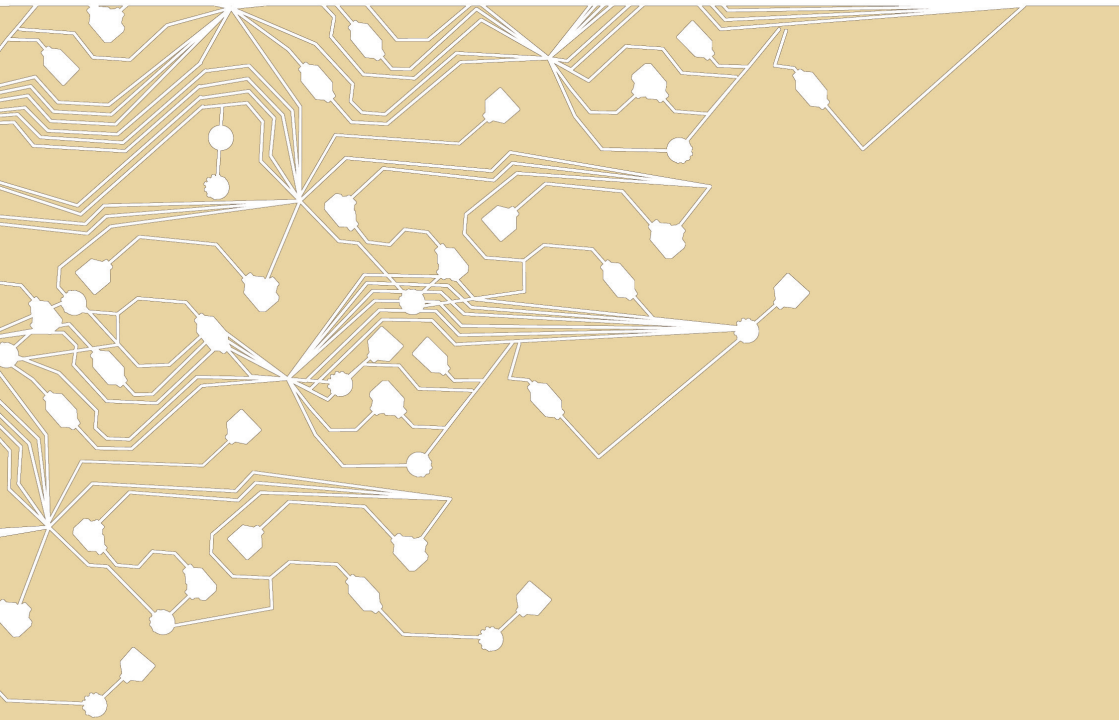


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INTERPRETER TRAINING IN FINLAND



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Interpreter Training in Finland

This article describes the status of interpreter training and qualifications in Finland. Interpreter training is provided at universities, universities of applied sciences, folk high schools and adult education centres, depending on the language and method of interpreting. The authors argue that university-level training should be made available regardless of the language or method of interpreting. Furthermore, the authorities should regulate and develop an accreditation system for the field of interpreting.

Keywords: interpreting, languages, training, accreditation

Due to different traditions and historical reasons, the training of interpreters who use different languages and work in different environments has been scattered on different levels of education. As a result, interpreters are being trained at universities, universities of applied sciences, folk high schools and adult education centres. This article examines the whole field of interpreting, but focuses in particular on sign language interpreting. In this article, the term *interpreter* refers to a person who mediates messages between spoken or signed languages, or interprets between languages and communication methods (cf. for example, the Act on Interpretation Services for Persons with Disabilities 133/2010). The communication methods include, for example, speech-to-text interpreting and sign-supported speech. The professional skills of interpreters are needed in various life situations and social environments (such as work, studies, running errands, and hobbies).

Interpreting can also be categorized by the interpreting situation into, for example, community, legal and conference interpreting. Community interpreting refers to a broad range of situations involving, for example, discussions between the authorities and a private individual. In legal in-

interpreting, an interpreter assists the client by interpreting discussions held during, for example, court proceedings. In conference interpreting, the interpreter works at meetings, negotiations, seminars or conferences. (Finnish Association of Translators and Interpreters 2010a, Finnish Association of Translators and Interpreters 2010b) Yet another interpreting situation is educational interpreting. It refers to interpreting that takes place in educational institutions of all levels, from pre-school to university. Educational interpreters interpret for a student, as well as for hearing teachers, peers and other school staff. (HUMAK 2010)

In this article, the term *spoken dominant languages* refers to languages traditionally used or studied in Finland, such as English, French or German. The term *rare spoken languages* refers to languages that have become more common in Finland through immigration (e.g. Arabic and Somali). *Signed languages* refer to Finnish Sign Language, Finland-Swedish Sign Language, or other sign languages.

Interpreter Training in the 2010s

The following figure (Figure 1) illustrates the organization of interpreter training in Finland. Translator and interpreter training has been offered in Finland for 40 years.

Translators and interpreters of spoken languages are trained at universities, while sign language interpreters are trained at universities of applied sciences. One exception to this rule is the degree programme in the interpreting of (rare) spoken languages introduced at the Diaconia University of Applied Sciences in the autumn of 2011. (Diak 2011a) Community interpreters of spoken languages are being trained at, for example, adult education centres, continuing education centres, as well as in courses offered within the personnel training programmes of business enterprises. (Assessment of Legal Interpreting 2008)

In the field of interpreter training, interpreting in signed languages has for a long time been the only subfield to offer degree programmes clearly aimed at preparing students for a profession. In Finland, training in

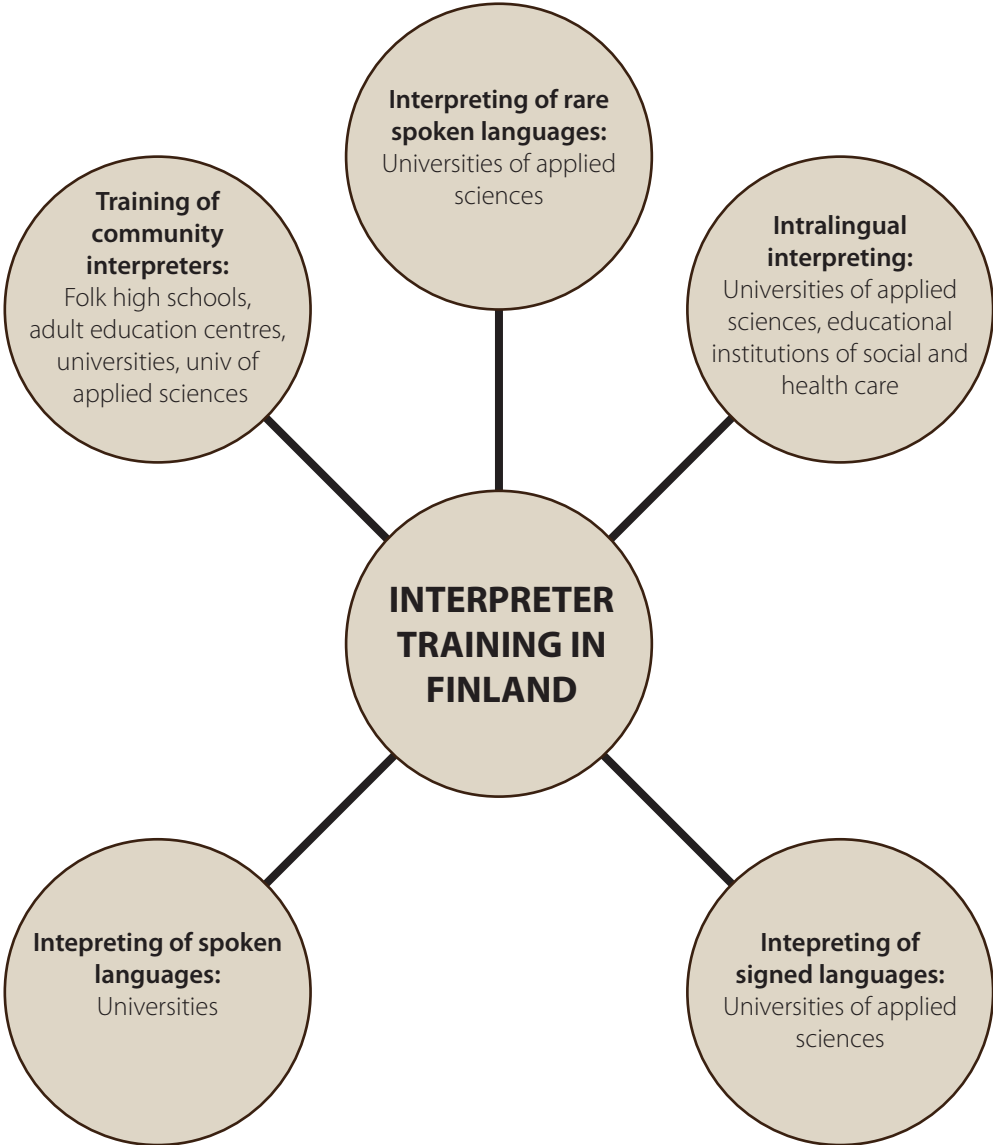


Figure 1. Interpreter training in Finland.

sign language interpreting is offered at two universities of applied sciences (HUMAK and Diak) in Bachelor of Humanities programmes of 240 ECTS. The duration of the programmes is four years. The programmes focus primarily on Finnish Sign Language and another working language (i.e. Finnish), as well as the skills involved in the interpreting process (interaction, self-evaluation, and development of one's work practices). Furthermore, students are provided basic skills in translating. In addition, two Master's Degree programmes of 90 ECTS are offered in Finland (Degree Programme in Sign Language Interpreting Services, and Degree Programme in Sign Language Interpreting). Diak has also introduced a degree programme of 210 ECTS in the interpreting of spoken languages. The working languages included in this programme are Arabic, Kurdish (Sorani dialect), Persian, Somali and Vietnamese, one of which must be mastered in addition to Finnish. The degree programme in the interpreting of spoken languages focuses on interpreting and translation, the interpreter's profession, and professional ethics. (Diak 2011a)

Interpreter training in spoken dominant languages is offered at the University of Helsinki, the University of Eastern Finland, the University of Tampere, the University of Turku, and the University of Vaasa. Today, studies at the University of Helsinki are located at the Department of Modern Languages, where the majoring options are the translation of Russian, German or English (University of Helsinki 2010). At the University of Eastern Finland, it is similarly possible to major in the translation of English, German or Russian (University of Eastern Finland 2010). The main difference between these programmes and those on sign language interpreting is that the former focus on translation, and interpreting is only a minor part of the programme.

The School of Languages and Translation Studies of the University of Turku offers studies in the translation and interpreting of English, French and German. The scope of the master's degree programmes is 80 ECTS, and as in the University of Helsinki and the University of Eastern Finland, the studies focus on translation. (University of Turku 2010)

The University of Tampere offers a degree programme called Multilingual Communication and Translation Studies, with English, German

or Russian as a working language (major subject). In addition, translation studies in, for example, Swedish, are offered as a specialization option. Studies in the Multilingual Communication and Translation Studies degree programme take place at the School of Language, Translation and Literary Studies. The share of interpreting studies is relatively large in the degree programme when compared to the programmes of the other Finnish universities. For example, in the Master of Arts programme, the scope of interpreting studies is 35 ECTS. (University of Tampere 2010)

Unlike the other Finnish universities, the University of Vaasa offers interpreting studies to students of the Faculty of Arts as optional studies or as a minor subject (basic studies 25 ECTS, intermediate studies 35 ECTS). The minor subject studies are primarily intended for students of Swedish and Finnish. (University of Vaasa 2010)

In addition, the Further Qualification for Community Interpreters, which provides specialized professional competence, is offered at, for example, the continuing education centres of universities, and universities of applied sciences. At the Palmenia Centre for Continuing Education, which is part of the University of Helsinki, courses of different scopes have been arranged as labour market training and as vocational further education and training (Assessment of Legal Interpreting 2008). In addition, the Further Qualification for Community Interpreters has been offered at the Sign Language Interpreting Unit of HUMAK.

In addition to universities and universities of applied sciences, community interpreter training is offered at folk high schools (e.g. East Karelia Folk High School) and at adult education centres (e.g. in Turku, Tampere, Oulu and Vaasa) (Nykänen & Korhonen 2010). Also training commissioned by Centres for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment (ELY Centres) has been arranged by private service providers. One example of this is training commissioned in 2008 by the Kainuu ELY Centre: the training was provided by Semantix, a company offering translation, interpreting and training services (Centre for Economic Development, Transport and the Environment 2010).

Interpreter training also covers intralingual interpreting – interpreting methods that replace or support speech. Intralingual interpreting meth-

ods include, for example, sign-supported speech, speech-supporting signs and speech-to-text interpreting (Laurén 2006; Association of Persons with Speech Defects 2010). The aforementioned methods can be part of the professional competence of a sign language interpreter or an interpreter for persons with speech defects. Training in intralingual interpreting methods has been offered variably in connection with sign language interpreter training provided by HUMAK and Diak. Since 2009, the course offering of HUMAK has included specialization studies of 30 ECTS in speech-to-text interpreting. A new addition to the course offering in intralingual interpreting methods is the new syllabus of Diak's Degree Programme in Sign Language Interpreting introduced in the autumn of 2011. Students specialize, based on their aptitude and interests, on either interlingual or intralingual interpreting and pedagogy. In practice, this means that their studies emphasize either interpreting between Finnish Sign Language and Finnish, or interpreting using a communication method supporting or replacing speech. (Diak 2011b)

The Specialist Qualification in Interpreting Services for People with Speech Defects has been offered at educational institutions of social and health care since 2001 (Association of Persons with Speech Defects 2010).

Accreditation of Interpreters

The offering of interpreter training varies greatly depending on the language in question, but there are also differences in the accreditation of interpreters. For signed languages, accreditation is usually granted based on the Interpreter Register examination. This examination is arranged during sign language interpreter training by the staff of HUMAK and Diak. The examination includes the evaluation of a community and classroom interpreting situation, as well as a section on professional ethics. To be accepted into the Interpreter Register, the student must pass all three parts of the examination. The Interpreter Register is currently maintained by the Finnish Association of the Deaf, the Finnish Federation of Hard of Hearing, the Finnish Deafblind Association, and the Finnish Association

of Sign Language Interpreters. Membership in the Interpreter Register is a minimum requirement for being employed as a sign language interpreter by companies providing interpreting services. Also qualification in certain special fields of interpreting such as speech-to-text or deafblind interpreting requires passing the Interpreter Register examination. The registers for speech-to-text interpreters, deafblind interpreters and sign-supported speech interpreters are part of the Interpreter Register.

The future of the Interpreter Register has been uncertain ever since the responsibility for organizing interpreting services was transferred from local authorities to Kela in the autumn of 2010. The body eventually responsible for organizing and developing the Interpreter Register and the related examination is still under evaluation. The objective is to transfer the supervision of the professionals providing interpreting services to the authorities. (See e.g. The Finnish Association of the Deaf 2009; TTYR 2009)

At the moment, qualification as a community interpreter of spoken languages takes place with the Further Qualification for Community Interpreters, whereby proficiency is demonstrated in a manner that does not take into account the method of learning. Consequently, no requirements on participation in training can be defined for the competence-based qualification. However, in most cases the qualification is acquired during sign language interpreter training, as described above. (Finnish National Board of Education 2006)

Nevertheless, different authorities (such as district courts) also employ community interpreters lacking qualifications, especially due to the lack of interpreters of rare languages (Assessment of Legal Interpreting 2008). There are also other cases where persons who are not most qualified for the job end up providing interpreting services. For example, a less qualified interpreting service provider can win a competitive tendering over a more qualified one, or the client may simply consider looking for a qualified interpreter as excessively laborious. In the above kinds of practical situations, the client's needs or rights no longer determine the detail or expertise at which their matters are handled. At the moment, the field of interpreter training is not authorized or equipped to correct this situation.

The issue is part of a broader responsibility, which affects both state and local authorities.

No accreditation test corresponding to the Interpreter Register examination is currently available for the interpreters of spoken languages. On the other hand, there is an examination for authorised translators, which does not take into account the method of learning. The examination focuses on control of the language in question, translation skills, and capabilities to work as a translator. (Assessment of Legal Interpreting 2008)

So far, no register has been prepared for interpreters for persons with speech defects, and no criteria exist for such a register (TTYR 2009).

History of the Training Structure

There are historical reasons for the broad range of interpreter training described above. Some of the reasons are related to the demand for interpreting services and the statuses of different languages. For decades, the demand for the interpreting of spoken dominant languages mainly originated from international conferences. Languages less spoken in Finland only became interpreting languages in the 1990s as a result of growing immigration. At that time, there was an increasing demand in these language groups, especially for community interpreting. In the area of signed languages, community interpreting has long traditions, even though the professionalization of sign language interpreters only began in the 1980s. At that time, the scope of educational interpreting also grew significantly. In the interpreting of signed languages, meeting and conference interpreting have become an important part of an interpreter's job description, especially during the past couple of decades. (E.g. Assessment of Legal Interpreting 2008; Salmi & Laakso 2005)

In the interpreting of spoken dominant languages, training has quite naturally been offered at universities, where these languages have been taught well before the teaching of interpreting and translation began. Instruction in the interpreting of signed languages was located at universities of applied sciences as a result of the Finnish polytechnic reform, which

turned the previous college-level education into university-level education. Interpreting based on different methods (e.g. speech-to-text interpreting, sign-supported speech), on the other hand, is relatively new, and their instruction is still developing. It is natural for instruction to reflect the status of languages: the status of spoken languages as “proper” languages has not been questioned, whereas signed languages were for a long time seen as primitive language forms. (E.g. Salmi & Laakso 2005) This perception is a particular reason why there has been so little research on Finnish Sign Language and Finland-Swedish Sign Language. Furthermore, the interpreting of these languages has not been studied at all, except for master’s theses completed at universities.

Although the processes related to the history and educational structure of interpreting have left the instruction of interpreting in a largely fragmented state, the instruction and research of interpreting should be examined as a whole. The number of people working in the field of interpreting is small, and the number of people instructing and researching interpreting is difficult to estimate. For example, only three doctoral dissertations were published in the field of interpreting in the 2000s (Vuorikoski 2004; Vik-Tuovinen 2006; Saarinen 2009). With increasing international activities and immigration, interpreting will assume a more significant role in Finnish society, where quality interpreting will be a key element in guaranteeing human rights for a growing number of citizens. Interpreting will also become an increasingly important part of the work of the authorities. It is essential for the future of the field of interpreting that the scant instruction and research resources are spent rationally and avoiding any overlap.

Even though each language and culture is unique, and interpreters need to master their working languages and the related cultural skills, it is possible to study interpreting and interpreting services as phenomena regardless of the language in question. The core of interpreting remains the same: enabling interaction. The process involves multidimensional processing and mediation of information: processing information, locating meaning in the information, and mediating the meaning into the target language, which enables interaction between different parties. The pursuit

of fidelity, accuracy and comprehensibility apply to all interpreting. It is obvious that interpreters of spoken and signed languages go through similar phases when receiving, identifying, processing, formulating and articulating messages. They also have to make similar strategic choices regarding, for example, omission and delay. The goal is always to mediate ideas and meanings as well as possible. (Pöchhacker 2004, 47–65; Tommola 2006, 128–129; Selin-Grönlund 2007, 36) The difference between spoken and signed languages is in the modality, or the channel used. Interpreters of spoken languages handle messages mediated using the auditory-vocal channel, while interpreters of signed languages handle messages mediated using the auditory-vocal channel, as well as the visual channel. Interpreters who use different methods of interpreting may use all of the above channels or, for example, just the auditory-visual channel (e.g. speech-to-text interpreters). (Tommola 2006, 129)

Interpreting processes are similar also from the perspective of the service process: the client orders an interpreter, someone processes the order and forwards it to the interpreter, and a payment is made after the interpreting event. The parties involved include the client, the mediator, the service provider, and the party paying for the service. In the best case, the process involves a quality system in which certain instruments are used to assess service quality. This can mean, for example, gathering feedback systematically, or monitoring the quality of interpreting using other means. Quality can also be controlled and verified using accreditation systems.

While the training of interpreting has been fragmented for historical reasons, there are signs of a convergence between different fields. Internationally, interpreters of signed and spoken languages have had their separate organizations, but, for example, EULITA, the European Legal Interpreters and Translators Association, is intended for both groups (EULITA 2011). In Finland, the Specialist Qualification in Legal Interpreting has been attached to the degree programme framework, and the status of signed languages in the qualification is under review. The requirements of the Specialist Qualification in Legal Interpreting are expected to be completed at the beginning of 2013. (U. Aunola, personal correspondence, 28 October 2011)

At Diak, the training of interpreters of sign language and spoken languages represents another example of the convergence of training structures. While the degree programmes will remain independent, there are plans to offer common studies for the students of the interpreting of both signed and spoken languages (N. Isolahti, personal correspondence, 18 October 2011).

Conclusion

This article has argued that there are signs of the emergence of common goals and policies for signed and spoken languages, but that there remain unanswered questions about how to establish an equal status for all methods and languages of interpreting. In the future, an increasing part of the Finnish society will in one way or another depend on interpreting. Sign language users and immigrants have been the traditional customer groups of interpreters, but interpreting services are also used by various groups with impairments in hearing, vision and hearing, and speech. The authorities and persons working in service professions also depend on interpreting services.

For the authorities, interpreting services are a crucial element especially because of their responsibility to protect the basic rights and liberties of individuals. In addition to knowing how to use interpreting services appropriately, the authorities should also have sufficient higher-level knowledge and competencies in order to develop efficient service structures. Only this will guarantee all citizens the opportunity to express themselves and to receive information in a language that they understand. (Cf. Assessment of Legal Interpreting 2008, 8) The development of interpreting services requires an understanding of the whole interpreting service process.

It is clear that every individual dependent on interpreting should have access to interpreting that enables equal handling of matters and integration into society. From the perspective of interpreter training, a broader question is whether to train interpreters competent in as many languages, methods and technical tools as possible, or to train interpreters special-

ized in particular areas. An additional challenge to the first alternative is the aforementioned differentiated training of spoken and signed languages, which hinders the combining of studies in different spoken and signed languages. On the other hand, a challenge for equal specialization is the fact that interpreter training in, for example, methods supporting and replacing speech (such as the training of interpreters for persons with speech defects) is usually more short-term and less valued than training in interpreting between different languages.

Both alternatives for organizing interpreter training involve practical challenges. For example, the basic challenge in the training of sign language interpreters is that acquiring even one signed language as a working language takes a lot of time. It is very demanding to acquire sufficient language proficiency during a four-year degree programme offered at a university of applied sciences. Consequently, adding languages and other intralingual interpreting methods to programmes in addition to Finnish Sign Language will require careful evaluation of the potential impact of such diversification of training on the quality of interpreting services in each area of interpreting. On the other hand, the further specialization of interpreters may cause problems in regions where the clientele is small and heterogeneous. Such regions (e.g. northern Finland) usually already suffer from the lack of interpreters, which means that each interpreter should be able to serve a clientele with a broad range of needs. In other words, the needs of the clientele would require as broad expertise as possible. However, there are, of course, regions in Finland (such as the Helsinki Metropolitan Area), where there is a demand for specialized interpreters.

From the perspective of the development of interpreting and interpreting services, it is essential that all languages and interpreting methods be covered by higher education in the future. Nevertheless, the expectations set for a bachelor's degree obtained from a university of applied sciences require careful consideration. One possible vision for the future of interpreting is that interpreters acquire basic competencies in two working languages or a few interpreting methods with a bachelor's degree obtained from a university of applied sciences, and then obtain other necessary competencies through studies completed at the continuing education

centres of universities. Such a structure would require significant investments in the adult education of interpreters, as well as careful consideration of a possible accreditation system. However, any assessment should be based on the needs of different customer groups, by defining the competencies, or combinations of competencies, that would guarantee good interpreting services for all.

Another key question for the future of interpreting is the interpreter accreditation system. When an accreditation system is developed for the interpreters of signed languages to replace the existing Interpreter Register examination, it would be natural to think about its suitability also for the interpreters of spoken languages and interpreters using different interpreting methods. In this case, learning acquired through training of different types and length could be recognized with official accreditation. In practice, the system could allow, for example, a person who has completed a degree programme in sign language interpreting to be entered (at least for a limited time) automatically in the Interpreter Register. If the person acquires further competencies in, for example, speech-to-text interpreting or a spoken language, then he or she should obtain additional accreditation in those areas of interpreting.

There has been a debate in the professional field of interpreting about protecting the official title of an interpreter, which is also a key issue in the accreditation system. If the accreditation system is made a permit to practise a profession, then only accredited interpreters will be allowed to use the title of an interpreter. The protection of job titles is a long process, which also requires legislative changes. (Thurén, 2011; T. Rissanen, personal correspondence, 27 October 2011)

The profession of an interpreter requires excellent language and interpreting skills, as well as strong ethical competence. It is crucial that all parties involved can count on the message being mediated accurately in an interactive situation. The fragmentation of training and the lack of an accreditation system are today's challenges, which require clear solutions in the future. From the perspective of the legal protection of citizens, it would be best if the profession of an interpreter could not be practised without training or accreditation controlled by the authorities.

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