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Citation for published version:
Dong, J & Napier, J 2016, Towards the construction of organisational professionalism in public service interpreting. in P Henry-Tierney & D Karunanayake (eds), *CTIS Occasional Papers.* vol. 7, Centre for Translation & Intercultural Studies, University of Manchester, pp. 22-42.
<http://hummedia.manchester.ac.uk/schools/salc/centres/ctis/publications/occasional-papers/Dong-and-Napier.pdf>

Link:
Link to publication record in Heriot-Watt Research Portal

Document Version:
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Published In:
CTIS Occasional Papers

Towards the Construction of Organisational Professionalism in Public Service Interpreting

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Abstract

As an exploratory step into a larger qualitative investigation of the changing role of agencies intersecting the professionalisation of public service interpreting, the case study undertaken in this paper aims to explore the interpreters' expectation of agencies and how that contrasts with the viewpoints from organisational leadership. Fieldwork was conducted within an interpreting agency in the UK. Preliminary findings revealed that interpreters have relatively high expectations of their work organisation in the provision of screening, training, monitoring and other support. Managers, on the other hand, are keen on constructing *organisational professionalism* to inform practice. This implies that agencies might have gone far beyond the traditional role of information broker to become a crucial institutional gatekeeper and the centre of the occupational community. Unethically managed, it may exacerbate the fragmentation of the employment structure through encroaching professional autonomy, thus increasing the precariousness of the work relationship. Among other things, this paper highlights the lacuna in theorisations of commercial organisations in the professional project framework and the need for a more inclusive approach to understanding the factors that affect an occupation to professionalise, one that gives more weight to the social context and the key actors in shaping the change.

Key words: public service interpreting, interpreting agencies, professionalisation, organisational professionalism

Introduction

Public service interpreting (PSI) has been undergoing professionalisation in the UK for over two decades. Compared to traditional disciplines such as law and medicine that are built on hundreds of years of development, PSI is still a nascent profession. Before 1994, there were no formalised arrangements for interpreting services provided by public sector bodies (Townsley 2007). The UK is not alone in the situation where PSI (or "community

interpreting" [1] as it is known in the US, Australia and other countries) has a severe lack of regulation and organisation. It is a historical problem across the world where "consciousness of the role of the interpreter is limited and of little interest either to the minority group or to institutions" (Gentile et al. 1996:10). The PSI industry has perennially been under pressure from multiple institutions as a result of its freelance-based structure (Harrington 2001), low prestige (Pöchhacker 2003), cheap labour (Mikkelson 1996), contract-driven work (Ozolins 2007), market disorder (Witter-Merithew and Johnson 2004) and ad-hoc provision (Hale 2007).

Worse still, the recent public procurement policy in the UK has inhibited the rising status of the interpreting profession. Over the past five years, the legal interpreting field has suffered a drastic "deprofessionalisation" since the Ministry of Justice contracted out court interpreting services to a single commercial agency, *ALS* (now known as *CAPITA*), since January 2010 (PIJ 2013). Campaigners debated that the "single provider approach" has introduced "monopoly" companies that "undercut professional standards" and forced many interpreters to "consider alternative careers due to the cuts in rates for assignments" (NUPIT 2012). This foregrounds the role of interpreting agencies intersecting the professionalisation of PSI, a concern that has only been explicitly raised by a handful of scholars (such as Harrington 2001; Ozolins 2007; Fowler 2013). Despite the mounting tension between self-employed interpreters and some giant corporations, scant research has been conducted to explore how professional work is managed by agencies in daily practice, nor is sufficient empirical evidence available to measure the organisational impact on the work experience of interpreters.

This article begins to address this gap in research by examining public service interpreters' (PSIs') understanding of and expectations from agencies. To identify the perspective of agencies on professional work issues, attention has also been directed to how managers interpret the role of agencies and respond to the needs of freelancers. Given its exploratory nature, this study serves as the initial step towards a major investigation into the institutional function of commercial agencies intersecting with the forging of the profession of PSI. Thus, we ask the following research questions:

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[1] No distinction is made between "community interpreting" and "PSI" for the purpose of this paper.

1) How do interpreters and managers perceive the role of agencies in organising professional work?

2) How do such perceptions (re)shape professionalism in the organisational context?

More specifically, we present the results of an embedded case study (Yin 2003) of an interpreting service provider that combines a commercial agenda and the social objective of raising the professional standards of PSI. Through the qualitative analysis of questionnaire results and observations of workplace interaction within *Insight,*[2] two alternatives on the role of agencies and the shaping of professionalism are compared and contrasted from the perspective of interpreters and that of managers respectively. As the extant research related to professional issues has primarily drawn upon sociological studies, the following section reviews this body of work and identifies the unresolved issues in studies of PSI. It is our intention to point out that the dominant framework is no longer adequate to address PSI professionalisation in the UK due to its neglect of business organisations and the changing institutional climate. We then discuss how the findings contribute to advancing knowledge in Interpreting Studies. We conclude by mapping out the implications of this exploratory, embedded case study for further research in the field.

A Sociological Analysis of PSI Professionalisation

Inspired by the influential "trait model" with respect to a sociology of the professions (Macdonald 1995), earlier claims of interpreting scholars tended towards a generic analysis of professional issues and special attributes that distinguished PSI from neighbouring activities such as translating and interpreting at conferences, in businesses or in other settings. For example, contributors to the first Critical Link conference devoted a whole volume to presenting a global picture of the initial professionalisation of community interpreting (Carr et al. 1997). In the volume, issues of standards, evaluation methods, accreditation procedures and training were measured against the constituent elements of an established profession. Efforts have been made to subdivide the field by accentuating the untransferability of codes of practice from conference interpreting as a relatively mature profession to PSI as an emergent profession (e.g. Angelelli 2006; Hale 2007). To illustrate its distinct yet shared developmental trajectory, Ozolins (2000) mapped out four stages of professionalisation of

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[2] *Insight* is a pseudonym used to replace the real name of the agency involved, in order to protect the identities of the participants.

PSI provision across the world, namely non-comprehensiveness, ad hoc services, generic language and comprehensiveness.

The alternative sociological orientation, or "power paradigm" (Johnson 1972) that centres on occupational control, has also provided a theoretical lens for Interpreting Studies. Tseng (1992, cited in Mikkelson 1996) is among one of the few pioneers to study the professionalisation process of conference interpreting, considering the organised autonomy used by professional interpreters in preventing supervision and interference (Freidson 1970) and the "professional project" (Macdonald 1995) that interpreters undertake to claim exclusive ownership of expertise with the ultimate goal to close off the occupational jurisdiction (Abbott 1988). His work was later reinforced by Mikkelson (1996) to highlight the vicious circle in PSI where:

> Practitioners receive little recognition and low pay, and therefore have no incentive to obtain specialized training; consequently, training programs are rare and not well-funded; the low prestige and limited earning potential makes community interpreting unattractive as a career option for talented, well-educated individuals with bilingual skills (Para 3.3).

Despite the fact that his sample targeted conference interpreters alone, Tseng's theory is instrumental in defining key actors and stages in the professionalisation of PSI (see Pollitt 1997). However, the current state practice of public procurement and the emergence of interpreting agencies in the market may render Tseng's framework defective due to the lack of consideration of the role of agencies in his route map. As a result, it fails to explain the impact of a privatisation scheme and how that empowers commercial firms to potentially redefine the norms of professional practice. In fact, issues related to agencies remain particularly controversial. Ozolins (2007) identified agencies' uneasy relationship with interpreters: there exist conflicting expectations between interpreters who are concerned with standards of workplace practice and professionalism and agencies' priorities in business practice. A thought-provoking prediction from Ozolins (2007) was that the growing prominence of agencies may lead to a greater demand in introducing codes of industry practice, and ultimately accrediting agencies. In the sign language interpreting field, issues concerning the duty of agencies to maintain qualified interpreters have been raised (Harrington 2001). This includes making available a grievance procedure for interpreters to report inappropriate assignments, providing supportive training and establishing fair salaries and working conditions. In order to comprehensively understand the role of agencies in

relation to the broader institutional context of professionalism, an alternative perspective needs to be explored from an organisational theory standpoint.

Revisiting professionalism in a socio-organisational context

The lack of reference to interpreting agencies in the study of the PSI profession is problematic. Prevailing models of professionalisation (such as Burrage et al. 1990) have tended to neglect the role of organisations as characteristic vectors in such professionalisation processes. There is a strong call in organisational studies to look beyond the sociological professionalism characterised by a "peculiar type of occupational control" (Johnson 1972:45) based on independent discretion and lengthy development of occupational identities. Instead, it is asserted that attention should be given to "revisit[ing] theories of professionalism, which did not fully anticipate the shift of professional work to the context of large organizations" (Suddaby et al. 2007:25) and recognise the rise of organisation as a central locus for staging professional projects and redefining occupational boundaries (Muzio and Kirkpatrick 2011).

Following this "organizational turn" in the study of professions, scholarly work dealing with professional service firms (PSFs) (Greenwood et al. 1990; Maister, 1993) has accordingly extended from long-established professions to semi-professions that have fought to claim autonomy and status while testing organisational forms and developing practices. This extension covers commercial industries as well as public service providers such as paramedics and social work agencies (see a detailed taxonomy by Von Nordenflycht 2010). A shared feature of all PSFs is their employees' potential ability to (re)construct professionalism infused with organisational logics and managerial strategies. For example, Kipping and Kirkpatrick (2013) document how managerial strategies of consulting firms disrupted the policies of professional associations by manoeuvring organisational resources and status, leading to a progressive "hollowing out" of traditional professionalism underpinned by community values.

Located within the context of PSFs, increasing attempts have been made by organisational theorists to enrich the sociological understanding of professionalism. Built on their observations of globalising law firms in the legal practice field, Faulconbridge and Muzio (2008:20) argue that the **organizational professionalism** is formed through the professional project mobilised and secured by the "support of appropriate organizational systems,

structures and procedures" and ultimately in the interests of professionals. Evetts (2013) further distinguishes **organisational professionalism** from **occupational professionalism** based on the source of control. The former relies on externalised forms of regulation and is characterised by the standardisation of work procedures to achieve a managerial outcome. In contrast, the latter prioritises internal control deriving from professional peers and incorporates collegial authority. **Expert professionalism** (Brint 1994) perhaps better captures the dynamism in emerging, yet less-regulated, groups. In this context, emphasis is given to the "relatively less restrained consumer markets and corporate power" (124). A case in point is management consultants as "marketized experts" (Furusten 2013). This group digresses from the traditional pathway of professionalisation to the building of **commercialised professionalism**. Noordegraaf (2007) uses the term **situated professionalism** to embody his understanding of similar contexts. He elucidates the inevitable intersection of occupational control and organisational logics in the knowledge societies. Whilst it is challenging to retain strict professional autonomy, organisational considerations of costs, budgets and clients do not necessarily restrict professional development. The role of managers and professionals are no longer clear-cut but rather overlapping. As Freidson (2001) argues, professionalism is a **third logic** of the contemporary division of labour apart from the market and the organisation.

Considering the recent development of PSFs and the evolving interpretation of professionalism in alternative professions, brings us to our case in relation to interpreting agencies and the organisation of interpreting work. It remains uncertain as to what extent such a concept, with its emphasis on the intersection of occupational and organisational principles, will be relevant and applicable to explain the status-quo of the PSI sector. Furthermore, while prior research successfully establishes that professionalisation comes in all shapes and sizes, little work has been initiated in those settings where professional development is nascent and the resulting professionalisation is still taking shape alongside practice. PSI, with its distinctive flexible work structure and freelance workforce, might therefore contribute to this school of theory by providing evidence of a more fragmented, volatile and hybridised type of professionalisation.

Case and Methods

The field study analysed in this paper was conducted at *Insight*[3], a nascent British business which has approximately 200 freelance interpreters and provides specialised PSI services locally. This organisation was chosen for mainly three reasons. First, we followed a case study design that is widely applied in organisational studies and useful in "understand[ing] how the organizational and environmental context is having an impact on or influencing social processes" (Hartley 2004: 325). The process of organising interpreting work and the perception of management may only be fully comprehensible in the setting of multiple forces operating within the organisation, whether these are professional, managerial or institutional. Second, "purposeful sampling" (Patton 2002: 230), as opposed to random selection, was chosen because an information-rich case was deemed necessary to provide an in-depth understanding rather than making empirical generalisations. In this study, *Insight* represents an "extreme" and "revelatory" case (Yin 2003) in the sense that *Insight* is a social enterprise run by senior interpreters, thus indicating a potentially distinct form of leadership and hybrid organising logics. Finally, the prominence of *Insight* is exemplified by being appointed in a procurement contract as the sole training provider for court interpreters across the region. Such a characteristic is significant to our quest for tracing the agencies' impact on PSI practice and the way professionalism is redefined in the sectoral context.

To negotiate an entry to the research site, we reassured the director of complete confidentiality in everything we access and went through an ethical clearance procedure with the university. The consent forms specifying the research purpose and anonymity consideration were signed by key informants before we embarked on the fieldwork. The investigator (Dong) was introduced to the informants as an interpreter and a PhD student with an interest in PSI professional issues. Reciprocally, Dong agreed to assist the training officer with some paperwork in the office as *Insight* was developing a training program at the time of her participant observation.

A mixed-method approach was adopted with an emphasis on multiple **data** triangulation rather than **methodological** triangulation. The former, according to Denzin (1978), involves the use of a variety of data sources in a study to generate comparative analysis. Equally recognised by Napier and Hale (2013), the collection of more than one source of data in the field proved to be effective as a way of triangulation in a number of interpreting studies.

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3 In addition to the pseudonym, the business location has been deliberately omitted.

Under the qualitative paradigm, we therefore drew on the multiple strategies of questionnaire, observation and informal interviews as they allow us to compare and contrast, within one research site (*Insight*), both "naturally-occurring" data and "researcher-provoked data" (Silverman 2006: 201) deriving from the perceptual discourses of managers and interpreters. Specifically, we commenced our study with a questionnaire because of its usefulness in eliciting self-perceptions and seeking factual, behavioural and attitudinal information (Napier and Hale 2013). An opportunistic sampling strategy was used following Patton's (2002) suggestion that fieldwork is often filled with unexpected opportunities that cannot be planned well in advance compared to other experimental designs. A questionnaire was given to 25 interpreters when they participated in the induction session led by the general manager at *Insight*. Observational research was conducted for the rest of the week mainly with the management team dealing with recruitment and bookings. Field notes were taken as incidents, conversations, and behavioural patterns occurred, and additionally a research journal was written to record the researcher's own reflections.

The questionnaire consists of four sets of questions, namely, biographical data *(age, gender, education background, years of service and working languages),* expectation of agencies, self-understanding of the role and induction feedback. Eighty per cent[4] of the items in the questionnaire are closed questions that can be answered by choosing responses from multiple options, checking a range of statements (15, 20) or prioritising a list (9, 18) of criteria. To ensure each item is relevant to the research aim, each aim was plotted against the research questions to ensure that the content of the questionnaire only asked essential relevant questions (see Table 1). This part of the data was analysed using Microsoft Excel. With respect to the observational data, this study generated 20 handwritten pages with an average of 150 words per page. Analysis had already begun while in the field. The notebook was organised into three columns to record time, notes, and immediate comments respectively and were later thematically coded. The findings are presented in the next section.

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[4] All percentages are rounded to two significant figures.

Research objectives	Question categories	Questionnaire item
The functions of agencies in organising interpreting service	frequency/quality of training opportunities	7 18
To compare and contrast with the perception of managers	Self-understanding of ethics/practice	10 11 12 13 14 15 17 19.1
Interpreters' understanding of the role of agencies	interpreters' expectations of the agency	9 16 18 20

Table 1: Matching questionnaire items with research objectives (Adapted from Napier and Hale 2013)

Findings and discussion

Results are reported based on interpreters' and managers' perceptions generated through a mixed-methods approach. Two levels of perception are compared or contrasted wherever available and relevant.
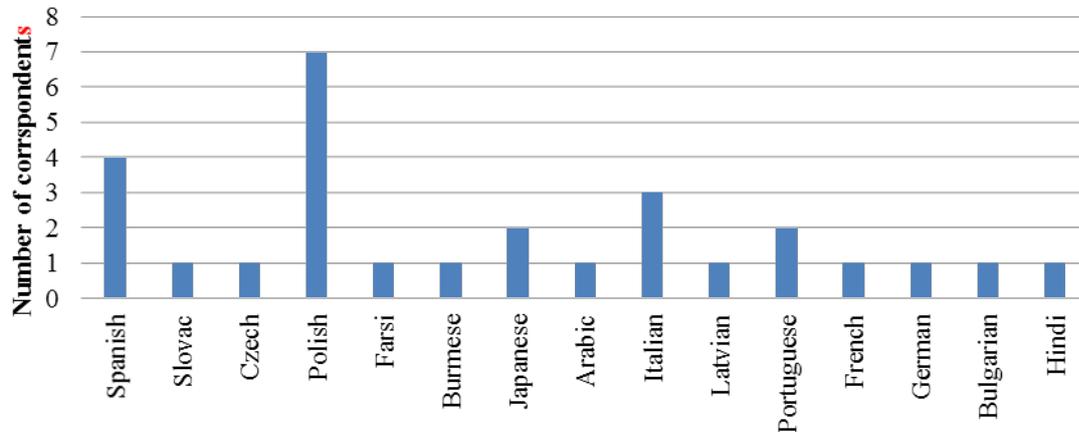
Biographical Data

Figure 1: Working Language

The sample consists of 5 men and 20 women (a total of 25 freelance interpreters). The age of the interpreters ranges from 24 to 49 with an average age of 32. Speakers with a total of 15 languages[5] are involved, with Polish and Spanish occurring most frequently (see Figure 1).

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[5] Language combinations are spread out across different training sessions at the discretion of *Insight* on the basis of administrative and logistic considerations.

Table 2 presents the results of the "I am__" query which we termed "self-identification", with an aim to examine how respondents categorised themselves according to their own evaluation of their occupational status.

1. Self-identification	Percentage
Public service interpreters	80%
experienced interpreters	28%
qualified interpreters	24%
ad-hoc interpreters	20%
court interpreters	8%
students majoring in translation and interpreting	8%

Table 2: Interpreters' self-identification

Whilst the majority of respondents identified themselves as PSIs (80%), less than a quarter consider themselves either qualified or experienced. Although this question did not specify the exact criteria, it can still be postulated that the interpreters' level of competence is in question and the concept of being 'qualified' is fairly ambiguous and contingent, subject to individual interpretations. For some, holding the Diploma of Public Service Interpreting (DPSI) qualification means "qualified"; for others, DPSI is merely "the minimum standard that interpreters should meet" (Perez and Wilson 2006:169). It reveals a conceivably high proportion of PSIs being relatively **new** to the field and perhaps not possessing any qualification. This alludes to the transition period from stage one to stage two in Tseng's (1992) professionalisation model where the workforce is over populated with unqualified, untrained and lay practitioners. Because of the market disorder, true professionals in this phase are particularly in a precarious position; they are typically threatened by endogenous price-cutting competition. Although there is a strong awareness of their occupational title and work (80%), participants still seem to be struggling with uncertainty caused by the lack of a well-defined industrial benchmark and the reduced autonomy to demarcate their professional jurisdictions.

Noticeably, despite few of them claiming to be "qualified" or "experienced", all respondents have passed the testing and interview procedures set by *Insight*. This indicates a potential disparity between professional standards and industrial practice driven by the actual market demand for interpreting services. In other words, practitioners without professional qualifications might still be able to work as interpreters if they are deemed capable by the organisational criteria. Therefore, it can be inferred that whichever agencies hold the service

contract possess considerable de facto power in guarding the access point to the PSI profession. As Alena, the general manager at *Insight*, pointed out:

> The fundamental problem in this industry is that anyone who happens to be bilingual can be sent. No one actually checks their qualifications. I know other companies only go through their CV, and if someone looks like Asian they will send him to do the job right away. That's why we must check and test to see if they are qualified.

The fact that DPSI is not available to all languages contributes to the current chaotic situation, which has been used as "an excuse to avoid screening" [training officer]. As a result, the necessity of verifying the qualification at the organisational level was foregrounded by Alena on a number of occasions. To this end, *Insight* is even "trying to develop an equivalent testing for certain languages to ensure interpreters that work for us are qualified" [Alena]. This signifies certain agencies' attempts to regulate the chaotic market that lacks a minimum threshold for entry and reliable professional control (Witter-Merithew and Johnson 2004). Once a procurement contract has been confirmed, the establishment of an internal testing system may enable agencies to undertake broader institutional work that does not conventionally fall within their business remit.

Expectations of the Agencies

Question 9 (Table 3) reveals how interpreters perceive the role of agencies in shortlisting job applicants. Respondents almost unanimously agree (above 80%) that agencies should first of all have entry requirements in place, and expect agencies to take into account a certain set of criteria when recruiting newcomers:

9. Entry requirements for job applicants	Percentage
Thorough understanding of interpreters' role	96%
Conscientious attitude	96%
Knowledge of code of conduct	92%
Knowledge of specialised terminology and jargon	92%
Pass the interpreting assessments set by the agency	88%
Personal values in line with corporate values	84%
Relevant qualifications	80%
Formal or informal experiences	80%

Table 3: Entry requirements for job applicants

Notably, among all the listed criteria, certain items that do not typically appear either in professionally recognised norms or codes of practice received unexpectedly high attention in

Table 3, with 96% of agreement on "having conscientious attitude" as the top quality for new entrants. Choices such as "personal values in line with corporate values" and "passing the organisational assessment" are supported by 84% and 88 % of respondents respectively. Why would these descriptors make a difference at all? One explanation can be found in Dean and Pollard's (2011) work on the distinction between the deontological and teleological role of interpreters. They argue that it is values rather than roles that the interpreting profession should protect with great enthusiasm. Likewise, we found that work values and attitudinal elements become key criteria to measure professional work performance other than subject knowledge alone. We add to this point by arguing that interpreters are endorsing, and thus contributing to, the emergence of a new "value-based" work guidance shaped by the hybridisation of managerialism and traditional professionalism. As they are increasingly exposed to corporate values and work responsibilities, their professional identities may begin to be framed around logics of efficiency and the market.

The field notes indicate that managers of *Insight* tried to emphasise the importance of "person-organisation-fit" by framing corporate criteria and personal traits in job interviews. For example, a recruitment officer spoke to a candidate as follows:

> I'm sorry I seem to give you a hard time. We are looking for people who are trainable, and we want to make sure you have various things that we are looking for. If you are very closed-minded about what you are supposed to do, then you are not trainable.

Here an open-minded and flexible character is considered a pre-requisite to become a member of *Insight,* since managers have a very clear purpose in looking for certain qualities beyond technical expertise. This reveals that access to the profession has been entirely guarded by the agency itself. Interpreters have to be fit for the organisation first before being able to demonstrate their expertise. This is somehow inconsistent with the sociological accounts of status of knowledge as the "core generating trait" (Abbott 1988) for a professional.

Regarding the attitudinal descriptors, the managers' perspective is also not far removed from the majority of respondents: "Unfortunately this country hasn't taken interpreting so seriously; specialized area should only let specialized interpreters go…The attitude is half of

the battle. If you know you are not good enough, you will work harder."[6] Both parties have a shared discourse on the importance of attitudes towards professional practice. Whilst it might occur by coincidence, it is at least safe to conclude that interpreters' professional integrity is reinforced by managerial expectation and influenced by the organisational ethos. This can be verified by the clues in Question 14. With regards to the qualities that interpreters believe to be most important, all nine listed categories (see Figure 2) received generally positive feedback, though some of the concepts overlap.

Notably, "responsibility" ranks second, only next to "language proficiency", among all the important qualities. This is in line again with *Insight*'s long-held belief that interpreters must be "reliable and responsible" [Alena], which can be even more important than linguistic competence in some cases.

Question 16 (Table 4) concerns the duties that interpreters expect the agency to undertake. It essentially asks what agencies should do in the opinion of the interpreters, which provides alternative evidence to locate the traces of "organisational professionalism" that is being constructed in interpreting practice.
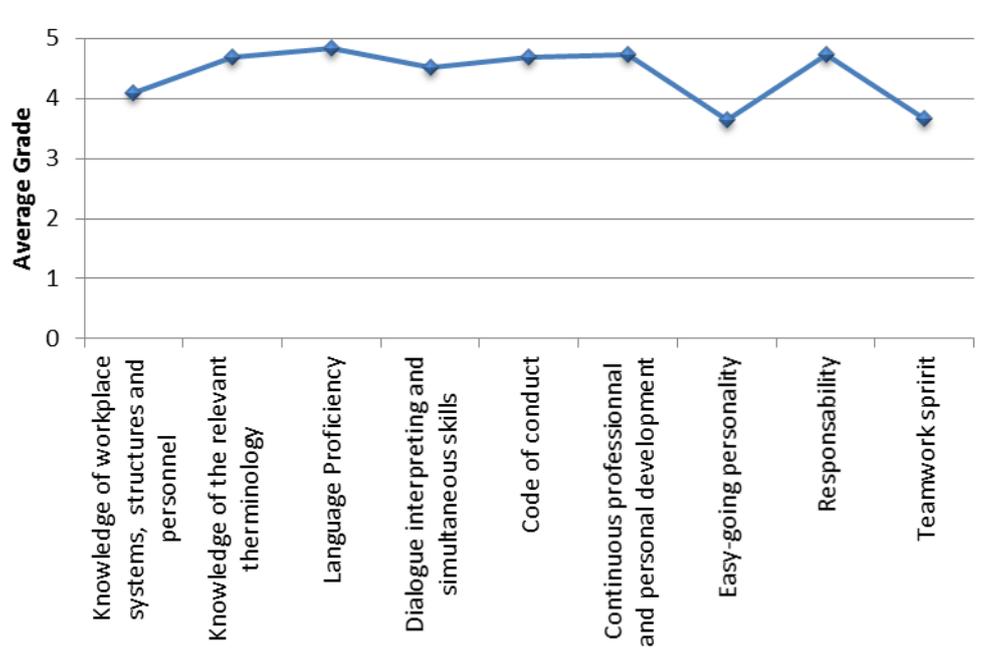

Figure 2: Important qualities of interpreters (Likert scale: 1-negative; 5-positive)

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[6] This quote is excerpted from the speech of the Executive Director of *Insight*, who was addressing a group of sessional interpreters during the induction event on the topic of the status quo of PSI professionalisation in the UK.

16. The agency has the duty (duties) to	Percentage
Make sure interpreter is informed of all appointment details	88%
Offer emotional and psychological support if needed	82%
Organise different types of CPD training for interpreters	81%
Provide sufficient job details without request from interpreters	81%
Remind interpreters to submit invoices/job sheets	72%
Readily give feedback to interpreters after each appointment	66%

Table 4: The agency's duties

The majority of interpreters (82%) believe that agencies must offer emotional support if needed, and a similar high percentage (81%) believe that it is the agency's responsibility to provide continuous professional development (CPD) opportunities. Such high expectations imply that the current status of agencies goes far beyond its traditional role as a booking broker and is shifting to the model of PSFs. As agencies increasingly improve their human resource management functions, they are also becoming more engaged with interpreters and more concerned with forming their distinct way of organising professional work. For interpreters, they seem to be acting as a counsellor, trainer and evaluator, which matters significantly in their day-to-day work.

At *Insight,* leaders' intention of leveraging an organisational template to manage professional practice is manifested through the recruitment strategies discussed above as well as other practices. For example, they are developing a membership subscription system to facilitate the CPD for their "own" interpreters. As Alena explained:

> I don't want to charge because it is a resource that we want to make available… if you charge, you can potentially open up to other people. If not it can be reserved for our own interpreters exclusively. And that would be part of the benefits for working for *Insight*.

The built-in modules might indeed lend support to internal interpreters' further development, but the agenda is also to facilitate the building of a collective identity by authorising exclusive access to organisational resources. By 'trademarking' the package and privatising the 'benefits', interpreters outside *Insight* are automatically excluded from tapping into these resources. In so doing, the managerial team not only raises the distinctiveness of *Insight* as a service provider that allows their members to gradually develop their organisational selves, but also establishes a mechanism to regulate the professional practice by monitoring those who do not closely follow the modules online.

The perceived functions also indicate a growing interdependence between interpreters and agencies. Question 18 (Table 5) was about the most important factors that enable interpreters to register with a particular agency, and 'good reputation for providing quality service' ranked at the top over all other conditions such as 'pay rate' and 'working conditions'.

18. Three most important criteria for interpreters to register with a particular agency	Percentage
Good reputation for providing quality service	80%
Pay rate	64%
Working conditions	60%
CPD opportunities	32%
Nature of the agency	24%
Scale and volume of business	24%
Strict entry requirement and assessment	12%
Corporate values	4%

Table 5: The most important criteria for interpreters to register with a particular agency

The emphasis placed on the reputation of the agency can be explained by the fact that the majority of participants have concerns over the impact of corporate reputation and managerial strategy upon interpreting practice. This has been a recent trend in other public service professions that increasingly find themselves the target of censure on their legitimacy from Thatcherism and managerialism (Noordegraaf 2007). Again it illustrates the rising status of agencies in the flexible work relationship with PSIs who can be easily reduced to a less costly and weakly organised profession. As such, the latter no longer seem to be "free agents" whose motivation is often "rooted in a professional ideology of work" (Kunda et al. 2002: 247) and in the disdain for organisational politics but have to on the contrary stake their professional career on the standing of the former.

Question 20 (see Figure 3) further consolidates the prior findings in that as many as 44% of interpreters believe PSF is the most appropriate way to describe interpreting agencies. 28% of respondents would like to consider agencies as an "interpreting activity coordinator" while 24% vote for "representative of interpreters" as the third best description. In contrast, the most inappropriate title in the eyes of the participants goes to "the boss of interpreters" as it was selected by the highest percentage (28%) for this particular query. Treating agencies as

the "third client" is surprisingly not an accepted convention at all, similar to "booking agency" as an unwelcome option.

As a particular type of professional organisation characterised by flexible work and knowledge-intensive assignments (Alvesson 2004), PSF has the least, if any, hierarchical structure and bureaucratic administration and is most often led by professionals themselves. This is very similar to the structure of *Insight,* which is founded and operated by senior interpreters who know the ropes of both interpreting and management. In terms of knowledge, Løwendahl (2000) argues that the resources that PSFs possess can enable workers to build up a client database, observe industrial standards and compete with peers. Our case testifies to this line of theory because *Insight* is not only gradually taking over clients from individual freelancers to become a new institutional gatekeeper of a repertoire of technical resources, but also has the expectation from interpreters to diversify its primary function of booking into screening, socialising and training new talent as well as supporting, monitoring and supervising front-line services.
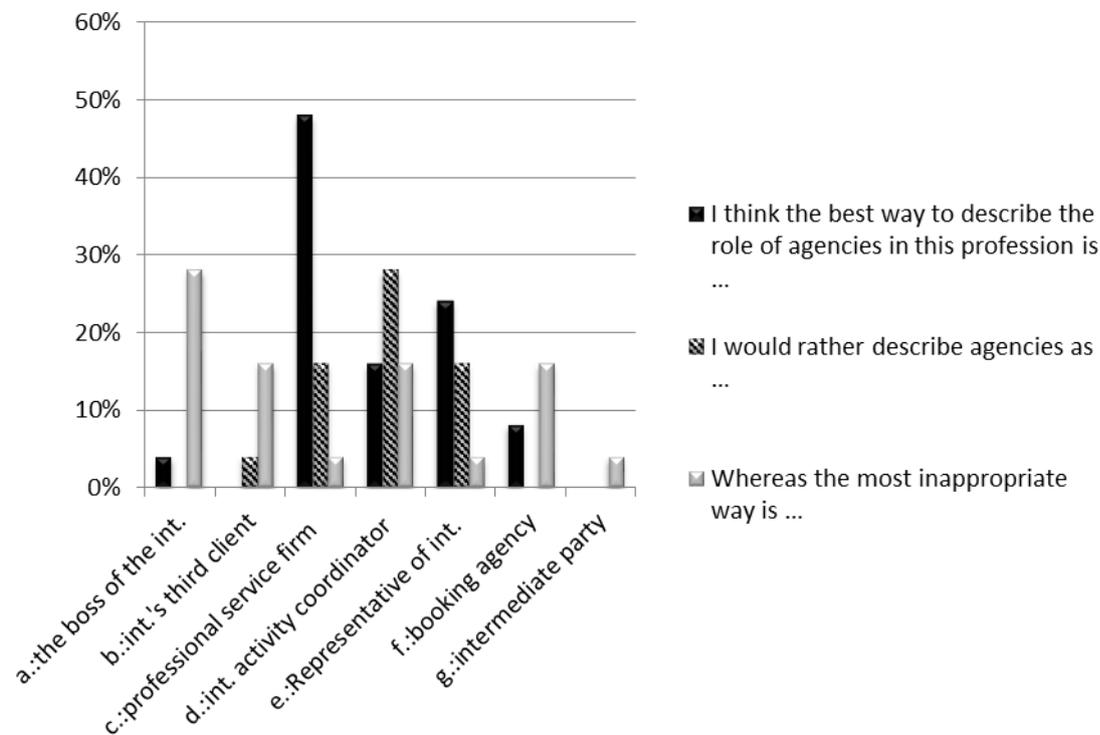

Figure 3: How would you describe agencies?

The perceived multiplication of the role of agencies discloses how organisational professionalism in our context is being co-constructed by both managers and interpreters. On

the one hand, agencies conceivably become the characteristic locus of a professional project in which interpreters are the components of broader organisational regimes. The management of interpreting activities has seeped into the otherwise independent work of self-employed interpreters, requiring interpreters to meet the standards and expectations of agencies. On the other hand, the traditional autonomy embraced by solo-practitioners has to give way to the collective autonomy represented by organisational leadership ("representative of interpreters"). In contrast with most mature professions that are primarily cohered and led by their professional associations, PSI is professionalising against the wave of neoliberal reforms where professional power is forced to be decentralised and diluted. Public sectors are more dependent on interpreting service providers to ensure quality service (Perez and Wilson 2006) without references to its fledging professional body. For this reason we found little trace of "pure" professionalism (Noordegraaf 2007). A low consensus on "booking agency" and "third client" reflects a potential decline in professional autonomy and an increasing possibility of 'being flexiblised'. Ozolins (2007) pointed out that interpreters often fail to recognise agencies as their third-party clients besides the two interlocutors in the actual interpreting assignments. From the lens of organisational professionalism, we provide an alternative explanation that interpreters are likely to regard agencies as a higher-up 'employer' who has a stake in their life career. Rather than simply exchanging expertise with economic rewards, they are likely to identify with or attach personal emotions to *their* agencies.

Concluding remarks

In comparing and contrasting key professional issues perceived by interpreters and managers through a lens of socio-organisational professionalism, this case study can make three contributions. First, we provide novel insights into the organisation of interpreting services in practice and open up the unexplored field of interpreting agencies as a fruitful research site. It resonates with the "social turn" (Pöchhacker 2006) in Interpreting Studies to examine the socio-economic aspects of interpreting activity and the shaping of professionalism besides the "interpreting moments" (Turner 2013). Second, our work is grounded in a new theoretical perspective to explain the current stage of professionalisation of PSI through combining theories in the sociology of the professions with the lens of knowledge-based organisations— PSFs. We identified commercial organisation as the missing link in the socio-professional framework and refocused interpreting agencies as the potential locus of the professional project, thus paving the way for a more in-depth ethnographic study in the next stage. Finally,

as a piece of "applied research" (Patton 2002), we contribute to bridging the dialogue between PSIs and procurement policy-makers. By engaging with both practising interpreters and interpreter entrepreneurs (managers at *Insight*), we give voice to the voiceless and encourage organisational acts to articulate their expectations and needs.

To sum up, we arrive at the following preliminary conclusion: First and foremost, from the interpreters' high expectations of agencies we found a strong interdependence between both parties. Interpreters pin their hopes on the agencies to provide training as well as emotional support or psychological consultation. One possible explanation is the scarce number of development opportunities available for PSIs. It is this unmet demand that drives agencies to diversify their business yet made for their impact on professional work. The absence of proper guidance and care from an established professional association worsens the situation and leaves interpreters unprotected from interprofessional competition. A strong attachment to agencies not only reflects interpreters' need to be 'looked after' because they are constantly detached from their occupational community, but also signals a tendency to the reduced professional autonomy inset with the 'independent-contractor' status. One consequence is that agencies might gain momentum at the expense of the declining independence of the welfare profession PSI.

Second, the results foreground the possible functions of agencies as sites for the professionalisation of PSI. Agencies are one of the key stakeholders and active social agents. The trajectory of PSI professionalisation might differ from traditional professions because of the clout of commercialism and managerialism prompted by the socio-economic policies. By adopting the mode of PSF, interpreting agencies may mobilise their distinct organisational resources to promote the professional profile of PSI.

Lastly, we believe interpreting agencies in the UK have gone beyond the traditional role of information broker to a crucial institutional gatekeeper and potentially the centre of the interpreting occupational community. It can be inferred that the PSI profession is undergoing a dramatic transformation from a technical profession towards a managed profession, in which traditional values are increasingly merged with business principles and market tenets. In this context, professional competence is, to some extent, reassessed, redeveloped and reinforced by organisational standards. Professionalism, therefore, is epitomised in organisational professionalism which requires the extension of interpreters' roles and ethics to a broader variety of values. This presumably requires PSIs to prioritise the needs of clientele

and agencies over the benefits of the professional community at the heart of the practice. Further study should aim at exploring varied data sources to triangulate the current results. A more inclusive approach, including semi-structured interviews with freelance interpreters and longer periods of participant observation within agencies are necessary to understand the underlying factors that prompt an occupation to professionalise, one that gives more weight to the social context and the key actors in shaping the change.

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