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## The invisible work of invisibility at work: public service interpreters as 'non-human beings'

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### Background

Public Service Interpreters (PSIs) have recently emerged as a new breed of interpreters in the UK. Their role is to linguistically assist public service users whose proficiency in English is limited in accessing a whole range of health, legal, social welfare and education services run by the government. However, as various codes of professional conduct set out, PSIs are required to 'melt into the background' and perform that role with total neutrality and impartiality.

Although evidence suggests that PSI is an ancient practice (Baker, 1998), its development into a profession is fairly recent (Corsellis, 2008), sparked by factors such as globalisation and the rapid expansion of multiculturalism, along with concerns about the use of informal language brokers (especially children). Framed by various ethical codes (ITI, 2002; IoL, 2006), as well as by guidance and policies issued by the government (Crown Prosecution Service, 2008; Communities and Local Government, 2007), the new profession has, however, taken on a dehumanizing aspect. PSIs often work in emotionally charged situations with distressed service users, for example, but are not allowed to interact supportively, give opinions, or show their emotions. Although interpreting between service professionals and users, they are expected to remain outside the boundaries of the social interaction that is taking place.

The tight occupational boundaries within which PSIs work are nonetheless contested. Service users and providers alike do not always know what to expect from PSIs (Alexander et al, 2005; De Vries, 2008). Users may resist official boundaries of the PSIs' role, desiring also empathy, support and advocacy. On the other hand, PSIs themselves may have views that resist the prescribed professional standards (Leschen, 2009). It is this tension around expectations of a 'non-human' presence, where the PSI stands as a supposedly invisible boundary object between service and user, that the paper will explore.

### Research Questions

The enquiry focuses on the invisible work PSIs undertake in order to pursue or resist concrete (physical) and abstract (linguistic) invisibility during interpreted events. In contexts such as those described above, how do they interpret and enact the required invisibility? How do they negotiate occupational boundaries with service practitioners and users? Are there instances when this stringent boundary becomes unstable and 'leaks', when invisibility breaks down into visibility, and when human social interactions intrude into their dehumanised position? How and why does this happen? And what are the effects on PSIs and their professional identities? If as Rancière argues 'politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time' (Rancière, 2004: 13), what is the political statement behind wanting interpreters to remain invisible?

The paper explores these issues in relation to particular aspects of the invisible work of being invisible: the aesthetic and political (Rancière, 2004), the emotional (Hochschild, 1983, Colley, 2003, 2006), and the ethical (Cribb, 2008; Cribb et al, 2008).

### Methods

Data for this research is drawn from ethnographic-type interviews carried out with PSIs, and from my own autobiographical account. The narrative technique is used to discover how participants make sense of their experiences of life and work (Andrew et al., 2008; Josselson and Lieblich, 1995). Their accounts are complemented by views obtained from public service users and providers through the

same interview method. The aim of data collection is threefold: a) to illustrate how in/visibility is interpreted from the three different perspectives of the parties involved, b) to determine the impact in/visibility has on the relationship between them, and c) to establish how it influences the outcome of the interpreted event.

To date, very little literature exists on public service interpreting, and what does exist focuses predominantly on the high quality of interpreting required (Corsellis, 2008). There is, however, a far broader literature on work place learning, social participation and professionalism (e.g. Colley et al, 2007) which will be reviewed. The article will draw on and critique the notion of communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Davies, 2005), exploring the extent to which PSIs are able to jointly construct their professional identities or operate largely in professional isolation.

## **Frame**

The paper draws broadly on Seddon et al's (2009) study of occupational boundary work in teaching as the analytical framework that informs our symposium. Within this approach, professional action can be seen as an 'active process of constructing professional identity and professional communities' (Niemeyer, 2009), with political, aesthetic, emotional and ethical dimensions. In addition, Goffman's concept of 'non-persons' (1963) is used to frame the experience of being invisible at work, and Sennett's notion of the corrosion of character (1998) is applied to understand the effects of these challenges in the workplace on PSIs' identities.

## **Research findings**

This study contributes to filling the gap in the literature on public service interpreting by exploring this new profession through a social (Wadensjö, 1998) rather than a linguistic lens. It uncovers the tensions between what is officially expected from PSIs and the realities they encounter, thus providing new empirical evidence on occupational boundary work in that field. In particular, it uses instances of 'leakage' to generate insights into the nature of such boundaries and their maintenance. The study shows how public service interpreting is shaped by the government, professionals and the media, and how PSIs react jointly or individually to the changes imposed. Participants' responses also shed light on the invisible labour - political, aesthetic, emotional and ethical - that ensues from their conditions of work and the practices engendered thereby.