, 1999: 311).

Grimen, accordingly, takes on a transactional perspective to the concept, and states that "trust implies that the giver of trust [i.e., the person who trusts another person] leaves something in someone else's keeping in good faith" (Grimen, 2008a: 198). Moreover, he explains, the giver of trust "always transfers *de facto* discretionary powers over this something to the other [i.e. the trustee]" (ibid.) with the implicit expectation that the trustee will *take appropriately care of it*.

The "something" that the speaker (as "giver of trust") leaves in good faith to the interpreter's discretionary power, are her/his own utterances. An exchange between four interpreting students in a chat room highlights the issue of trust and its link to the interpreter's

position between the *two* clients, the speaker and listener. As indicated by the facilitator's question on how signals of distrust may "drain the interpreter's energy", the agenda of the exchange is the interpreter's own health and the danger of burnout³. The students' response point to two other aspects of trust, however. Firstly, the exchange sheds light on the fact that many professionals in need of an interpreter tend to associate the interpreter with the speaker of the minority language. The tendency comes to the fore for instance when a professional party refers to the interpreter and the minority speaker jointly with the plural form of the pronoun *you* ("dere") in Norwegian (line 2). Secondly, the comment in line 6 alludes to the fact that non-professionals are often trusted to serve as interpreters in institutional discourse.

Example 2: Interpreting and distrust

1. Facilitator 18:24> When a party shows distrust towards the interpreter, e.g. because of ethnic differences. How may this drain the interpreter's energy? Examples?
2. mStudent1-18:25> one thing that I have noticed i.e. that some look upon the interpreter as a representative for the client. Even they use the word "dere" [i.e. "you-plural"; the two of you]
3. fStudent2 -18:26> right, I have experienced that plenty of times. In particular at the Official Driving Test (ODT)
4. fStudent3 -18:27> what happened at the ODT?
5. fStudent2 -18:28> that the sensor was very skeptical, and seemed suspicious. It is something that is very annoying, and you cannot avoid thinking about it.
6. mStudent 4 -18:30> I have heard that some interpreters have misused their position at the ODT (Skaaden & Wattne, 2009: 83).

The student's comment in line 6 points to cases referred in the Norwegian media where the person performing the interpreter function sat the Driver's Test on behalf of the candidate. On the one hand, the exchange in example 2, accordingly, relates to the role of training in the process of professionalization. At the same time, the students' responses draw attention to the link between *trust* and the principle of *impartiality*, which is a central principle in interpreters' professional ethics, but debated in the literature (Hale, 2007: 41-42). Before we return to the organizational aspect and the role of training, let us therefore first take a closer look at the interpreters' clients.

2.1.2 The interpreter's clients

The aspect of the interpreter always having *two* clients – speaker *and* listener – who equally depend upon the interpreter's skills to solve their how-to problem, is unique to the interpreter profession. A core meaning of the word *client* is "dependent", and by definition "clients are dependent in the sense that they seek assistance from the professional in order to handle issues that to them are important" (Molander & Terum, 2008: 19)⁴. From the perspective of the interpreter the 'clients' on both sides of the table, accordingly represent Parsons' aforementioned *laymen* (Skaaden, 2013a: 219). In institutional discourse, one may object, one of the interpreter's "clients" is himself a professional. This is of course correct. In the public sector setting one of the interpreter's clients is normally a highly ranked professional, often a

³ The chats are carried out in the students' common working language, Norwegian, but for the sake of brevity, only the author's English translations are rendered here. In the chat-log excerpts, students from several working languages discuss issues of professionalization as part of a university level training course on interpreting (Skaaden & Wattne, 2009, Skaaden, 2013b, *in press*). In the excerpts, each posting signifies the student's gender (m/f), the order of appearance in the quoted excerpt, and the time of posting.

⁴ *Klienter er avhengig i den forstand at de søker bistand fra fagpersonen for å kunne håndtere forhold som for dem er betydningsfulle* (Molander and Terum, 2008: 19) (Author's translation into English).

practitioner of medicine or law. However, as far as the services offered by the interpreter go, even legal professionals (as just witnessed in excerpts 1 and 2) are *laymen*, in that they depend on the specialized skills of the interpreter to make themselves understood. Accordingly, when confronted with a language barrier, professionals of law and medicine alike are themselves, in the role of speaker/listener, dependent on the interpreter's specialized skills and exercise of discretion in rendering the institutional discourse.

Situations such as the Driver's Test in example 2, highlight the fact that both speaker and listener, or professional and client, equally rely on the interpreter's exercise of discretion in institutional discourse. Yet, the students' discussion reveals an attitude among their clients that the interpreter is the minority speaking party's "helper". The attitude is widespread among professionals in charge of institutional discourse (Felberg & Skaaden, 2012: 100). The tendency is interesting, when we take into account the importance of *verbal communication* between the professionals and their clients, as stressed within medicine and law alike (Skaaden, 2013a: 28, 192). The professional party's obligation to *inform, guide and hear* their clients is stated both in the professions' codes of conduct and in legal documents regulating their professional activities. For the legal professions, *Equality of Arms* is a central principle, asserting the right of every party to present their case on an equal footing (see e.g., Giambruno, 2014: 9, on *Directive 2010/64/EU* and *Directive/29/EU*). For the profession of medicine, "the conversation between doctor and patient is *the heart of the practice of medicine*," as Woloshin et al. (1995: 724) put it. In fact, the practice of medicine has a legal side as well. As substantiated in Norway in the *Patients' Rights Act*, this involves both the rights and obligations of both parties involved in institutional discourse (Felberg & Skaaden, 2012: 99).

Given the importance of the interpreter function to the established professions and their own professional integrity when viewed from this angle, it is quite a conundrum that the "interpreters" called upon in institutional discourse have no professional training. We keep this observation in mind, as we next view the interpreter function in light of the organizational aspect.

3. The interpreter and the organizational aspect

Briefly stated, the organizational aspect of professionalization is about society's measures for establishing license and mandate for persons trusted to perform a certain societal task, and thus, secure society with high quality services (Molander & Terum, 2008: 22). Organized training is a basic prerequisite on the path to ensuring high quality services for a given task or function (Parsons, 1968: 536). The importance of training also receives focus in contemporary studies of the professions, which emphasize that *training* not only builds the students' *knowledge and skills* as future practitioners, but also brings *professional identity and status*, and ultimately *monopoly to perform a certain task* (Smeby, 2008: 88). Moreover, the sociology of professions emphasizes the interplay between practice, research and training as a major factor in the process of professionalization (Grimen, 2008b: 76-77).

3.1 Training as path to professionalization

Despite the fact that interpreting has been practiced since the beginning of civilization, the organizational aspect of the profession is in its infancy. In fact, the organizational aspect of the interpreter profession is stepmotherly cared for in most countries (Ozolins, 2000: 22;

2010: 7, Giambruno, 2014: 149). This state of affairs represents a paradox since the interpreter in the public sector daily serves the established professions. In the domain of research, studies where “worst practice” rather than “best practice” sets the standard mirror in this situation. An excerpt from Meyer (2001: 93) illustrates this type of activity where a daughter is “interpreting” between her mother, the patient, and a surgeon, preparing the patient for operation:

Example 3: Doctor-patient dialogue via a non-professional interpreter

1. Doctor: Das ist die Leber. (1.2) Das ist die – (*That is the liver. – That is–*)
2. Patient: hm, hm
3. Doctor: Gallenblase. (1.3) (the gall bladder) Da sitzen die Steine drin, (.) nech? (.) Und (.) das is (.) ein Speicher für die Galle und de/ (...) die Galle wird (.) über den Gallengang (...) in den Darm abgegeben (xxx) (*The stones are in there, (.) right? (.) And (.) it is (.) a reservoir for the bile and th/ (...) the bile (.) is via the bile duct (...) passed into the Intestine (xxx)*)
4. „Interpreter“: Also vai pra ... Äh (.) aqui é o coisu, ja? Tu dizes que é o veneno dos coelhos. Vai, e depois vai para os (*So it moves... er (.) here is the thingy, right? What you call the rabbit's poison. It moves, and then it moves to -*)
5. Patient: Bom (*ok*) (from Meyer, 2001: 93).

The fact that this type medical practice takes place is important to document, and the information that medical professionals are “happy to make do” with this type of “interpreting” (Meyer et al. 2003: 75) is interesting given the obligation of the professional party to inform and hear *their* clients. Meyer’s study is not exceptional. As already mentioned, studies of interpreted institutional dialogues mediated by unskilled practitioners are numerous, both within medicine and law. The real problem, I will maintain, arises when this type of exchange receives the label “an archetype of community interpreting” (Meyer, 2001: 113).

The study of the unskilled interpreter relates to the lack of training options for the interpreter. On the one hand, it is fair to say that the development of the profession hinges on challenges associated with establishing proper measures for license and mandate through training. On the other hand, this situation places particular responsibility on the researcher. Due to the interrelationship between practice, research and training – where the latter two eventually, feed back into practice, it is important to prevent that “worst practice” is accepted as norm. Many students of interpreting today are already practicing in the public sector. This opens up for direct interplay between practice and training. Accordingly, we shall next look into a group of students’ discussions on professional status and trust.

3.2 Interpreter students on professional status and trust

Norway has offered web-based university level courses on interpreting since 2003 (cf. footnote 3 above). The students we meet in the next excerpts, like those we met in excerpt 2 above, all take part in real time chat discussions on professionalization, professional ethics and interpreting practice as part of the course. Students with different working languages participate in each online exchange. The chat exchanges take place in between on-campus gatherings where the students meet for interpreting exercises. Each exchange has a preset agenda, such as the “interpreter’s own health” or “professionalization” as is the case in the excerpts presented here.

Since the interpreter constantly serves two clients, speaker and listener alike, the interpreter’s allegiance is always double (Skaaden, 2013a: 25-28). In the literature, a recurrent topic, often discussed under the label “role”, therefore concerns the extension of the interpreter’s area of responsibility, or in our terms – *the domain over which the interpreter*

exercises discretion. The topic, which relates to the principle of impartiality, is also debated in our students' chats. In their discussion, which takes place in the first semester, the students relate the danger of burnout to the interpreter's impartiality. The facilitator's reference to a curriculum text on elements in the work situation that may lead to burnout, initiates the exchange:

Example 4: On professional status and own health

1. Facilitator 19:39> "The fuzzy boundaries of your responsibilities" is included in the literature as one element [that may lead to burnout]. How does this [element] apply to the interpreter?
2. fStudent1 19:40> All users [of the interpreter's services] do not understand in the same way what an interpreter can do and cannot do and therefore the boundaries of the interpreter's area of responsibility appear unclear
3. fStudent2 19:41:12> if someone is uncertain about what [type of] tasks an interpreter should actually take on
4. fStudent2 19:41> ito [i.e. in terms of] "extra" tasks that suddenly pop up during an assignment
5. fStudent3 19:42> Fuzzy boundaries would be if s/he [the interpreter] is given tasks which are outside the interpreter's boundaries [of responsibility], and carries them out without clearly signalling that this is not the interpreter's responsibility
6. fStudent4 19:44 > Vague boundaries may also mean being unclear about your own skills and abilities as an interpreter
7. fStudent5 19:44> and it may also be that users ask the interpreter to breach her/his own professional ethics, like client confidentiality? (That a user asks the interpreter about how his case is coming along, like in the video we watched at our [on-campus] gathering?).

Interestingly, as a first response the students (lines 2-5 and 7) point to the fact that their clients' have a diffuse picture of the interpreter's area of responsibility and its boundaries. As a result, their clients ("the users") meet the practicing interpreter with expectations that go beyond his specialized skills. Importantly, the student in line 6 draws attention to the fact that inadequate awareness about your own abilities and limitations (i.e., lack of training) also implies unhealthy vagueness for the practitioner. Accordingly, the lack of education for interpreters, along with their clients' lack of knowledge about the interpreter function, harms the practice of interpreting. The exchange in the next excerpt takes place towards the end of the course. Here, eight students of another set of working languages discuss the process of professionalization explicitly, and we learn what remedies the students recommend for the process to succeed:

Example 5: On the interpreter function's process of professionalization

1. Moderator 20:54> What is necessary in order to enhance the interpreter profession's status in the public sector?
2. fStudent1 20:54> That we all behave as professionals
3. fStudent2 20:54> inform about the interpreter's role to everybody that we have assignments for
4. mStudent3 20:54> Official Stamp on your a...
5. fStudent4 20:54> that we act like a group, not only as individuals. And that everyone represents the same, behave as professionals, and are proud of their work
6. mStudent5 20:55> agree with fStudent2, explain every time the interpreter's role
7. fStudent6 20:55> Not to interpret for your own family members
8. fStudent7 20:55> an interpreter education that is obligatory for everyone who wants to work as an interpreter in the public service sector
9. fStudent8 20:56> users of interpreting services harm the interpreter profession when they use non-competent interpreters
10. fStudent1 20:56> mandatory use of the best in the Interpreter Portal [the public online register of available interpreters and their qualifications]
11. mStudent3 20:57> We were once incompetent...don't forget that we were once cubs...

Here the students stress the importance of the organizational aspect for the process of professionalization. Accordingly, they point to the need for “license and mandate” through measures such as certification (line 4), education (line 8), and a register of accredited practitioners (line 10). Moreover, the students call attention to the responsibility of the professionals in charge of institutional discourses to acknowledge the professional status of the interpreter by hiring trained interpreters (lines 9 and 10). Most importantly, the exchange signals an emerging professional identity (lines 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 11). The professional “we” that surfaces through the exchanges, bear witness to the socializing effect of education on the process of professionalization as accentuated by Scandinavian sociologists (Smeby, 2008: 88).

Conclusion

The analysis shows that the interpreter function fulfills the performative aspect of being a profession with good margin. However, the underdeveloped organizational aspect holds the process of professionalization back. The above excerpts illuminate the fact that the interpreter is equally important for the clients on both side of the table. In fact, the interpreter’s exercise of discretion is of particular importance for the professional party, who has an obligation to communicate with his or her clients – both according to institutional standards and own professional integrity. At the same time, empirical research indicates that professionals of both medicine and law allot trust to “interpreters” who lack training and necessary skills to manage the interpreter’s task. Future research should therefore continue to explore not only the question: “What do the interpreter’s discretionary powers embrace?” We must also address the question: “How does the interpreter affect the discretionary powers of the established professions in charge of the institutional discourse?” The answers have impact not only on the development of the interpreter profession. They will also have impact on the professional integrity of the professions that the interpreter serves in institutional discourse.

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