Commonplace and Indispensable: the Interpreter in the new Reality

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Abstract

A central structure for the growth and development of healthy societies and commercial enterprises, of all sizes and types, is the international and national civil and criminal legal process. Its purposes are: to protect the rights of individuals, groups and companies, to empower them to exercise their proper responsibilities towards themselves, their families, communities, professions and partners and to investigate and bring to a fair trial any who seek improperly to deny them the opportunity to exercise these rights and responsibilities.

Equal access to equal participation in a transparent and accountable legal process - irrespective of language, culture and gender - is therefore a fundamental basis for successful development and co-operation. An essential pre-requisite for that is accurate communication and full understanding between all the parties involved, particularly where those parties do not share a language and culture.

This paper addresses two issues which derive from these assumptions:

1. The need for adequate standards for legal interpreters, translators and
2. The way these standards might be achieved with individuals who require or possess these skills in terms of:

* selection
* training
* assessment
* guides to good practice
* codes of conduct
* deployment and employment

The discussion will draw upon both the Malaysian and the UK experience to argue that there are 'international common denominators' which can be detected and shared in the process of creating the new profession of Public Service (or Community) Interpreter.

1. Setting the scene

Our title contains the key terms which set the parameters for the investigation in which the authors of this paper are involved. It seems wise, therefore, to define these terms in order to show how we intend to use them in our discussion.

The interpreter acts as an impartial linguistic intermediary between individuals and communities who do not share a common means of communication and is, as such,
required to serve the interests of the process rather than those of any individual involved in it. Hence, the interpreter must stand apart from persons and personalities in order to help the system operate efficiently and effectively. Interpreting as a profession can be traced back to the Nuremberg Trials at the end of the Second World War and the subsequent creation, in 1953, of AIIC; the International Association of Conference Interpreters. The members of AIIC constitute a cadre of highly skilled interpreters (some 3000 in all) who provide top-quality interpreting - frequently simultaneous - at international meetings of those involved in the academic, administrative, business and political worlds and, frequently, in such institutions as the United Nations, NATO, the European Union.

Traditionally, a distinction has also been drawn between interpreters - who communicate through the aural/oral channels of speech or, if they are sign language interpreters, the visual channels of facial expression and gesture or, for the deaf-blind, the tactile - and translators who concentrate on the visual channel of writing. In reality, of course, the two roles are frequently combined with interpreters being called upon to provide written translations of documents and translators spoken, sight translations of texts.

That such activities are commonplace and also indispensable virtually goes without saying in any multilingual society i.e. in practically every society in the world; monolingualism is a rare phenomenon, as the populations of Malaysia and the UK are well aware. Interpreting is commonplace in the sense that we are surrounded by it - even telephones and automatic cash-dispensers now ask us which language we would prefer to use - and indispensable in the sense that modern society could not conceivably operate without it.

However, the fact that interpreting is commonplace carries with it the danger of the professionalism of the interpreter being under-rated by society. Few non-professionals realise how difficult it is to act as an interpreter or how to communicate through one efficiently if they are required to. That it is indispensable does not lead automatically to the granting of the resources (material and psychological) which would nurture a profession which could provide the necessary bridges for communication between otherwise estranged groups.

What, though, is the new reality? There have, as far as we know, always been many languages in the world and there still are: currently, probably around 4500 (Crystal 1987: 284). Many of these languages have small speech communities which are dying out, as the ‘world languages’ (English, in particular) increase their domination of international communication.

None of this, however, constitutes a new reality; there have been international languages in the past and international empires administered through them. What is new is the virtually uncontrolled movement of information and people world-wide and, as a result of that, the creation of ever-more heterogeneous communities in which it is unrealistic for everyone to learn everyone else’s language.

This new reality encourages the use of lingua franca for mail and on the internet as well as for face-to-face communication. English is, according to Time July 1997 (Geary 1997), currently used for 75% of mail and 80% of e-mail and it is hard to see why this percentage
should reduce significantly in the near future. One dramatic effect of this trend towards universalisation can be seen in the reduction of other languages to the level of an endangered species and this threat, has, in turn, created a response in the form of programmes for language maintenance and the promotion of bilingual skills. Both of these movements have the inevitable effect of requiring increasing professionalisation amongst interpreters and translators.

Today, as we are increasingly recognising (see Bell and Ibrahim 1998a on the roles of translator and interpreter), the interpreter’s scope is being extended well beyond conference interpreting. Interpreters are now being called upon to operate in contexts of local and national rather than global and international needs and institutions (e.g. the law, health and local government services). We are, therefore, witnessing the emergence of a new branch of the profession: the public service interpreter (PSI).

2. The Malaysian context

Malaysia intends, by the year 2020, to have become,

"...a united nation, with a confident Malaysian society, infused by strong moral and ethical values, living in a society that is democratic, liberal and tolerant, caring, economically just and equitable, progressive and prosperous, and in full possession of an economy that is competitive, dynamic, robust and resilient". (Mahathir 1991:1),

all goals which depend on effective internal and external communication for their attainment.

Malaysia has always been a multi-communal, multicultural and multilingual society. Malay is the official as well as the dominant language, spoken alongside English and the languages of long-settled Indian, Chinese and indigenous aboriginal communities. To this should be added the languages of the recently arrived, 1.7 million migrant workers (a Ministry of Home Affairs mid-1997 estimate) not only from other states in South East Asia but from as far afield as West Africa, Bosnia, the Middle East and Bangladesh. As a result of this influx, the number of languages currently in use in the country may well have reached 25 or 30 (there are no available figures) and, in this situation, only Malay (often in its ‘low’ pidginised ‘bazaar Malay’ form) can serve, as it has for centuries, as the means of inter-lingual communication.

The need for interpreting (particularly, but by no means exclusively, in the legal system) arises directly, therefore, from the dichotomy between the Official Languages of the State and the language of many of those brought into contact with those institutions.

The language of justice, for example, is either ‘high’, standard Malay (the official language of Malaysia but the mother tongue of only part of the population) or standard English (the mother tongue of virtually none of the population). Both languages have clearly defined official roles (clause 152 of the Malaysian Constitution specifies them; see Legal Research Board 1997b: 133-34), with those of English still reflecting the historical influence of colonial times when the British imposed the English legal system on the country. It is, for example, still in use in the Higher Courts and available for use in the Sessions Courts.
What the language of the law is not, however, is the ‘low’ non-standard variety of the language. An individual may be fluent in Bazaar Malay but incapable of dealing with the language of the Court. In addition, there are speakers of Chinese dialects and Indian languages who are not proficient in standard Malay though able to communicate in everyday business of life in the language, and therefore entitled to the services of an interpreter. This is a general common law right, confirmed in Malaysia in the following terms: ‘Whenever any evidence is given in a language not understood by the accused, and he is present in person, it shall be interpreted to him in open court in a language which he understands’ (Criminal Procedure Code para 270 (i); see Legal Research Board 1997a).

Individuals are entitled to the services of an interpreter and to services which are adequate for their purpose. To move from policy statement to implementation is a matter of language planning tailored to the current needs of a rapidly changing situation (see Bell and Ibrahim 1998b on the place of public service interpreting within a general model of language planning). Planning is typically seen as organised in four interlinked stages:

i) problem-definition,
ii) strategy-creation and
iii) policy-implementation and
iv) evaluation of the effect of the strategy.

We might, however, ask at this juncture why a society should be concerned if people are unable to communicate in the language of the country they are living in? Why should scarce national resources be used to help such people? The answer, we suggest, is found in three principles: equity, probity and economy.

* **Equity:** The individual has an inalienable right to a fair trial and this implies *inter alia* that the person charged comprehends the charge and its full implications and is able to take legal advice and to participate fully in the proceedings of the court. Such a right is enshrined in the Common Law (confirmed in both the Malaysian Constitution as part of the first of the ‘fundamental liberties’—liberty of the person—and the UK 1993 Report on Criminal Justice) and in such international agreements as the European Convention on Human Rights. If the defendant is unable to exercise this right this situation will be, as the appeal judgement on the Iqbal Begum case (1991) states, ‘...a proper plea has not been tendered to the court’ and any judgement arrived at in such circumstances is null and void (see Corsellis 1995: 4-17 for this and for further, international, examples and significant judgements).

* **Probity:** A problem of this type impacts not only on individuals who received a service which is poorer than they are entitled to expect but on the public service professions themselves which are unwittingly compromised and put at professional risk by having to make decisions on the basis of inaccurate or partial information: decisions for which the professional will be held responsible.
In the simplest of terms, it costs more to put right on appeal a judgement based on flawed information derived from incompetent interpreting than it does to get it right in the first place. The additional (and unnecessary) cost is frequently far from negligible. For example, a murder trial in the UK - Regina v Smith, Smith and Sams 1995 - had to be halted after eight weeks as a result of faulty sign language interpreting. The defendants were remanded in custody for a further three months pending a re-trial and the cost to the taxpayer was calculated as in excess of £1 million (Daily Telegraph 1995). Such expensive miscarriages of justice are, in the context of inadequate provision, far from rare.

2.1 Defining the problem

The situation in Malaysia in the closing years of the century, is one in which the arrival of large numbers of non-Malay speakers and a context of rapid growth and expansion is putting great pressure on translators and interpreters whether acting in the public or the private domain.

The problem of the shortage of court interpreters has been recognised and has been the subject of public debate for a considerable period of time. Concern has been expressed by government ministers (including, most recently, Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister’s Department, Nazri Aziz; Bernama 1997), the judiciary (including the then Lord President himself Harun Hashim: Hashim 1996) and the interpreters themselves (Chun 1994). The situation appears to have remained unchanged since the early 1980s (Teo 1984) with few coming forward offering themselves as interpreters and, of those who are in service, many leaving after only a few months. Why should this be? Why, fifteen or more years on, is there still an acute (and growing) shortage of interpreters? The reasons seem clear:

* The age profile of the profession; many interpreters have retired or are nearing retiring age and few young interpreters are coming forward to take their place.

* More lucrative work available outside government service; freelance work and posts in broadcasting can pay up to four or five times as much.

* Low pay and inadequate recompense for responsibilities; the interpreter starts on a salary equivalent to, or even less than, that of the domestic servant and that can hardly be considered a living wage for a professional.

* Lack of appropriate criteria for entry; only Malaysian School Certificate - equivalent to ‘O’ level or NCVQ level 3 - and a credit in the Malay language and in a second language is required; this is clearly not the basis for the creation of a graduate-level profession.

* Lack of training; once selected trainees are given no specific training but learn by observation and trial and error in preparation for government examinations. Nor does passing the Court Interpreting course - run by the University of Malaya since 1989 - carry any professional recognition or pay increment.
Ambiguity of the role of interpreter; the ‘interpreter’ performs the dual role of clerk (a combination of scribe and usher) and interpreter plus others which, in the British system, would be carried out by a legally qualified Clerk of the Court. As a matter of urgency, this ambiguity has to be resolved in the interests of the proper administration of justice, let alone the status and prestige of the interpreter.

Small wonder, then, that untrained and unqualified individuals are taken on as temporary interpreters. Amazingly (and fortunately), this has yet to lead to a case as appalling as that of Iqbal Begum in the UK; sentenced to life imprisonment as a direct result of totally inadequate interpreting (see section 3.1 below). But the occurrence of a similar miscarriage of justice in Malaysia cannot but be a matter of time.

Small wonder too that interpreters encounter problems from both sides and are faced by accusations of corruption and partiality. A poorly paid and poorly trained profession deprived of political and social support cannot command respect and cannot deliver the service it is charged with adequately and efficiently.

The professional interpreter with an accredited qualification which recognises specialist knowledge - commercial and legal - and top-quality linguistic and communication skills is lacking at this crucial time in Malaysia’s development. Unqualified, unrecognised, unrewarded and unmotivated individuals are being pushed into taking responsibility for the lives and happiness of others, the careers of those who work in the legal professions and the reputation of the legal system itself.

Short-term compromise must be replaced by planned change. The ad hoc reliance on the staff of foreign diplomatic missions or, indeed, anyone who claims competence in the required languages (in the UK in 1995, the cook from a Chinese restaurant was given the responsibility of communicating with a crippled oil tanker, with the inevitable results) is simply not good enough.

2.2 Creating a strategy

A decision must be made as to whether such a service is to be state-operated (i.e. interpreters continue to be civil servants) or run by a privatised agency. Either way, the following requirements seem to be essential:

- An improved pay scale for interpreters; in UK, for example, the registered public service interpreter is normally freelance and receives the same hourly rate as the part-time University teacher. In Malaysia, where, in contrast, the interpreter is a permanent full-time member of the civil service receiving a fixed salary, this would be contingent on a revision of the entry qualification for the service.

- A precise job description; the present ambiguities, which make the execution of the interpreter’s responsibilities so difficult and stressful, must be removed.
Adequate training systems must be put in place; training has to be made relevant, sufficient and compulsory. At present ILKAP - a training institute set up under the auspices of the Prime Minister’s department - seeks to upgrade knowledge and increase awareness among the judiciary and legal departments but provides only a one-week intensive course for in-service interpreters.

There is clearly an argument for integrating this ILKAP short course with the full time one semester course in Court Interpreting offered by the Faculty of Languages and Linguistics in the University of Malaya. This is particularly pertinent in the context of the suggestion made by the former Lord President himself that court interpreting training be upgraded to diploma level. (Hashim op cit)

A regulatory body needs to be set up if Public Service Interpreting is to be recognised as a profession. Such a body would oversee and regulate the selection, training, remuneration and professional conduct of its members.

2.3 Implementing the strategy

Malaysia might care to take advantage of the UK and Australian experience (see Office of Multicultural Affairs 1996 for an introduction) and set up a properly researched Public Service Interpreting Project which could investigate needs and propose a national strategy which would train and put in place qualified interpreters for Malaysia’s courts, hospitals, local authority and immigration services in time for 2020.

3. The UK context

The United Kingdom is, like Malaysia, a multi-communal, multicultural and multilingual society with a single dominant official language and a limited degree of legal recognition for other indigenous languages, such as Welsh and Scots Gaelic. Again, like Malaysia, the UK has received substantial numbers of refugees and immigrants, many of whom speak a language other than English for hearth and home purposes within their own communities. There are no precise figures for the total number of languages in use in present-day Britain but it must be more than the 200 reported in London alone, where 25% of school children speak at least one other language in addition to English.

Malaysia in the late 1990s is currently facing problems which have arisen as a result of the actual appearance of substantial numbers of migrant workers. In the UK, a similar influx occurred in the 1960s and triggered the recognition of the need for adequate communication between the settled and the incoming communities. At present, the issue of a new influx of non-English speaking individuals and groups is, in the UK, rather more potential than actual. The Single European Act (1996) provides for free access and domicile in any member state of citizens of any other member state of the European Union. Whilst those working in the inner cities, in particular, have become accustomed to having to deal with clients whose preferred language is Asian or African, the future demand will be the ability to cope with speakers of European languages as well.
However, in contrast with Malaysia, only Standard English is available as the universal lingua franca. There is – nor has there ever been in the UK, as against some overseas ex-territories e.g. Papua New Guinea, parts of the Caribbean and West Africa – no equivalent to Bazaar Malay; a pidgin English.

3.1 Defining the problem

During the last 15 years, it has become increasingly clear that many linguistic minority groups - both immigrant and indigenous - have been, and to a degree still are being, disadvantaged in their dealings with the public services. Many professionals and informed members of the public felt a growing sense of discomfort about the adequacy of many of the services which were being provided. This was particularly the case where the quality of service necessarily depends on the quality of the information available to the professionals and that, in turn, necessarily depends on the quality of the communication between client and professional.

3.2 Creating a strategy: 1981-90

Recognition of problem in the early 1980’s led rapidly during that decade and in the next to the work of the Languages Lead Body in specifying national language standards, including those for translators and interpreters (Languages Lead Body 1993, 1995a) and the linking of these standards with the NVQ (National Vocational Qualification) system (Languages Lead Body 1995b).

At the forefront of organised work towards change was the Institute of Linguists, founded in 1910 and the largest and oldest UK language professional body. It has a membership of over 6500 and has the stated aims of promoting the learning and use of modern languages, improving the status of professional linguists, establishing and maintaining high standards of work and serving the interests of all linguists. The Institute provides a range of language qualifications - in more than 30 languages - which are recognised in education, industry and professional life and approved by the Secretary of State for Education. In addition, the Institute acts as a forum for linguists in all areas of professional and academic life and binds its members to disciplinary procedures governing professional conduct.

Not surprisingly, when a number of concerned individuals began seeking, in 1981, a means of addressing the problem of perceived low standards of language competence in the public services, it was the Institute to which they turned. In response, the Institute set up a panel of linguists and individuals from the Home Office and from the Department of Health which worked on the problem from 1981 to 1983 (by which time it had evolved into the Institute of Linguists Community Interpreter Project). By 1990, a model for the creation of a truly professional body of Public Service Interpreters had been built and piloted.

The Institute’s model (see Institute of Linguists 1990 for details) included: 1) criteria for the selection of students for training, 2) an access course and examination; the Bilingual Skills Certificate (BSC), 3) training to work in specialised fields: health, legal, local government, and an examination at a basic professional level in specialised options; the Certificate in Community Interpreting (CCI), 4) a code of ethics, 5) a guide to good practice, 6) professional structures and 7) training of trainers.
3.3 Implementing the strategy: 1990-96

After this developmental and pilot period, the Nuffield Foundation, with substantial financial assistance from the Home Office, set up the Nuffield Interpreter Project to support the work on the professional aspects of Public Service Interpreting carried out by the Institute of Linguists, by extending the tentative structure to the national level by:

- providing supplementary funding for colleges wishing to offer training courses,
- providing residential - weekend - courses for trainers,
- subsidising examination fees,
- carrying out a national survey of the use of interpreters in the legal system and
- raising awareness of the need for competent interpreters, especially in the legal system.

Both stages were informed by seven key assumptions which, we suggest, may have a degree of applicability to other contexts. We need to:

i) Admit that the reality is as it is and commit ourselves to a target of legislation and the provision of adequate resources to equip society to deal with the new reality. Multilingual societies are here to stay. There is no alternative to facing the fact of multilingualism. Multilingualism is not a problem; it only becomes one if we allow it to.

ii) Be realistic. In an ideal world there would be a recognised professional interpreter on call 24 hours a day, with the required language combinations and specialisms in every town and village in the country. Clearly, this is utopian but the National Register of Public Service Interpreters (NRPSI), which has been available since 1994, brings us closer to such an ideal. In addition, there are in all multilingual societies individuals available who are necessarily engaged in interpreting (with varying degrees of success) as part of their daily lives. All that is needed is to recognise and build on that experience.

iii) Create and co-ordinate an incremental national strategy. There are no immediate solutions and it is all too easy, in the face of urgent need, to adopt short-term compromises which slip easily into becoming unsatisfactory long-term solutions. The situation fifteen years ago was one of widespread collusion whereby people with inadequate skills were given insufficient training by well-meaning colleges and employed on low pay with euphemistically high-sounding job titles by compromising public services. No training, no qualification, no selection criteria, no clear job specification, no agreement on pay and conditions, no listing of available interpreters, no code of conduct, no guides to good practices; such was the situation in the early 1980s.

However, within this chaos lay signs of hope for the future; a pool of linguistic and professional talent waiting to be tapped and it was the Bilingual Skills Certificate (BSC) available through part-time courses in 22 centres throughout the United Kingdom which, by testing written and spoken competence in English and another
language in a general service context roughly equivalent to University Entrance level, began the process of training and accrediting such individuals. Although the Certificate does not constitute an interpreting qualification, it does provide attested evidence of a sound foundation in cross-cultural communication skills and, typically, facilitates access to further training as interpreters or to posts such as bilingual receptionist.

The higher qualification - the Diploma in Public Service Interpreting (DPSI); upgraded from the CCI and renamed Public Service to avoid confusion with ‘Community', in the sense of the European Community - is, like the BSC, an Institute of Linguists examination and qualification available in 24 centres in the UK. It can be taken in any one of four (two or even three specialisms can be, and often are, taken consecutively) specialist options; English and Scottish legal system (this includes police, court and probation services), health, and local government services (this includes housing, social services, education welfare and environmental health).

iv) Establish and enforce codes of conduct. A profession is a group of people who profess publicly to a set of values or to a code of conduct in order to protect their clients, the body of knowledge they possess and themselves as individuals. Translators and interpreters are (or need to be) professionals in the sense just proposed. The PSI, in particular, has a heavy responsibility. After all, failure to translate a poem 100% accurately is unfortunate but no reader of the translation is likely to lose their life or liberty as a result! In addition, and most importantly, there must be disciplinary procedures which enforce the code of conduct to which the members of the profession have agreed. Contravention of the code can, and should (as it is in the legal and medical professions, for example) be punished (after open and proper investigation by the recognised Disciplinary Panel) by admonishment, suspension or - in an extreme case - expulsion from the profession. It is also essential that there should be parallel codes and agreement on good practice if the services are to be delivered satisfactorily across languages and cultures and disciplinary procedures of this kind are now in place not only for the interpreting profession but also for the public services themselves.

v) Make the skills accessible. Unless the public is able to find accurate and up-to-date information on the membership of a profession - qualifications, experience, expertise, location, availability - all the training, codes of conduct and guides to good practice come to little. What is needed is an easily accessible and readily available list of its accredited members. For PSI, this came into being in 1994 with the production of the NRPSI. This was produced (with the support of the Nuffield Foundation and the Home Office) by the Institute of Linguists from whom it can be obtained on subscription (on disk and in hard copy). The Register is owned, administered and regularly updated by the Institute and contains, in addition to the list of members (covering the four specialisms and up to 100 languages), guidelines for employment arrangements (terms of engagement) and for good practice as well as a copy of the code of conduct. Similar registers - though more limited in scope - also exist for bilingual psychiatrists and for interpreters working with the deaf (the CACDP Directory; first published 1992).
vi) **Provide professional support and continuing professional development.** All professionals need support from their peers and access to new knowledge and skills as they become available. The Institute of Linguists has a specialist Public Service Division which acts as a professional forum through which problems are aired, workshops run (Adams, Corsellis & Harmer 1995) and mutual support is provided. There is, however, still, a need to formalise routes to continuing professional development e.g. developing new specialisms and raising the individual’s skills to a higher level.

vii) **Provide interdisciplinary conventions and skills.** An adequate system of public service interpreting requires more than the training and accreditation of professional interpreters. That is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for an effective service. No matter how good the interpreters are, the system will fail if the users (those who work with interpreters) are ignorant of the role of the interpreter and put improper or even impossible demands on them. There is a need for the training of those who work with interpreters in, for example, the housing tribunals, the police stations, the accident and emergency units of hospitals. There is a need, too, for those who work with bilinguals to realise that what is at stake is not just a language; there is a cultural dimension which, if mishandled, can be as destructive of adequate communication as linguistic incompetence can. Some services have been aware of the need for a good while and have produced exemplary guidance for their professionals and interpreters working together (e.g. Cambridgeshire Constabulary 1990) but more, inevitably, remains to be done. Finally, the bilingual service provider needs not only to be trained but to be recognised and rewarded within the structure of the service e.g. bilingual doctors, policemen, lawyers should have their bilingualism publicly recognised in their job description, reflected in their work-load and rewarded with appropriate increments and promotion. Few will come forward to offer their expertise, if it is seen as no more than an optional ‘add-on’.

### 3.4 The Present situation

There is still much to do and while it would be unwise to be complacent, it should be recognised that an enormous amount has been achieved and we now have a much clearer and workable framework within which to grow and develop. In this, the role of the Institute of Linguists has been, and remains, crucial and the existence of over 400 fully qualified DPSI interpreters (and twice that number coming forward for examination) the firmest foundation for the future. There is an increasing realisation that other disciplines need to learn about the expertise, the role and the responsibilities of the interpreter and that the public services need to develop and implement the skills and strategies required to work across languages and cultures. Indeed, the next crucial step is to train those who work with interpreters and this is the thrust of the developmental work being carried on at the present time.
3.5 Evaluation

There are indicators that the system is beginning to work and is being recognised by users. The DPSI is recognised as having the value of a level 5 NCVQ, as the equivalent of a BA and the Institute of Linguists is the only UK awarding body for interpreting at NVQ Level 5 and has a pilot scheme (1997-98) for the assessment and award of the Level 5 NVQ for Public Service Interpreting. Possession of the DPSI is sufficient to make a candidate eligible to apply for full professional membership of the Institute of Linguists.

In addition, quality assurance is guaranteed for all courses, since they are offered at accredited institutions which provide their own internal mechanisms for approval and review. These involve the rigorous scrutiny of new courses at the initial validation stage and regular annual monitoring and periodic revalidation by internal validation and review panels and by means of the reports of external assessors and examiners.

Increasingly, the service providers expect and demand interpreters who are on the Register and reject those who are not and, above all, it is the recent decision by the Lord Chancellor's Department which provides the strongest positive evaluation of the system which is now in place. The (currently still draft) requirement reads 'it is the aim that by the end of 2001, every interpreter working in courts and police stations should be selected from the National Register of Public Service Interpreters'. This constitutes an enormous and irreversible advance which firmly establishes the profession and vindicates all the work which has been done over the last fifteen years.

4. The future

The model described earlier must, necessarily, be specific to the needs of those who live in or visit the United Kingdom; no one would suggest for a moment that it was universally applicable in all its aspects. Each society has its own individual needs which have grown up over time and its own particular ways of dealing with problems.

However, it seems plausible that we can discover international common denominators - general standards of good practice and equivalences of standards which can be codified and applied world-wide - and that, presumably, is a goal which we would all support; agreed standards which cross national boundaries on matters of immigration, drug control, family and commercial law. The basis of economic growth (articulated with great clarity in Vision 2020) is, after all, a viable, dynamic and cohesive social structure and this cannot be achieved except in the context of mutual tolerance and understanding of the language and culture of others. Languages and cultures are separate but the bridge is there in the interpreter if we are willing to nurture the necessary skills. Better communication cannot but be to the benefit of all; poor communication leads to the dire results we all know about.

Closer to home, we propose to investigate the extent to which the Malaysian situation resembles that of the UK and how the UK model might serve as an impetus to the creation of a professional Public Service Interpreting infrastructure in Malaysia. We have already begun this comparative process and are now seeking the moral and financial support which will make Malaysian PSI a reality.
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