Notes on the Basic Economic Forces Affecting Interpreting

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<https://jonathandownie.wordpress.com/2021/01/21/interpreting-is-heterogenous-but-economics-applies-to-everyone/>

This version has been cleaned up and includes sources that were not available when the original post was written. These support the overall argument.

Corrected 10th May, 2021

This short note will discuss the general economic factors governing the provision and availability of interpreting. Its original intended audience was practitioners who are looking to understand wider sectoral trends that will affect their work. However, it may prove to be of use as a future starting point for more detailed examinations of the economics of interpreting in specific regions, countries and commercial sectors. Its observations are based on current research and assumes that the comparative approach I suggested in my most recent published article “Interpreting is Interpreting” (Downie, 2020) provides a useful framework in which to see what is true for interpreting as a whole, irrespective of where it takes place. As such, I will assume that the economics of interpreting are basically consistent, even if interpreting practices are not. I also suggest what changes in demand for interpreting mean for the profession.

What interpreting looks like

No fair discussion of interpreting can take place without an open admission that interpreting practices vary greatly across time and space. From the community-building and strictly controlled interpreting of the *metourguemanim* in ancient Judaism (Kaufmann, 2005) to interpreters using various remote interpreting technologies to beam their work across cities or even continents (Braun, 2016), interpreters have always had to adapt to the communities, technologies, clients, and organisations with whom they work.

We therefore have to take this variation into account, while still maintaining that interpreting is a single human activity taking place in a variety of settings. A journalist interpreting an interview with a sportsperson (Torres Díaz and Ghignoli, 2015) is performing the same kind of service as interpreters in supranational organisations (e.g. Duflou, 2016). Interpreting is interpreting, no matter who does it, how it is delivered and whether we like the conditions under which it is commissioned, delivered or evaluated.

That was the main point of my most recent published paper (Downie, 2020), a post-print of which is available for free. Whether we look at conference interpreting, court interpreting, community interpreting or even non-professional church interpreting, we find striking similarities in interpreter behaviour and the challenges they face. There are, of course, important differences in terms of emotional burdens, (im)balances of power, mode, pay, etc.

Yet these differences don’t allow us to use our existing neat categories between different “settings”. A court interpreter in the US could receive more pay and better conditions than a conference interpreter in another country. Professional interpreters can do volunteer interpreting and may create systems to

allow such interpreting to be delivered under better conditions and so on. In this respect, Gile and Napier are right to assert the need for practitioners and researchers across a variety of 'settings' to work together (Gile and Napier, 2019). This point was given further force in the response by Buzungu and Hansen (2020) whose response called for a greater of acknowledge of the similarities between interpreting in different modalities.

Interpreting is incredibly heterogenous and yet there is still a lot of common ground, much more than anyone could imagine. One area that is usually overlooked is that the laws of economics, in particular the laws of supply and demand and questions around scaling, are issues that affect all interpreting. Interpreters who might have been insulated from their strongest effects, either due to working in a unique market or being subject to strict regulation, are suddenly finding that even with the best protections in the world, they are no longer immune.

Interpreting is growing, perhaps faster than availability

Contrary to the Public Relations pitch of automated speech translation companies, human interpreting is growing apace. In the USA alone, government figures predict 20% growth over the period 2019-2029, "much faster than the average for all occupations" (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). It is not clear that training can keep up with demand. Taking sign language interpreting as a single example, interpreter shortages have long been reported in the UK (West, 2018), the USA (Utah State University, no date) and Australia (Australian Government: Department of Social Services, 2004).

There are good reasons to suppose that these shortages are not limited to sign language interpreting. As recently as 2019, Nimdzi Research published a report on the state of the (presumably spoken language) interpreting market in the US, the UK, the Netherlands, Australia, Canada, Spain, Belgium, Russia, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Finland. In it, they concluded that:

There is not actually a scarcity of interpreters, but there is a scarcity of trained interpreters because as rates and working conditions are dropping, professional interpreters are either going on strike or leaving the profession altogether. (Nimdzi Insights, 2019, p. 15)

Thus, while there are signs of growing demand, due to immigration and global trade, supply issues remain. These may be due to an absolute workforce shortage, in the case of sign language interpreting, unhelpful immigration policies or due to unsustainable recruitment, working and payment practices.

It seems obvious that the problems with interpreting cannot therefore be fixed simply by increasing training opportunities or increasing the number of interpreting students. While it does seem to be true that training opportunities will need to be adjusted according to demand, increasing supply will not be sufficient in itself, while working practices cause the profession to lose its attractiveness. In addition, it is odd that statistics point to higher demand yet this increase in demand does not seem to have been translated into lasting increases in interpreter workload or interpreter fees across the board.

The Difference between Frequency and Profitability

Among the most tightly controlled markets are those where associations or their equivalents have convinced both buyers and suppliers of interpreting that certain conditions should be upheld. AIIC, the international association of conference interpreters, has long set the standards for what is and is not acceptable conference interpreting practice. While AIIC do not set rates of pay, it makes sense that

interpreters who are socialized into knowledge of equipment standards, shift lengths, breaks and team sizes will tend to be those who charge the most and whose conditions will be the best.

The confidential nature of much conference interpreting work seems to prevent thorough investigation of pay and practices but conference interpreting has often been viewed as the most advanced type of interpreting in terms of professionalization and, by extension, interpreter conditions. Researchers in various forms of community, medical and court interpreting have viewed the norms and standards of conference interpreting as the measuring stick to which other practices are to be compared (e.g. Mikkelsen, 1999; Clifford, 2004, pp. 92–93; Ivars, 2020). Mostly, these comparisons are done to show how a particular form of interpreting is not like conference interpreting and why practices or ethics must therefore differ from those established for that sector. Nevertheless, advances in conference interpreting practices form the background for discussions of what professionalization might look like elsewhere.

Yet, it almost goes without saying that conference interpreting is one of the least common forms of interpreting. In the aforementioned Nimdzi Research report, the US was the only country where the public sector made up less than 80% of the interpreting market and even then, the researchers argued that this was likely due to healthcare in the US being excluded from the public sector share (Nimdzi Insights, 2019, p. 4). Simply put, people get sick or come into contact with the legal system or need to communicate with government departments far more often than they go to conferences.

Conference interpreting may well be the best regulated and best paid segment of interpreting in many countries but it also accounts for the least work. This explains why, outside of a few “conference cities” and hubs of international diplomacy, conference interpreters in many countries tend to be interpreters and translators or interpreters and teachers or interpreters and writers or interpreters and something else.

Simply put, conference interpreting and its associated recruitment and working practices are designed for and make the most sense in situations where there is a relatively small cadre of interpreters working in a relatively small market segment, where prestige, exclusivity and personal relationships matter more than profitability, speed and efficiency. None of the conference interpreting standards were designed for the recruitment of interpreters *en masse* or for finding an interpreter in a language where professional training is rare, for a ten-minute emergency assignment. None of this is a criticism against conference interpreting standards but simply an admission that different market conditions and market segments impose different process requirements.

Demand for Interpreting is Changing the Rules

As interpreting becomes more ubiquitous, the requirements are shifting. While there will likely always be prestigious conferences and multi-billion-dollar business negotiations, there are kinds of assignments opening up that either didn’t exist before or were unknown to many spoken language interpreters.

This is most obvious in the case of the effects of the rise of remote interpreting. Sign language interpreters have been doing Video Remote Interpreting in various forms for years, with much of this moving to centralized call centres before the outbreak of COVID-19 (Napier and Leneham, 2011; Napier, Skinner and Turner, 2017). Now, spoken language interpreters across all sectors and market segments are delivering interpreting remotely, irrespective of the mode. The rise of remote interpreting likely

presages the use of interpreting in situations where buyers either did not arrange meetings at all or tried to get by with a very imperfect monolingual meeting.

In medicine, remote interpreting of various forms may come alongside telephone interpreting, allowing access to interpreters everywhere, from first contact with patients in emergencies to recurring care. In legal interpreting, the adoption of remote now is likely to lead to its continued use in some form. In business, it is now both technically and financially feasible to arrange interpreters for short meetings, which might not have taken place or might have relied on internal staff before.

As the variety of situations in which interpreting is used continues to increase, so will there be a need for a re-examination of hiring practices. Paramedics cannot wait for a local consultant to flip through their rolodex before someone comes on the line, fast-paced business might want to schedule meetings quickly to check stock delivery, check in on clients or pass on sensitive information.

What this means practically: learning from the translation sector

Again, none of this means that existing hiring and working practices should be completely abandoned. But it does seem that such practices will need to be happy to sit alongside practices that scale more easily and respond more quickly to shifts in demand. This is similar to the way in which the world of human translation has become increasingly fragmented, with MT in various forms, existing alongside large agencies, smaller specialised boutiques, and highly specialised translators, whose working practices may not have had to change much.

The challenge for the interpreting profession is to notice what has happened to translation and find ways to respond to shifting demand, before outside actors come in and impose their own will. Certainly, the increasing commoditisation of translation has had negative effects on large market segments in much the same way as ill-considered government contracting has done on certain interpreting markets.

If interpreters and their associations do not wish to see similar market distortions affect even wider swathes of the profession, creative thinking is needed now. Interpreters have to choose the segments in which they wish to work and take a realistic view of the needs, requirements and potential of those segments. For many interpreters and associations, the challenge will be to find means of scaling their work and helping to ensure the supply of qualified interpreters, while addressing the real risk that scaling could mean reductions in working conditions and pay.

Outside of the high prestige/high pay segments of interpreting, which exist in different languages and different contexts, fair scaling is the central challenge for the profession. It could even be argued that trying to move as much of the market as possible towards high prestige/high pay is a genuine goal. Yet high volume interpreting and short assignments will always exist and, unless the profession is happy to see machines take over such work, addressing the challenges of scaling and the difference between supply and demand will continue to form the two greatest challenges for interpreting.

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