

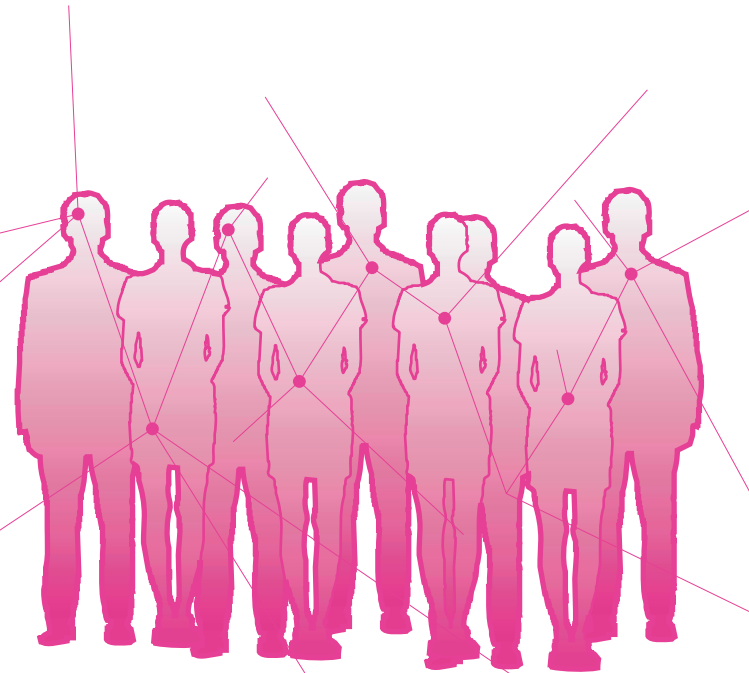
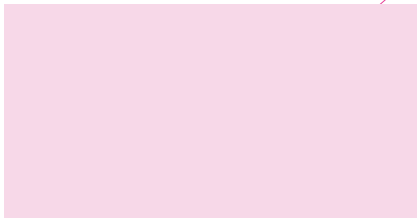


# Interpreting for the Public Services

A guide to commissioning excellent interpreting services



Written by Jan Cambridge.  
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Many people working in the public services think they cannot afford an interpreter. Many think that anybody can be an interpreter. Some think that interpreters are machines. The suggestions in this brochure are aimed at achieving the very best interpreted communication.

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## Is an interpreter necessary?

“The client speaks English well enough when they want.”

Going to court or hospital is not “when they want” and they may be afraid. The kind of English they will hear there can be difficult enough to understand even for people who have spoken English all their lives. As a professional in your own field, you naturally want to provide the highest standard of safe, effective service. That means good communication, so the interpreter is for your benefit as much as that of the client.

In 1981 Iqbal Begum was sent to prison for murdering her husband, R vs Iqbal Begum, (R. v Iqbal Begum (1991) 93 Criminal appeal Reports 96) after years of domestic violence. An interpreter was engaged for the trial, but he was not trained for the job. He was a professional accountant. They did not speak the same dialect. She did not understand a word of her trial, but nobody realised. She was released on appeal in 1985, but by then her family had disowned her because of the disgrace. Some years later, desperate, she took her own life.

Interpreters listed on the National Register of Public Service Interpreters (NRPSI) are accredited to work in specialist areas of the public services e.g. law, health care or local government related services.

## Different kinds of activity

Interpreters work in different ways, depending on the circumstances. There are two main ways of interpreting in the public service context:

**Simultaneously (whispered):** i.e. at the same time. This saves time and gives immediacy and flow to the conversation. It is often used in court, and is very useful in some medical situations as well. The interpreter is listening, changing the language, and speaking all at once. You can help a lot by not speaking too quickly and by making short pauses at the end of each thought.

Ask the interpreter for a few minutes’ technical run-through before the interview, if you have never used this method before. It really does save time.

Simultaneous interpreting is like close-order marching. You’re the front rank, and the interpreter is following, half a pace behind you, but doesn’t know where you’re going. If you suddenly change direction, the interpreter will be unable to keep pace with you. It’s as simple as that.

### You can help by signalling changes of topic.

On average, there are 25% more words in Spanish than in the same statement in English. Put simply - it takes longer to say in the other language. Many languages have a completely different structure to English, so your interpreter will be forced to wait until you finish a sentence before they can start speaking. But they still have to keep up with you!

**Consecutively:** the interpreter will take notes while you speak, and then relay the message, while you wait. Taking notes is a sign of competence. When your message contains a lot of hard facts, such as dates and times, names and places, there is less risk of forgetting something vital if it has been noted down on the way. As with simultaneous interpreting, finish the thought before you stop speaking.

## Intervening is a good sign

Professional interpreters use the “Impartial Model” of interpreting, which is taught in courses leading to the Diploma in Public Service Interpreting, and will only ask you to stop if:

- They cannot hear you, or if you’re speaking too fast
- They do not understand something
- They think there is a misunderstanding
- There is a missed cultural inference that is likely to cause misunderstanding

When interpreters stop to ask for clarifications, they are asserting their right to do the job well. They will interpret responses and not give explanations themselves.

It is important that interpreters not only speak both languages to a professional standard, but that they have a good knowledge of the field they work in and adhere to codes of professional good practice, which includes confidentiality.

Doctor: Tell me Mrs Bloggs, is your family complete?

Interpreter: Would you re-phrase that question please.  
What do you mean by complete?

*(Ambiguity doesn't travel across the language barrier,  
and can be dangerous)*

## Interpreting is not translating

Interpreting and translating are very different skills. Some practitioners do both, but not all. Interpreters can be asked to do sight translations if the text is:

- Short (no more than 300-400 words)
- Non-technical

This means that the interpreter will give a spoken rendering of the written text, in the other language. Public Service Interpreters (PSIs) are equipped to provide written translations of short, straightforward texts. Unless the PSI is qualified to do more, you should refer longer and more complex texts to a professional translator.

### Some texts that might be suitable for sight translation:

- Patient information leaflets
- Instructions on medications
- Brief extracts of witness statements, in court
- Short letters of a non-technical nature

Professional interpreters who belong to a nationally recognised professional register adhere to a code of ethics, which includes a commitment to confidentiality.

There were 600,000 words in the 1989 version of the Oxford English Dictionary. Nobody can know them all.

## Briefing is vital

Good interpreting comes from good preparation. We do not need to know the case in great technical depth. On the contrary, information that is irrelevant to the actual conversation you need to have interpreted can be unhelpful. We need to know *what* you're going to talk about *now*. What sort of things are you likely to say?

In court one day, an interpreter providing simultaneous interpreting was unexpectedly faced with the phrase “bus lay-by”. There is no such thing in the countries where her other language is spoken and therefore no established term for it. If she had been warned in advance, she could have thought of a neat way to deal with it. As it was she had to stop the proceedings and discuss it with the defendant and lawyer at some length, to explain the meaning of the term.

## Going for lunch?

The levels of concentration involved in interpreting are very high and interpreters get tired. The often conflicting demands of various court officers requiring an interpreter, can mean that everyone goes for lunch, but not the interpreter. If you build in adequate rest periods and time for something to eat, when no demands are being made on them by others, they are less likely to make mistakes.

Interpreters working at conferences at the EU and UN work in pairs in 30 minute shifts each.

Sign Language interpreters work in pairs.

Public Service interpreters in the courts work most effectively in pairs, for all the same reasons.

## Language and politics

In a sense, language is a political concept. To be defined as a ‘language’ implies nationhood. Language changes constantly - often along socio-political lines. This can lead to sensitivities and language difficulties for example between speakers of the Bosnian and Croatian languages.

It is vitally important in these situations that the interpreter is perceived by both parties as being impartial. If the client, who is feeling particularly vulnerable in a stressful situation, does not feel that the interpreter can be impartial for any reason, it may be better to look for someone else.

## Lighting, acoustic conditions and sight lines

A large percentage of what you hear, you lip-read. Interpreters often cannot hear what counsel are saying because they are too far away, speaking too quietly and have their backs to the interpreter. In hospitals there are often lots of background noises, echoes, and other distractions. Remember that when interpreting simultaneously, the interpreter can also hear their own voice, which increases the need for clear speech from others.

*“I recommend the establishment of standards of best practice in the design of new court buildings and the adaptation of equipment in existing courtrooms for the provision of adequate accommodation and facilities to interpreters.” Lord Justice Auld’s Report on Criminal Courts, 8th October 2001, pp 584-588*

## Clients may object

You may sometimes find a client will object to an individual interpreter, even a very competent trained professional. It is always safest to work with a trained professional, not a relative or friend. Client concerns you may need to discuss include:

- Gender issues
- Religious issues
- Political issues

## Occupational hazards

Housemaid's knee, tennis elbow... every occupation brings occupational hazards.

"Interpreters' dead elbow", and "quasi incontinence syndrome" afflict interpreters in the public services.

You contract the first of these in police custody suites and hospital wards, when a non-English speaking client has been locked up or has felt isolated while an interpreter is found, but doesn't understand what is going on. When the interpreter arrives he or she is seized by the elbow with the cry "Thank God you're here! You won't leave, will you?".

You get the second in court buildings where there is no separate waiting area for interpreters and the defendant's supporters are determined to 'get you on their side'. Sometimes they are so indiscreet, you end up locked in the lavatory, in self-defence.

**"(Interpreters) are, for the occasion, officers of the court, yet have no accommodation or facilities there and are obliged to mingle in the public area... it would be proper... if they could have access to a staff common room while waiting to interpret in court or during adjournments."** *Lord Justice Auld's Report on Criminal Courts, 8th October 2001, pp 584-588*

## How do I know it's the right language?

If in doubt, ring the interpreter you were thinking of using and check with them. Tell them where your non-English speaking client was brought up, and maybe even put the client on the telephone to make sure they understand each other before the interpreter sets out.

Remember that there are many languages that have dialects within them, which are incomprehensible to each other. Catalan is not Castilian. Sylhetti is not Bengali. Mirpuri is not Urdu. They just come from the same broad geographical areas. Some languages have no written form and speakers of those may not be able to write, or they may read and write in another language. This is also true of the deaf community: a person who communicates through British Sign Language does not necessarily read or write fluently in English.

Courts and other public service situations are full of different kinds of language. This in itself can present interpreters with a challenge, as they make the constant shifts between one style and another, from extremely formal to natural or slang.

## Quoting aloud from documents

Text, when read aloud, is particularly difficult to deal with, unless the interpreter has sight of the document being read. That is because written language is much denser and more packed with hard information than normal speech. And when we read aloud, we speak very much faster than normal, because our thought processes are not engaged in composing what we say, only in repeating what somebody else wrote.

## Jargon

As far as speaking through an interpreter is concerned, the frequent use of jargon comes under “unfair practices”. The trouble is, most of us do not recognise that we are using it. Jargon is both technical language that is used in specific fields, and deliberately obscure language used to impress or confuse.

“This is a pretentious little wine, with a fruity nose and overtones of compost heap, but I think you’ll be amused by its cheek.” (Tasting notes on wine bottle)

A good jargon-busting test for any English word or phrase is to try to think of another way to say exactly the same thing, in English. If you cannot, it is probably jargon, and is certainly something your interpreter is likely to have to explain, rather than being able to use a directly equivalent word in the other language. That is why you will hear terms like “social worker” and “district nurse” being left in English. If the exact equivalent profession does not exist in the other language, it is safer to explain the term and then leave it in English.

## It's not all talking

We also communicate in other ways, all of them having different significance in different cultures. 70-90% of normal communication is non-verbal. We should not assume that we know the intended message behind:

- Loudness of speech
- Gestures
- Eye contact, or lack of eye contact
- Other body language

The child of a mixed marriage, Mr X had grandmothers from widely differing cultural backgrounds. As a little boy he learned about the importance of getting eye contact right - if he looked one grandmother in the eye, she’d slap his face for being rude. If he *didn’t* look the other grandmother in the eye, she’d slap his face (for being rude!)

## Being polite is different in different cultures

There are different naming systems with different levels of formality built into them all over the world. There are rules about courteous forms of address: when to say “Sir” and when to use a formal title with a person’s first name. The interpreter will know this, but the other two parties will not. This is one occasion when an interpreter can intervene to explain cultural differences and ensure that neither party causes unintended offence.

## How much will it cost?

“You’ll get nothing for nothing, and very little for sixpence!” as the old saying goes. You cannot expect to engage someone with degree-level qualifications for mop-and-bucket money. How much responsibility is your interpreter going to be asked to take for their pivotal role in the success of your planned conversation?

If it all goes wrong, who will take the blame? You? You have no way of monitoring this interpreter’s performance at the time of delivery (or you wouldn’t need them, would you?). If you are going to base your diagnosis, or your professional judgement on the information you receive through the interpreter, doesn’t it make sense to go for the best possible quality? Find someone who has passed nationally recognised exams or has other accreditation (a relevant Diploma in Public Service Interpreting, post-1997 Metropolitan Police test or other test leading to access to the NRPSI), and exchange clear letters of agreement beforehand.

Interpreters working in the public services have made the same decision as lawyers taking publicly funded cases. They know they could earn considerably more in the commercial sector, but this is the work they want to do. Nevertheless, neither group can live on fresh air.

## Where to go next

**BLIS Professionals** Database of international communication experts: [www.blis.org.uk/professionals](http://www.blis.org.uk/professionals)

**National Register of Public Service Interpreters:**  
[www.iol.org.uk/nrpsi](http://www.iol.org.uk/nrpsi)

**Institute of Linguists** The Institute serves the interests of professional linguists throughout the world and acts as a respected language assessment and accredited awarding body:  
[www.iol.org.uk](http://www.iol.org.uk)

**Institute of Translation and Interpreting** Independent professional association of practising translators and interpreters in the United Kingdom: [www.iti.org.uk](http://www.iti.org.uk)

The Institute of Linguists is happy to endorse this brochure in the belief that improving understanding of what is involved in public service interpreting will enable both those using interpreters and the interpreters themselves to work more efficiently. Mutual comprehension is the aim not just of people who speak different languages but also people who do different jobs. Real understanding helps all concerned to achieve their aims.

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**Henry Pavlovich**

Director & Chief Executive  
Institute of Linguists

