

AUSIT Jill Blewett Memorial Lecture 2007

Translation of a Profession: An Interpretation

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Introduction

President of AUSIT, Ms Sarina Phan, special guest Dr Blewett, other members of the AUSIT executive and your colleagues and friends who are here, I am flattered to be asked to present the Jill Blewett Memorial Lecture and thank you for the invitation. I am indeed humbled by Jill's contribution and those who preceded me in giving this lecture in her honour.

Before proceeding may I congratulate you, Sarina, on your appointment as President of AUSIT. I know that the chair of NAATI, Susan Bures, who is here today, would want me to congratulate you on behalf of the NAATI board as well. We look forward to a very productive time working with you to build on the existing relationship between AUSIT and NAATI in the interests of the profession and the communities we serve.

As most of you will know I have been in this role for only two months. The translating and interpreting community is largely new to me, although multiculturalism isn't. I am also not directly involved in the profession as a linguist, translator or interpreter. In appointing me from outside of the translating and interpreting sector I am sure the NAATI board has taken into account the wealth of experience and expertise in translating and interpreting that I am able to draw on in the NAATI community and beyond, such as professional bodies like AUSIT and NAATI's Regional Advisory Committees (RACs). The board looked instead to the other attributes I can bring to the role from my background in other sectors. One of these is my interest in the structure and functions of professions and professional education.

When I was asked to give this lecture I contemplated possible topics and decided that, as I am new to this world of translating and interpreting, I could perhaps offer some 'outside' views on the translating and interpreting profession, unencumbered by any prior position. My aim today is to offer a perspective as a newcomer, which I hope may provide a foundation for AUSIT and NAATI's continuing work together in building the profession. I trust you will accept my comments in the spirit intended and forgive me if I cover territory you have already considered.

Translation of a Profession

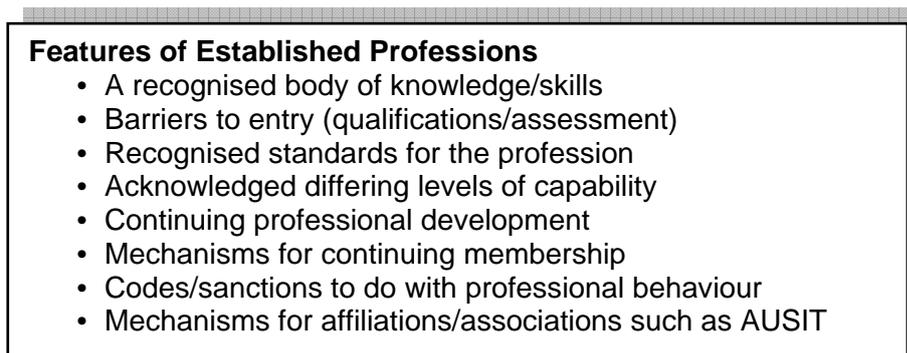
In choosing the title for this lecture, aside from a play on words, I was seeking to make a point. An external observer can indeed see signs of a profession 'in translation' e.g. standards have been set and codes of ethics adopted, there is an accreditation system, a professional development system is being implemented, there are professional bodies (particularly AUSIT) and a system for maintaining accreditation is being implemented. These are all marks of a profession that is on a firm foundation, although we would probably all recognise that some of these developments are in early days. There are also signs of tensions between the views of various groups that have an interest in the welfare of the

profession – a healthy sign of a desire for self determination, albeit with some risks of unproductive conflicts.

The Profession

You will perhaps be surprised by the many views of the profession that have either been expressed to me or, more commonly, are implicit in the writings and behaviour that I have been introduced to recently. In trying to gain an appreciation of all of this I have drawn on a framework to understand the profession. In my work with other professions I would generally look for these types of characteristics in a profession (Fig 1).

Fig 1



You may care to reflect on how you see the translating and interpreting profession in the light of this framework.

What I would like to do now is to turn to a very fundamental question that has been at the top of my mind recently – what is the identity of the profession?

Fig 2

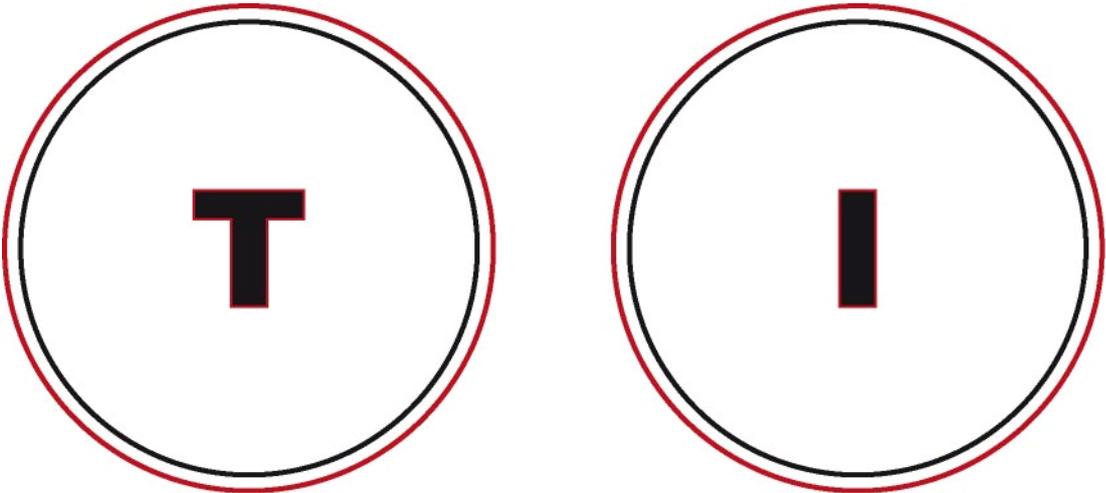
Identity of the Profession?



Is this (Fig 2) an accurate representation – i.e. translation and interpreting are two aspects of a coherent profession? Some have put that view to me.

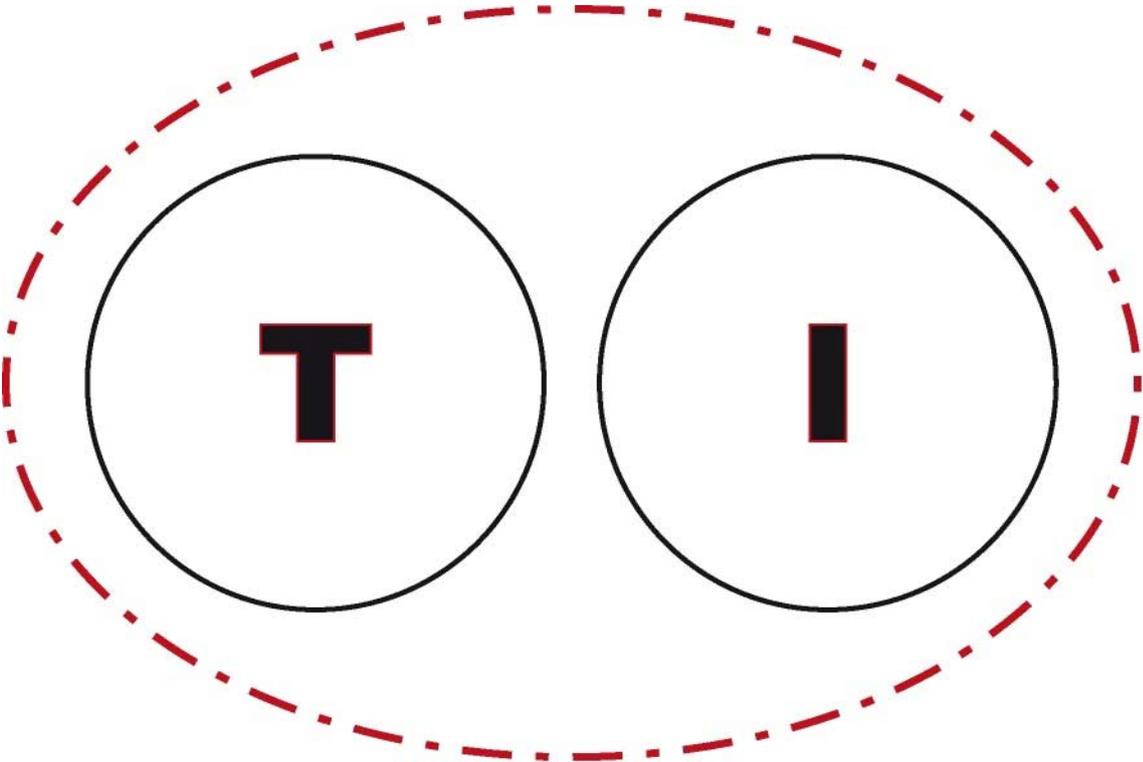
Another view (Fig 3) that can easily be inferred from some material I have looked at is quite different, where there are in fact two separate ‘professions’.

Fig 3



Another view (Fig 4) is that the two components of the profession are parts of a greater sum (dotted line), although quite what constitutes the embodiment of the greater sum is perhaps not so clear. Perhaps the name of AUSIT speaks to this model.

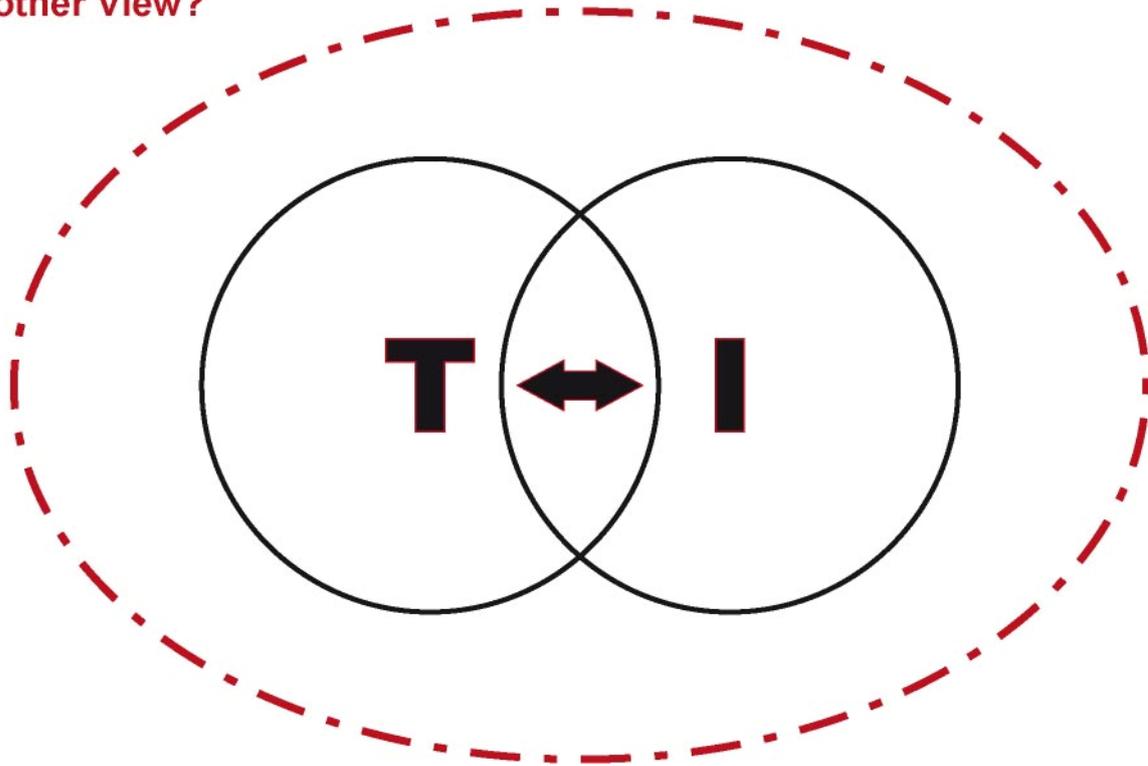
Fig 4



Another view is this (Fig 5), where one could envisage a degree of common ground between the components. If you accept this view you will no doubt have a view on the extent of the common ground.

Fig 5

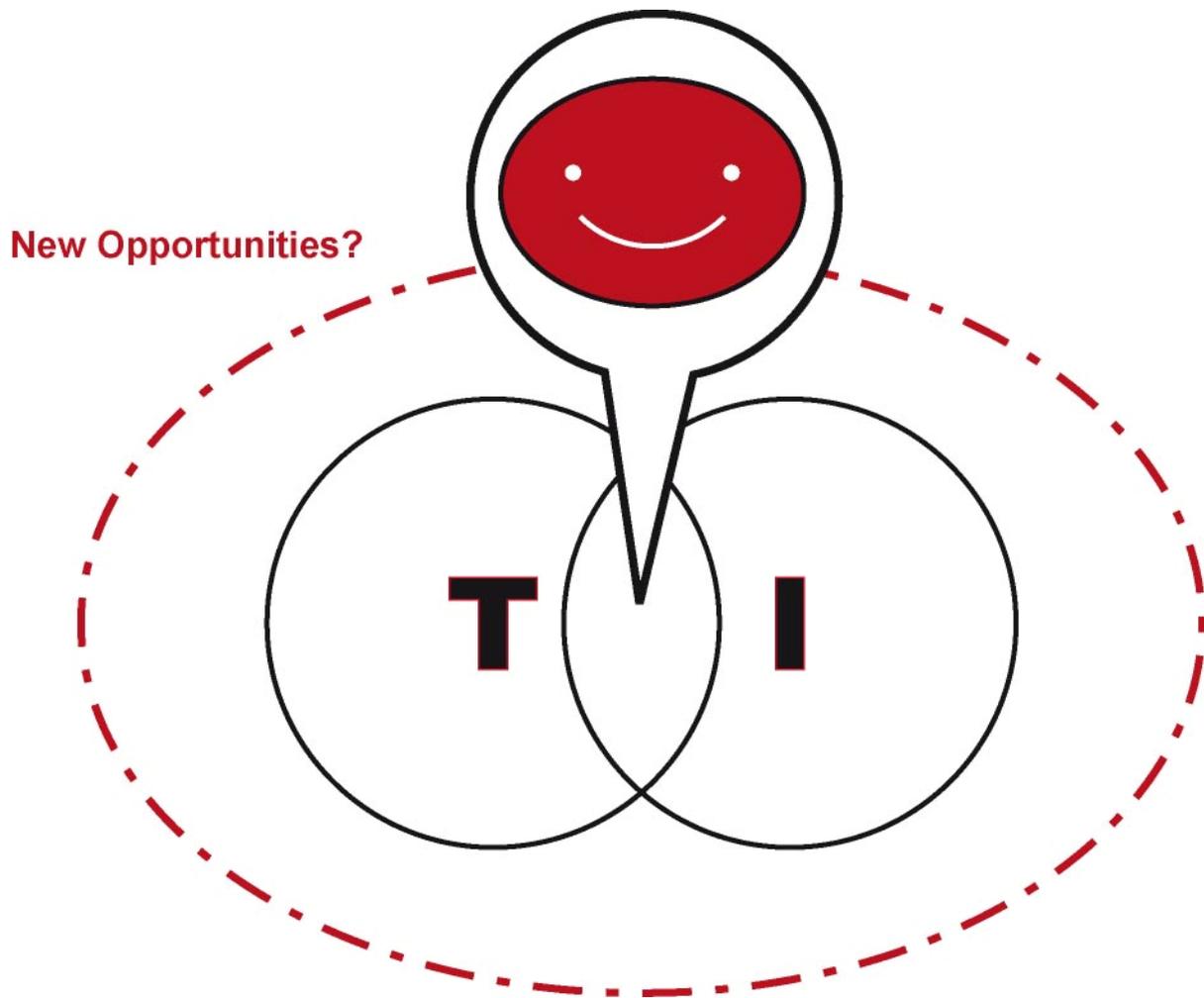
Another View?



What I have tried to do is illustrate a variety of views that one can form of the 'profession' as a newcomer, and a member of the external community, drawn largely from artefacts as it were – the writings, expressed views, and behaviours that I have encountered.

Why do I think a clear identity is important? There are many reasons for being clear on a professional identity but let me illustrate one.

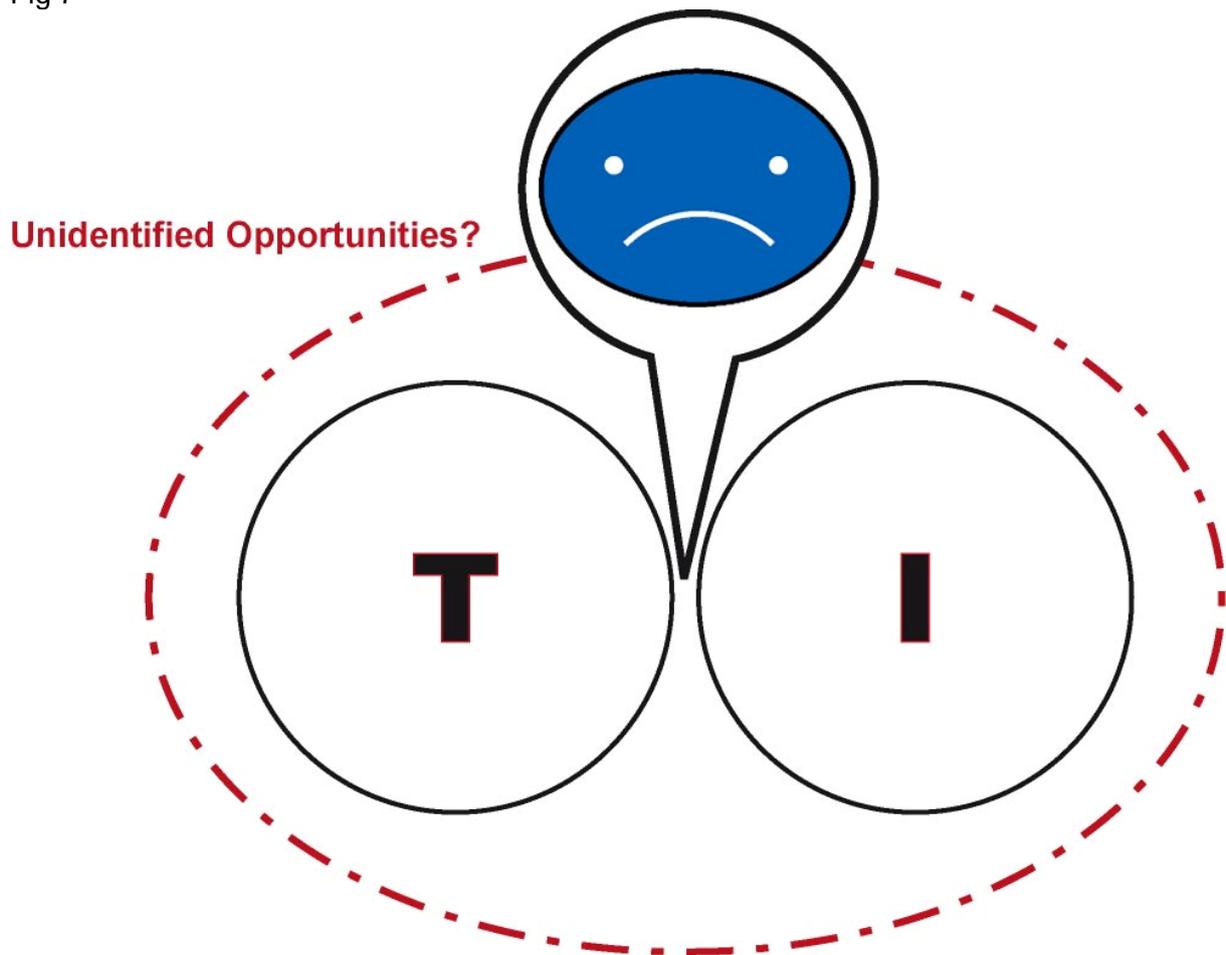
Fig 6



In my view the common ground shared by parts of a profession can be a fertile place for its evolution as a profession (Fig 6). For example, the discipline of physiology arose from the application of the principles of chemistry and physics to biology. Chemists and physicists still recognise their separate disciplines today but within the umbrella of the sciences they have spawned the discipline of physiology, which has become the basis of all clinical professions.

How well do other models of the profession fare? If we return to the two-component model (Fig 7), there is a risk that opportunities will not be identified and/or will be lost to the profession.

Fig 7



This is clearly more of a risk if an embracing 'envelope' or 'umbrella' is absent from our conception of the profession and there is nothing to bring together the separate components in a way that may stimulate cooperation and collaboration in facing new challenges. One could argue that AUSIT, ASLIA and NAATI form critical parts of this national envelope and that the model of fostering creative common ground (Fig 6) could offer a symbolic basis for our future work together.

In summary I believe, in the eyes of a newcomer, the concept of a 'profession' as it relates to translating and interpreting could still do with more work to strengthen the identity of the profession, at least as it is portrayed to an outsider. I noticed last night at the awards dinner that there was much reference to an 'industry' and a passing reference to increasing 'professionalism', but rather less reference to 'a profession'. Perhaps this is a point on which we agree. I hope it is something on which we can work together as we build on what has been achieved and look to the future.

Before we leave the concept of the 'profession', it is instructive to look at the community's view of the profession. All professions are under community scrutiny – translation and interpreting is no exception. During my involvement with the development of competency standards for many professions in the 1990s, I was surprised by the different perspectives held by the members of professions and those who observed the professions.

What do the clients of professions want? At the heart of most clients' expectations are:

- availability of the types of professional services wanted
- access to those services, and
- an acceptable (and affordable) price for the services.

The quality of the services may also be important, although clients are variously placed to judge the quality of the services across different professions, depending on the complexity of the services. How well are the clients of your work able to judge quality - and on what basis? Do they get it right?

Members of professions are generally passionate about their role and their work and enjoy the intricacies of their art. Questions such as 'what actually is linguistic competence?' and 'how might it be measured?' may be of great interest to professional translators and interpreters, but clients and employers may have much less arcane interests and much more utilitarian expectations.

For example, a policy maker might simply regard professionals as 'units of labour' to be applied to a task and the profession itself might be viewed in the 'aggregate' as a part of the societal fabric, or a 'black box' as it were. This view is often anathema to professionals who are typically more concerned with human interactions and dynamics at the one-on-one level. Nonetheless, I feel it is useful in this context for those of you who are not involved in the policy-making world to understand how you and your profession may be seen. From the standpoint of working with policy makers, it is helpful to appreciate this perspective of the profession when presenting your views, no matter how much you might think it understates (or even misunderstands) the contributions of individual professionals.

This of course brings me back to the concept of what is the identity of the profession and the importance of the members of the profession being able to articulate that identity clearly. How do you believe the profession is, and should be, seen by clients, policy makers, governments etc?

Before leaving this topic of perceptions about the profession you may be interested to know what common messages I have been receiving in the last few weeks.

Fig 8

Community View



Report Card?

Could do much better at raising community awareness about the professional skills required for translating and interpreting.

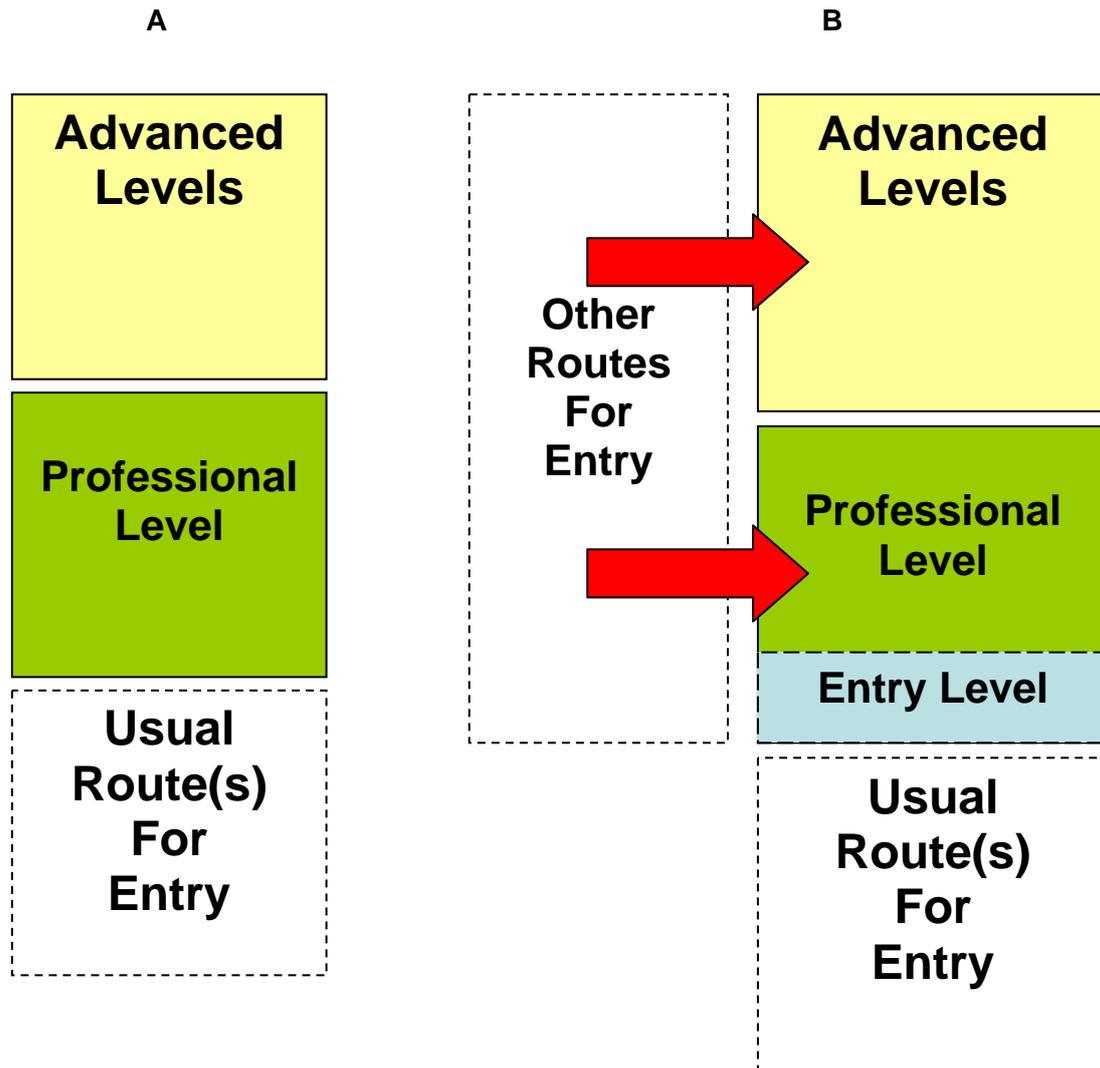
It seems to me that the community and governments have a deal more to learn about what are the essentials of being a competent member of your profession. Whose role is it to communicate and advocate?

Structure of the Profession

Setting aside the issues I have already discussed about the nature of the profession, I would now like to turn to the 'structure' of the profession. Are there definable structural components and how do they fit together?

Professional structures are variously clear across the professions I have looked at, but something along the following lines is usually evident (see Fig 9A).

Fig 9



I had hoped to be able to discern some similar structural arrangement for translating and interpreting, and found some interesting variations (See Fig 9B). There are a variety of options for entry to translating and interpreting. In addition to an educational route through NAATI-approved courses (a 'traditional' educational model for professions) or other courses, there are also the options of assessment of overseas qualifications (quite common in the regulated professions) and by NAATI testing.

The option of NAATI testing, with its inherent flexibility of testing opportunities, is seen by many to be a strength of the profession, although some (including members of AUSIT) have

put to me that testing might usefully be augmented by an induction program to deal with the contextual and other factors that need to be surmounted in practice. This is an area of potentially fruitful exploration and collaboration for NAATI and AUSIT in future.

Some professions, e.g. pharmacy, define an 'entry level' or 'intern level' of the profession where practitioners work under supervision for a period. This poses special challenges for translating and interpreting where practitioners typically work one-on-one in a market that has limited capacity (or willingness) to pay for one practitioner, let alone a 'supervisor'. Irrespective of these difficulties, perhaps there is a need to contemplate whether it would be helpful to define an 'entry level' for the profession and what that might mean e.g. for support, mentoring, professional development etc. Could/should there be some formal 'rite of passage' from entry level to 'professional' level and, if so, what might that be?

It has been put to me that the current paraprofessional level might be seen as an entry level. This poses some difficulties. The entry level concept implies that a practitioner at this level has the basic attributes (knowledge, skills, etc) of the professional level but needs to develop full professional capability through additional experience, supervision, workplace testing or the like. In contrast, our paraprofessional level actually identifies a different level of capability in a similar way that in nursing, for example, two different levels of capability are recognised through the title 'enrolled nurse' (EN) and 'registered nurse' (RN), the former being required to work under the supervision of an RN. Like our paraprofessionals, an EN cannot progress to RN by workplace experience alone.

A discussion of levels of a profession would not be complete without mention of some interfaces. Whether or not the translating and interpreting community wishes to identify an 'entry level' it is important to contemplate those who are just about to enter the profession. Could we (or should we) do more to assist the soon to be 'novices' of the profession by e.g. mentoring, orientation, induction etc? I have already alluded to AUSIT's view about induction as a possible entry requirement. Who might be involved in these processes, particularly in such a dispersed community? Would it be practicable, or even possible, to establish debriefing for critical incidents as occurs in some professions?

In a similar vein, should the profession be actively encouraging transitions from one level of the profession to another by e.g. role modelling, streamlining opportunities, professional development geared specifically toward transitions. Some of you have been critical of employers in this respect for not being willing to pay more qualified practitioners commensurately with their more advanced skills. Is there more to be done in relation to advocacy?

Last but not least is the matter of maintenance of membership of a profession. All of the regulated professions are able to demonstrate a mechanism through which members' competence is maintained and developed and some record of that development is kept. This approach of collective professional responsibility for the continuing quality of professional work has proved remarkably effective in protecting the professions from external interference.

Important steps have been taken to establish such mechanisms for translating and interpreting through the emerging revalidation system. I am aware that this has not been an entirely harmonious journey, but I am encouraged to find that the underlying concept of continuing professional development is not generally at issue; this perhaps augers well for our capacity to work through the practical issues of implementation that lie ahead.

Standards

Many but not all professions have defined standards for the profession. This activity was stimulated in large part by the Commonwealth Training Reform Agenda of the Hawke government under Minister Dawkins in the 1990s, when there was a concerted national effort to develop competency standards for professions. Advances have been made in setting standards for translating and interpreting through the different levels of NAATI accreditation. Development of competency units for a national training package is also envisaged. My view is that both of these developments have considerable merit but neither fully addresses the competency of the profession overall. My suggestion is that it would still be useful for the 'profession' (however defined) to revisit the development of professional standards. Some of the questions that might be asked are:

- Are profession-wide standards necessary?
- Should they be explicit or implicit?
- What type of standards would be most helpful e.g. competency standards, accreditation standards?
- Could the standards simply be qualification-based?
- Is there a need to define different levels of the profession more clearly?
- What would be the scope of the standards e.g. professional level, entry level, all levels?
- Who should 'own' the standards on behalf of the profession?
- Should there be a separation of the development of the standards (e.g. the profession) from education toward them (e.g. training packages) and testing against them (e.g. NAATI?)

In this context I would like to comment on the proposed development of competency units for national training packages for translating and interpreting. This is potentially a very helpful development in contemplating overall standards for the profession, for focusing training and for laying the foundations for improved articulation between different 'levels' of the education system. However, it is also at risk of encountering some of the difficulties that occurred with the development of competency standards for other professions such as:

- confusion of competency standards for a profession and competency units of a training package – they are not the same thing (although one may inform the other)
- failure to recognise and accommodate the different educational philosophies that can exist between higher education (HE) and vocational education and training (VET), which cannot be ignored e.g. in contemplating articulation arrangements and 'pathways' between VET and HE
- inadequate recognition of all of the sections or groups within the profession in conceptualising competency units.

Regulation

Translating and interpreting are not among the regulated professions. This too is a matter for contemplation as the profession develops. Some may see advantages in a more regulated environment (e.g. a clearer professional identity, stronger sanctions against professional misconduct, exclusion of unqualified practitioners) while others may prefer the present arrangement. Whether a statutory base would be desirable or whether self-regulation would work are relevant questions if the profession wishes to look at regulation.

Sanctions

I have now had the opportunity to participate in a number of meetings where there has been animated discussion about how to deal with a practitioner whose work does not seem to be up to standard. While this concern reflects an emerging expectation of a professional 'standard', even if tacit, a deal of discomfort has been expressed about initiating a one-on-one interaction to address the matter, no doubt in part reflecting a wish to avoid potential conflict in the interests of maintaining a working relationship. Other professions have explored ways of dealing with this type of situation by e.g. establishing a panel of respected peers who could be asked to have a non-confrontational 'fireside chat' or the like. Some professions have established an informal local network of peers who observe each other periodically and give constructive feedback. What ever may be the preferred approach(es), a profession will be more credible (and perceived to be so) if it can show mechanisms that deal with the odd 'bad apple' effectively, ideally through formative feedback.

There is currently an opportunity to think about this idea in the context of revalidation. Perhaps some form of peer-review might be a component of accepted professional development, both for the reviewers and the reviewees. This could e.g. provide an opportunity for those who believe they do not need a revalidation process for themselves, to offer leadership to their peers.

Mutual Opportunities

What I have tried to do today is to look at the translation and interpreting profession through the eyes of someone who is accustomed to looking at how professions operate. I hope I have been able to highlight some issues in a way that might be helpful to the future of translation and interpreting.

I do believe this profession is 'in translation' and has great opportunities to look to its future. The AUSIT excellence awards celebration last night was a powerful indication of the energy, commitment and individual professionalism you are able to harness for the future of the profession. Nonetheless the challenge is to establish a coherent whole that is clearly recognised by the community and accepted and 'owned' by its members.

There is much that can be learned from others, particularly the well-established regulated professions. Translators and interpreters don't need to make the same mistakes that some professions have made (e.g. destructive and distracting political activity) and you do not have to adopt any particular model of a 'profession'. However, I believe it would be most unwise not to learn from others who have taken the journey before us. I will regard it as a privilege if I can be part of working with you all in the times ahead. So too will NAATI.

If I can finish with two thoughts – you may be interested to know what has been the foremost message I have heard about the profession as I have travelled around the NAATI and AUSIT communities. Aside from concerns about working conditions, the most common message has been (in one form or another):

'Bilingualism alone does not a translator or interpreter make'

As I mentioned earlier, much more needs to be done with the external community to convey this message that bilingualism is necessary but not sufficient, but it is heartening to see that this is such a clear message within the translating and interpreting community.

If I might return to the theme of this lecture by borrowing from the 'bilingual' message, a message I would like to close on is:

'Translating and interpreting do not alone a profession make'

There are many challenges and opportunities ahead in building the profession. I have covered some of these today including:

- clarification of the identity of the 'profession' and its 'ownership'
- the desired structure of the profession including identification of an 'entry level'
- induction, mentoring, role modelling and debriefing
- professional standards and training packages
- sanctions and counselling
- effective advocacy.

I look forward to being part of the next phase of the profession's development and working with AUSIT and our other colleague organisations in particular.

In honouring Jill Blewett today I feel sure that she would have been pleased with the progress that has already been made with your profession and would have relished the chance to overcome the challenges ahead.

Thank you for the opportunity to give this lecture.

Lindsay Heywood
November 10, 2007