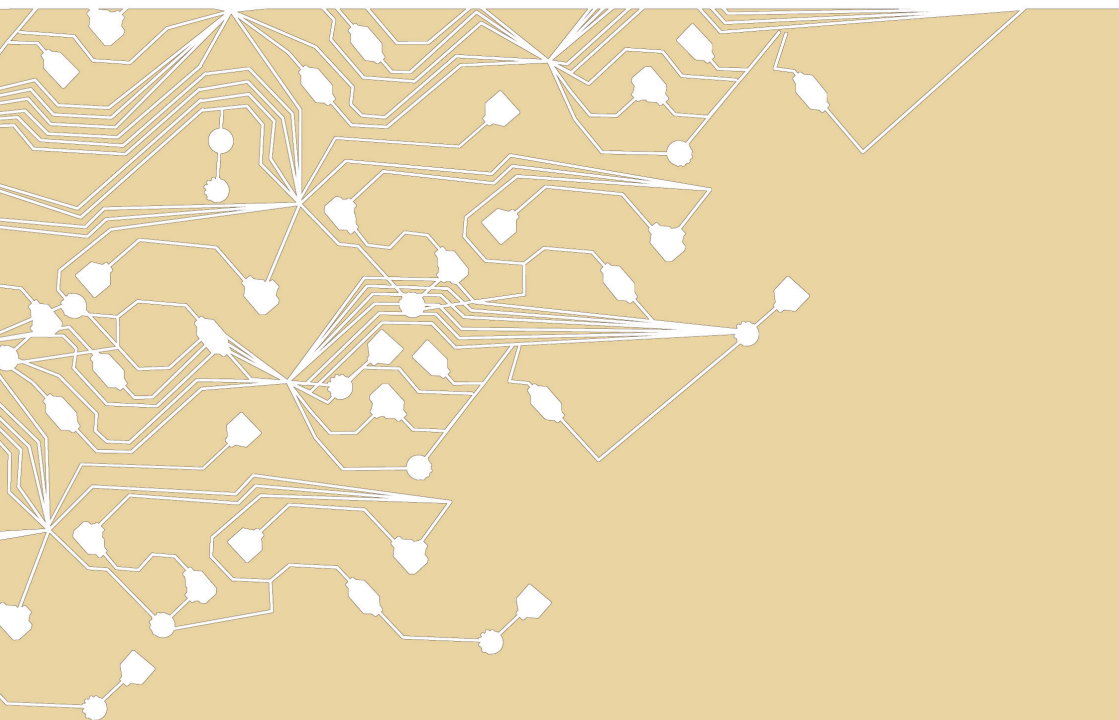


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“LICENCE TO INTERPRET”: ON THE AUTHORIZATION AND REGISTRATION OF INTERPRETERS



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“Licence to interpret”: On the Authorization and Registration of Interpreters

This article discusses a reform of the register of sign language interpreters in Finland. The author argues for the need to replace the current system with a register maintained by the authorities. The development of the new system should focus on establishing quality criteria: there should be clear criteria for the qualifications and minimum language proficiency of interpreters. The author also discusses the possibility of establishing proficiency levels for interpreters.

Keywords: interpreting, sign language, quality

The register of Finnish sign language interpreters is a training register. Any interpreter who has completed the required training and the Interpreter Register examination can apply to be included in the register. The register is maintained by client organizations of the Deaf and hearing impaired (the Finnish Association of the Deaf, the Finnish Federation of Hard of Hearing and the Finnish Deafblind Association), as well as the Finnish Association of Sign Language Interpreters. In the current system, a person who has been accepted into the register cannot be removed from the register. Furthermore, there are no sanctions for interpreters who have, for example, acted unprofessionally.

When the responsibility for organizing interpreting services was transferred to Kela (The Social Insurance Institution of Finland) in the autumn of 2010, one of the criteria in the competitive tendering was that “persons working in managerial positions in interpreting services and those pro-

viding interpreting services shall be registered in the Interpreter Register maintained by Tulkkitoiminnan yhteistyöryhmä (cooperative body of interpreting services), and shall have completed one of the following training programmes, or shall fulfil corresponding criteria”. (Kela 2009) This is the first official demand related to the Interpreter Register in the field of sign language interpreting, and it has further highlighted the need for an interpreter register reform.

This article discusses the need to reform the Interpreter Register. The article is based on the author’s master’s thesis in the Degree Programme in Sign Language Interpreting Services, which compared the interpreter registers in use in different countries, as well as other professional registers and their structure (Thurén 2011). The author is currently promoting the Interpreter Register reform as part of her work as a Special Advisor on Interpreting at the Finnish Association of the Deaf. It is the view of the Finnish Association of the Deaf, as a representative of the sign language community, that the current register system does not correspond to the demand in the market in which the quality of interpreting, professional ethics and the development of professional competence should be controlled and developed continuously in order to guarantee the human and linguistic rights of clients through quality interpreting services.

In the current Finnish system, clients consider the Interpreter Register as a guarantee of the interpreter’s professional competence, because belonging to the register requires the completion of certain studies and of the Interpreter Register examination. The register is closely connected to professional ethics – one does not exist without the other. Interpreter training, the Interpreter Register and a professional code of conduct together lay a solid foundation for the profession. Training provides an understanding of professional ethics, but in the labour market, a body is needed to control professional ethics and their observance by interpreters practising their profession. At the moment, quality control is an issue largely up to interpreters themselves, or their employers. (Tulkkitoiminnan yhteistyöryhmä 2009)

Interpreter Training

A degree programme of 240 ECTS is offered in sign language interpreting at two universities of applied sciences. The programmes are offered at HUMAK University of Applied Sciences (Helsinki and Kuopio) and the Diakonia University of Applied Sciences (Turku). The programmes provide a professional foundation for mastering one's working languages, broad general education, and knowledge of the characteristics of the culture of Finnish Sign Language users and Finnish culture. In addition, two Master's Degree programmes in sign language interpreting were introduced in Finland in 2009. In January 2009, the first European Master in Sign Language Interpreting (EUMASLI) programme was launched in cooperation by HUMAK University of Applied Sciences, Heriot-Watt University (Scotland) and the Magdeburg-Stendal University of Applied Sciences (Germany). In addition, in autumn 2009, HUMAK and Diak together launched the new Master's Degree Programme in Sign Language Interpreting Services (90 ECTS), from which the first class has already graduated and the second began its studies in the autumn of 2011.

The organization of the Interpreter Register examination has been the responsibility of the educational institutions by a mutual agreement. The structure of the examination has been standardized to ensure that interpreters graduating from both universities of applied sciences take similar tests and are evaluated using similar criteria. The latest standardization measure for the examination was approved by the cooperative body of interpreting services on 14 March 2011. (Tulkkitoiminnan yhteistyöryhmä 2009)

The fact that the educational institutions are responsible for the Interpreter Register examination poses a problem, because all candidates should be evaluated by an outside, neutral party. Lecturers who teach students may not always be able to distance themselves adequately from their students and their common history (when evaluating language and interpreting skills) or to evaluate the students' skills in these areas objectively despite genuine efforts to do so.








Registers	 Finland	 Sweden	 UK	 USA	 Canada	 Australia	 New Zealand
Authorization & register		X	X	X	X	X	X
Register/one-time admission	X			X			
Register/fixed-term admission		X	X		X	X	X
All languages and interpreters		X				X	X
Professional code of conduct	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Test	X	X		X		X	X
Maintained by the state		X					
Maintained by an association	X						
Maintained by other			X	X	X	X	X
Personal development plan			X	X	X	X	X
Supervisory body	(x)	X	X	X	X	X	X
Registration fee (2010/2011)	–	X	X	X	X	X	X

Table 1. Interpreter registers in different countries (Thurén 2011, 30).

Registers in Finland and Elsewhere

The structure and format of interpreter training varies from one country to another, as do the structure, requirements and duties of national registers. In most countries where interpreting services are already provided to some extent, there is some kind of a register but no interpreter authorization system in place. This makes it difficult to compare different register models. Table 1 below illustrates the key features of interpreter authorization and register models in use in Finland, Sweden, the UK, the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand. In Sweden, Australia and New Zealand, the authorization systems are common for the interpreters of both spoken and signed languages.

As the table indicates, similar criteria and descriptions have been defined for qualifications in the models used by different countries: relevant training, broad general education, in-depth knowledge of the field, strong interpreting skills, strong skills in both/all working languages, and solid ethical know-how. In many models, a personal study and development plan as well as continuous professional training are a requirement for qualification and authorization, or an element related to the validity of the authorization. Personal development shall also be proved periodically.

A New Register for Finland?

The above-mentioned problem related to the organization of the register is one reason why an administrative authority should be responsible for the planning, organization, development and maintenance of the Interpreter Register. The field requires a body to guarantee the rights of both clients and interpreters. This body should have the necessary power and opportunity to tackle problems and impose different types of sanctions where necessary – even to remove an interpreter from the register temporarily or permanently. The system should therefore include, for example, an ethics committee, consisting of representatives of client municipalities, interpreters and the authorities. The Interpreter Register could be maintained by

the Ministry of Justice or the Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, or a jointly by the two ministries. Alternatively, the authority could outsource the maintenance of the register to a business, as has been done in Australia and New Zealand.

In Finland, there are currently no common, specific, official criteria for a qualified interpreter. Nevertheless, an interpreter register maintained by the authorities would require clear qualification criteria. The register examination should also perhaps contain different levels of qualification, granting newly graduated interpreters, for example, the status of a general interpreter, and defining the situations in which this qualification would be sufficient. After a certain period, a qualified general interpreter could apply for the next level (e.g. a professional interpreter's proficiency test) and again after a certain period for a third level (e.g. an expert interpreter's and a specialist interpreter's proficiency test). In most of the aforementioned countries, such as the UK and the USA, interpreter and translator proficiency levels and their qualification criteria have been implemented using authorization and registration models.

When determining qualifications, it is important to remember that interpreters are a highly heterogeneous group in terms of skills, knowledge and field of interpreting. In addition to interpreters of spoken and signed languages, there are speech-to-text interpreters, interpreters for persons with speech defects, as well as deafblind interpreters, who use different interpreting methods. How could authorization methods be developed for interpreters using other than spoken or signed languages? How should interpreters registered in the existing Interpreter Register be taken into account in the new system, while ensuring the qualifications of interpreters who lack today's level of training and have only completed a short course or one-year training, or lack interpreter training altogether? These questions should be addressed in the design of the new register system.

One important area of development is the specification of minimum language proficiency. For this reason, the National Certificates of Language Proficiency of the National Board of Education should include proficiency levels for sign language. Work towards the establishment of

such proficiency levels began in 2010, and examinations are expected to be ready in 2013 or later (Ministry of Justice Publications 24/2011, 34). The definition of proficiency levels will allow the development of minimum criteria for each level of interpreting proficiency. The proficiency levels would form one part of the criteria of a common quality system, which would also include quality metrics.

One goal of interpreter registration would be to guarantee that only persons who have graduated from a degree programme and educational institution approved by the authorities are allowed to practise the profession of an interpreter. The rules of the new interpreter register would establish common criteria for training that allows a person work as an interpreter for sign language users, deafblind people, late-deafened people, or the users of spoken languages. In addition to interpreting skills, interpreter training aims to guarantee that all interpreters have strong ethical know-how right from the beginning. (Tulkkitoiminnan yhteistyöryhmä 2009)

The first interpreter register to be maintained by the authorities will probably be the register of legal interpreters. The National Board of Education has established a committee to prepare a Specialist Qualification in Legal Interpreting. The committee is expected to complete its work by the end of 2012. The committee's work is based on the Directive 2010/64/EU of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 October 2010 on the right to interpretation and translation in criminal proceedings.

Protection of the Job Title

In addition to the registration of interpreters, also the protection of the interpreter's job title should be taken into consideration. Professions that have a register of practitioners and the related legislation include, for example, lawyers (Advocates Act 496/1958; 569/2008), accountants (Auditing Act 459/2007), and medical doctors, nurses and other healthcare professions (Valvira 2011). Translators are the only language professionals with an official translator authorization system and legislation in place

(Act on Authorized Translators 1231/2007; Government Decree on Authorized Translators 1232/2007).

The protection of the job title could be used as grounds for establishing a new register and authorization system for interpreters. Legislation determining the training criteria and supervision of interpreters, as well as the establishment of a register of practitioners would facilitate the establishment of a system for developing the professional field of interpreting and would also enhance the public image of the profession of an interpreter.

The protection of the job title and the establishment by law of an authority responsible for interpreters would create a system through which anyone could verify an interpreter's qualifications at any time. This would be important also for the reason that interpreters, especially sign language interpreters, often work with children. Working with children, healthcare, the legal system, police and financial information places interpreters in a position of great responsibility. This responsibility necessitates a system of supervision, evaluation and authorization, which will license qualified interpreters to practise their profession.

Conclusion

Interpreting is one of the most important services for guaranteeing linguistic rights, freedom of expression, access to information, as well as equal participation and influencing opportunities for sign language users, the hearing impaired, and persons with speech defects (Language Policy Programme for the National Sign Languages in Finland 2010). Interpreting services and their quality and availability influence the quality of people's everyday life and their independence directly and indirectly. Therefore, from the perspective of guaranteeing the human rights of clients, it is important to ensure, control and develop the quality of interpreting. Two key duties of an interpreter register are to control the quality of interpreting and to guarantee the linguistic rights of clients in interpreting. Quality criteria in the register system and a quality assurance mechanism would

establish common quality criteria and a monitoring mechanism for the professional field.

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