Although interpreting has a long pedigree in Ireland, the wider development of conference interpreting in the Irish context is much more recent. My research study, which was recently published in a special edition of Translation Studies focusing on Ireland, is the first to explore the professional status of conference interpreters working on the Irish market.

Based on six semi-structured interviews, the findings showed that there is indeed an active and viable domestic conference interpreting profession, representing a close-knit group of qualified practitioners. Interviewees also noted that EU status for Irish has raised awareness of the translation and interpreting professions among clients and the general public. In terms of training programmes, the PDip/MA Conference Interpreting programme at NUI Galway was also frequently mentioned, with interviewees emphasising its status as the only course worldwide that trains interpreters with Irish, as well as the programme’s strong links with the relevant interpreting directorates of the EU institutions.

Regarding less positive aspects of the profession, however, the main issue raised by the interviewees was the absence of a protected professional title for conference interpreters. As outlined by Mary Phelan in Issue 2020/1 of the Bulletin, this shortcoming also affects other areas of the interpreting profession, notably in the medical and legal spheres. Recognising the important role played by the ITIA, some participants called for the creation of a standardised professional examination for conference interpreters. This could, for example, be modelled on the ITIA certification developed for legal translators, thus providing a kitemark for conference interpreters wishing to work on the Irish market. In addition, it was felt that this additional recognition would lead to enhanced quality and higher standards, as well as improved working conditions for conference interpreters across all language combinations.

Changes at EU level

The planned lifting of the EU derogation for Irish in 2022 was also mentioned by the interviewees. Indeed, it was anticipated that the creation of permanent Irish booths in the European Parliament and European Commission could lead to increased demand for interpreting with Irish in Ireland itself. However, as a European Commission report from 2019 outlines, a dearth of relevant linguistic personnel at the EU level means that there are no guarantees that the derogation will be lifted as scheduled.

In addition, given that the interviews for this study were conducted well before the COVID-19 outbreak, it was impossible to anticipate the changes that the pandemic would bring to the conference interpreting profession across the globe. As such, the impact of Brexit on the conference interpreting market in Ireland has not yet been fully felt. Interviewees noted that Dublin, as the capital of the largest English-speaking country in the EU, could see an increase in multilingual conferences, and thus increased work for Irish-domiciled conference interpreters. However, with large meetings banned and international travel curtailed due to coronavirus-related restrictions, remote interpreting has now become increasingly widespread across all jurisdictions. It remains to be seen, therefore, if this new reality will endure once the pandemic subsides.

Nonetheless, it is certain that the conference interpreting profession in Ireland will adapt to whatever future opportunities and challenges may arise. To conclude, it is hoped that the profession will continue to flourish and gain further professional status and prestige over the years to come.

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Link to “Translation Studies” article.