

**THE INAUGURAL JILL BLEWETT MEMORIAL LECTURE**

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## *Introduction*

I feel honoured and humbled to have been asked to present the Jill Blewett Memorial lecture. This is an honour which I would gladly have foregone as, by its very nature, it implies that we have lost someone who, to me was more than a colleague and had become a personal friend. I would like to thank AUSIT for this initiative, I believe this is a fitting tribute to someone who gave her all to the interpreting and translating profession. I would also like to publicly thank NAATI for publishing the Jill Blewett Papers.

I will begin my presentation by making a few remarks about Jill's work and on her impact on the work of others in I/T circles. I will then offer a few thoughts on the evolution of the I/T profession in this country, not in chronological order but by considering certain recurring themes which have occupied the minds of those involved in I/T for the last 18 or so years. In concluding, I will allow myself some remarks about where I see the profession going in the next few years.

## *Jill Blewett*

It is very difficult to add to the tributes which have been paid to Jill since her untimely passing; she was a woman of vision and energy, an energy which she displayed in the literal sense, as anyone who tried to keep up with her gruelling schedule would know, and in a spiritual sense, as anyone who knew her will testify.

My friendship with Jill began with a disagreement. We had decided to present a joint paper on I/T at the Applied Linguistics Association of Australia's Conference in Melbourne. This was the first time that any space was being given to I/T issues at an annual conference of a "mainstream" organisation and we began to have differing opinions as to the format and content of the paper. It was through a series of brutally frank exchanges about what each had drafted that I began to appreciate the depth of Jill's feelings about and knowledge of, I/T.

Soon after we found ourselves occupying similar positions of responsibility vis-a-vis interpreting and translating programs and we began to talk to each other on a regular basis about common problems and often common solutions. Some of these conversations would take place in airport lounges between flights from Adelaide to Canberra, as Jill fulfilled her other obligations to NAATI or to the protocol of the Australian Government. Often we would spend considerable time on the telephone, late at night, as we tried to grapple with some urgent issue, usually to do with funds being cut. My last conversation with her was on the 9th of October 1988, the night before she died.

I decided to recount this in order to illustrate how her contribution to the I/T profession was constructed; not through grandiose and pompous pronouncements, not through self-aggrandisement but through the dogged pursuit of a vision made up of a series of more modest visions, as it were, which had to be encouraged, nurtured and turned into realities. It was manifested also by her willingness to speak to countless groups about the basic issues in I/T practice and at the same time through the preparation of submissions to chart the policy course for I/T in Australia.

What is the significance of her contribution? Undoubtedly, but not solely, her most telling contribution has been to the field of I/T education. This was achieved not only through her developmental work in the Level 2 and Level 3 courses in Adelaide, but also in her involvement with NAATI in various capacities. Her overseas experience helped us

to begin peeling back the cringe which seems to be *de rigueur* with anything made or developed in this country. Her concern for verisimilitude in the classroom was something which has continued to keep us on our toes and which has led to what I consider to be an unusually and appropriately close relationship between the field and the educators. Unusually, because, in my experience, more institutionalised professions do not feel as acutely as we do, the need to work together with the educational institutions and do not contribute as much as in our profession to the education of their future members; appropriately, because without this continuous dialogue there would be no improvement: no improvement in the training and no improvement in the profession.

How can we commemorate Jill Blewett? Activities such as this and the publication of her papers are certainly an important way of achieving this. However, I believe that the most effective way of commemorating her work is to carry it on, to pursue with the same determination and clarity of purpose the goals which will enhance our profession, not for the profession itself but for the objectives and the clients which it serves.

Have we moved any further since October 1988? What is it that appears on the "assets" side of the balance sheet? The fifth anniversary of the founding of AUSIT seems a good time to look at these issues and I shall try to provide a picture of what I believe are recurring themes in the development of the profession. That they are recurring themes is significant and it indicates the successes and failures of the profession as well as being a clear indication of the fact that this is a profession which is developing. This kaleidoscope has, in my view, four basic patterns which are modified by the ebb and flow of various tides which at times produce informed and forward-looking debate and at other times obscure the vision and suppress initiatives and creativity. They can be summarised thus: the first is the theme of interaction between language competence and interpreting and translating competence; the second is the theme of professionalism in interpreting and translating; the third is the theme of training of interpreters and translators and the fourth is the question of the types of interpreting and translating. Each theme in turn gains prominence in debates, according to what is by now a fairly firm list of factors, namely the experience of the people initiating the debate in the practice of I/T, their role in the I/T field (are they employers, clients, practitioners, educators?), their level of knowledge about the I/T profession as an international phenomenon, and their intellectual distance from the decision nodes about the profession.

#### *Language competence and I/T competence.*

Let me begin with an illustration. A person from the Horn of Africa presents to the Springvale Citizen's Advice Bureau with a serious family problem: he/she speaks Amharic. The social worker on duty cannot communicate with that person and looks for someone who speaks Amharic. After a considerable time a speaker of Amharic arrives and converses with the client and the social worker until some decisions are made as to the nature of the problem and its possible solution. The experience which these three people have gone through will be described variously by each of them. The English speaker probably regards the Amharic speaker as an interpreter, the client sees the person as a helper and the Amharic speaker will see himself/herself as an interpreter in proportion to the number of times he/she gets called to perform in this fashion. This situation is a contemporary one. If we change the language to Greek and go back ten or twelve years the situation would be exactly the same. We shall never know the difference that the intervention of the third person made; all we know is that some effect was felt and that the effect of this intervention is deemed meliorative. You will note that the first reaction is to ask for someone with the language competence; this is the most natural and most misleading approach to interpreting. If someone is asked what they do and they reply "I am an interpreter", the next question they are likely to be asked is "How many languages do you speak?". These examples indicate a dilemma which we face as a profession and which is perennial in the sense that it is impossible to educate all

clients over a large number of language groups and in perpetuity. There will always be, therefore, a need to clarify the role of the interpreter and translator no matter what domain one is working in and how tiresome this may become.

This issue affects the perception of the profession and influences what people regard as professional performance; it impinges upon training in that differentiation between language studies and I/T training is seldom accepted; it affects funding and jobs since competence in a LOTE, in our context, is not valued very highly due to the perceived commonplace nature of the skill and the fact that this skill is often not acquired by means of hard work but is innate, as it were, and a consequence of accidents of fate such as migration. The very multicultural and multilingual environment in which we live tends to confuse rather than clarify the issues for I/Ts. The whole question of evaluation of language competence is allied to this. As long as the general perception exists that bilingualism means being able to utter greetings and order a cappuccino, it will be very difficult to free the skills required to interpret and translate from the shackles of language competence. The debate should really be focused on what are the skills of the interpreter or translator apart from language competence. Surprisingly we have only fairly vague and anecdotal descriptions of these; such labels as flexibility of mind, knowledge of the subject matter, ethical and professional knowledge, communication skills, inter-cultural awareness, a good memory, etc. We have made some of these labels operational for the purposes of training, but the attention given to them in comparison to the question of language competence in the overall scheme of things is minuscule. We, as a profession are falling into the same trap as the uninitiated, in that we are opting for the most obvious and visible facet of our performance to the detriment of others of equal importance and that is probably because language is one of the most immediate ways which we as human beings have of presenting ourselves to the world.

### *Professionalism.*

If we were to analyse the number of times that this question of "professional" and "professionalism" comes up in discussions about I/T we would be staggered. Why does this occur and what does it mean?

On the one level it is simply a phenomenon peculiar to a profession in the making; the mere declaration of professionalism has, to a limited extent, the effect of a self-fulfilling prophecy. It provides a fillip to those struggling with their identity in the face of often gross misunderstandings about the role of I/Ts; it also provides a veneer of respectability to dubious practices or practices which are at best opportunistic.

On another level it is a reflection of the actual work of I/Ts when examined against the parameters of what are generally considered to be professional activities.

The exercise of autonomous judgement is one aspect of professionalism which is often overlooked. This happens at various levels and stages: in a linguistic framework this judgement is exercised in the split second decisions about choice of expression in the target language, it is characterised by the successive elimination of possibilities against the criteria of communicative intent, contextual appropriateness and register complementarity; in a psychosocial framework this judgement is exercised in the choice of appropriate behaviours towards the clients, behaviours which are informed by professional ethics but which require unique solutions at every occurrence. This exercise of autonomous judgement is one reason why training, for example, cannot be seen as a slavish inculcation of semi-automatic responses or a matter of short, injection-type courses. The acquisition of this ability to exercise autonomous judgement along

different axes of a matrix requires not only time but also an opportunity to reflect on one's practice and an ability to articulate those reflections. The I/T Category Review in DILGEA which has been in progress for three years and five months has not, in my view, explored sufficiently this aspect within the Public Service definition of a "professional".

The question of professionalism is ultimately related to remuneration and the importance of the work which a body such as AUSIT must engage in, to present cogent and well-researched arguments in a number of forums should not be underestimated. It is no longer sufficient and appropriate to state that I/Ts are professionals and place the onus of proof on our interlocutors. The subtleties of our work which make it so demanding must be documented and disseminated if any results are to be achieved.

### *Training*

In September 1974 the report of the Sub-committee of the Committee on Overseas Professional Qualifications was tabled with a number of well-known recommendations. In February 1975 the first training course for I/Ts was instituted. An auspicious beginning one would think! And I am sure it was. I will not here consider all the issues which have to do with training; this would take at least a three-day conference! I shall limit myself to a consideration of the global issues in I/T education which illustrate the major dilemmas.

The first issue is the lingering view that training is not necessary to become an I/T. This view is most often espoused by competent bilinguals who have never practised as I/Ts and who, in a private and intellectual sense can convince themselves that they can do it because it is a matter of language competence. Once put to the test, this conviction is soon dispelled. Unsuccessful candidates in our intakes tests and in NAATI tests are often in this category.

The second issue is the question of supply and demand. In the early eighties the common wisdom was that there should be a Level 3 course in every State. This has proved to be impossible and the reasons are not to do simply with a lack of funds. An I/T program has to be able to adapt to the demands for practitioners in a variety of languages and for the different modes of interpreting. To do this one has to have the flexibility in the staffing and the capacity to innovate at the level of curriculum. These conditions have not and do not exist in every Australian State. If the top notch expertise in I/T is being slowly built up, then the top notch expertise in teaching interpreting and translating is also taking some time to develop. Importation of these teaching skills is not the answer as adaptation to the local situation requires an equal amount of time and the conditions and remuneration available in this country are not likely to attract the expertise required.

In terms of student demand, it had been assumed that a Level 3 course in every State would be able to be sustained in any number of languages by constant student demand. This has also proved incorrect. Some courses have had to close because of this lack of demand.

In terms of student demand from students with the requisite entry level, the lesson we have learned over the last decade is that unfortunately the language resources of this nation extend only to a limited degree to the kind of competence required to enter I/T courses or that people with these skills are choosing some other career option. It has also become quite clear that for those whose first language is not English, there is a general lack of provision of English language courses of the kind which aim at a more

advanced level of performance and are focused on specific problems experienced with English by speakers of particular languages. In other words there is a question mark over the availability of the raw material for I/T courses in every State and over a range of languages.

These considerations seem to point towards the following conclusions:

that the idea of having a Level 3 course in every State is a practical impossibility and that other options must be evaluated in terms of concentration of resources and innovations in course delivery methods to take advantage of appropriate and effective technology.

that the range of languages offered must be increased and that more reliable data must be collected on the demand for services and the availability of potential students with the requisite intake competence.

I have not discussed Level 2 and Level 4 courses. Here the same considerations apply, in addition, there is a positive trend, especially from private agencies in Melbourne, to demand Level 4 qualified I/Ts for areas which have finally been recognised as more taxing and requiring a higher level of skills. You can draw your own conclusions about Level 2.

Finally, in this section, I would like to make a few remarks on the relationship between training and testing as this can be fairly described as a recurring and difficult theme over the years.

Testing as a means of entry into the profession was a legitimate and necessary method adopted in 1977 when we were faced with the plethora of self-styled I/Ts and I/T associations. I believe that refinements, at the very least, need to be made to the system. Firstly a symbiotic relationship has to exist between the education provision and the testing program. Where courses are available there should be no tests in those languages. There should be no tests of people without evidence that they have the equivalent educational level required by the particular NAATI level and achieved at the completion of courses. It is likely that there always will be the need for some tests in some languages, at some levels in some parts of Australia. The latter, though, should not be taken as a licence to abandon efforts to develop ways of providing training for all languages by some means at some point. If we do not accept training of a certain level and rigour as the normal, rather than the exceptional way of entering the profession we have no argument for remuneration levels and we have no claim on professional status.

### *Types of interpreting*

In the early years of I/T practice in this country, interpreters were interpreters and that was that. In 1983 or thereabouts, the then secretary-general of AIIC who was working at the Polytechnic of Central London was asked to be a consultant on a project in Britain to train interpreters (mostly volunteers) in some of the languages of the Indian sub-continent to work in hospitals, community centres and the like. In order to clearly and firmly differentiate between the conference interpreters and this new breed, she coined the term "Community interpreter". I must confess that I despise this term. It has done nothing to clarify the role of I/Ts, worse than that, it has created the impression of a difference in quality between these interpreters and others. It bases the distinction on a sphere of operation rather than on the interpreting mode used and by implication it relegates the domains in which our interpreters operate to domains of a second order,

where, presumably, standards are lower and the work is less demanding. Unfortunately this term has been picked up and used by the North Americans and has gained some currency, thankfully not in Sweden where the term "contact" interpreters is used.

The most damaging effect in this country, from my point of view, is that the term does not reflect the situation at all and it implies a net separation between certain types of interpreting and others. This is plainly incorrect. Many people are performing across domains which cannot be conveniently classified as "community" or otherwise. Is a barrister's conference about a disputed will in Holland a "community" setting? What is the difference between "chuchotage" in a conference workshop as opposed to a psychiatric assessment interview? I cannot see any difference in the fundamental skill requirements. These arguments are often contested by using the idea of "difficulty", I presume, of the text. This concept is so fuzzy and idiosyncratic and influenced by so many factors that a considerable amount of research work would need to be done before it could be taken seriously.

Another misleading aspect of the term "community interpreting" is the question of intertextuality. We have used the term "community" to refer to things which are associated with the migrant communities and thus by analogy, we risk regarding I/T services as services to non-English speakers. This totally ignores the existence of at least TWO clients in any interpreting situation.

To conclude this section, I need to say a word about the issue of the umbilical chord of interpreting and translating in Australia; I am speaking about its roots being firmly planted in migrant settlement and welfare. From the points made above and from the recent moves to commercialise government I/T services, it ought to be clear that the migrant connection is no longer necessary to justify the existence of our profession. Indeed, it has never actually had anything to do with migration. Migration was the impetus for its birth and we must regard it as a fortuitous benefactor and look at the issues in a much broader context, including anticipating the needs of future groups who will migrate to this country, looking at our trading partners and our would-be trading partners. I repeat that it matters not whether I am interpreting about ingrown toenails or joint ventures, the skills which I am using are fundamentally the same.

#### *A word about the future*

I would like to consider the future in terms of the sections which I have discussed above and perhaps it is not difficult to see the direction in which I am heading.

I believe it is extremely important to make additional efforts in order to improve the language competence of the population at large so that the pool of potential I/Ts is greatly increased. The pattern so far has been that those interested in the profession have been mainly people whose B language is English, i.e. their first language and English are their interpreting languages. There are a number of reasons for this: the first is because the LOTE skill is seen as a means by which a number of objectives can be achieved, namely, increase in status or achievement of status at least equal to that existing before migration, genuine interest in helping the particular language community, a relatively easy method of entry into a work situation if previous qualifications are not recognised. Another reason is that the education system is not producing sufficient numbers of appropriately competent individuals across the languages to enter I/T programs. Many programs and policies have been put into place which should begin to bear fruit in the not too distant future, teaching languages in primary schools being one of these programs. I look forward to the day when I will have an Indonesian interpreting class where the origins of the students are as varied as

the population at large. This will put a new face on I/T and will signal the acceptance and appreciation of language skills in Australia.

In terms of the profession, I expect that there will be a reduction in demand for I/Ts for a relatively short period of time, followed by a surge in demand. I expect this to occur as some of the policies and practices which are now in place cause a more sophisticated approach to be taken by employers and a rise in the general awareness of the importance of I/T to communication. In terms of translation, we are already seeing a shift to globalisation of services through the use of electronic data transmission.

It is also likely that with increased sophistication about I/Ts, there will be a clearer recognition of the direction in which I/T takes place and we might see more specific pressure for practitioners to extend their range of languages to a C language. This phenomenon is already occurring to a certain extent as simultaneous interpreting gains in momentum and not only in the conference setting.

In terms of education, Deakin University has already embarked on projects which we believe are the way of the future. A Level 4 Master's by coursework program is likely to begin in 1993 and we already have four students doing MAs by research and a PhD candidate for 1993. The importance of research needs to be mentioned here as our move from a cottage industry to something better necessitates inputs derived from properly constructed and expertly conducted research projects. We have set up the Centre for Research and Development in Interpreting and Translating with the aim of furthering the research effort and of providing consultancy services in terms of I/T policy and in-service and other programs to the practitioners and those who employ them. Two research projects will start in February, one on flexible delivery methods in I/T education and the other on the "rarer" languages issues, to which I alluded above. This is in addition to five other projects currently being undertaken. I believe in time we will need to adjust to the three language requirement and will perhaps begin with the addition of related languages to the a person's repertoire.

I believe that it is also important to recognise the problems which training faces in terms of its existence within educational environments which are not used to accommodating classes with fewer than 15 students in them and who, while being supportive, at least in our case, of the concept of I/T education, do have difficulty in managing different interests competing for diminishing resources in a climate of increased accountability.

I need not stress here the importance of becoming part of the international community of I/Ts; we have made much progress towards this and I hope that you will all get behind Melbourne's bid to host the 1996 FIT congress. Parochialism has no place in our future.

### *Conclusions*

While the picture I have painted is not altogether a rosy one, I have resisted being overtaken by gloom and doom. As you know, this could have easily been the order of the day. I think that I would have done Jill Blewett's ideals a disservice had I chosen that course of action.