EDUCATION AND STATE AUTHORIZATION OF Spanish-Swedish public service interpreters in Sweden

EDUCACIÓN Y AUTORIZACIÓN ESTATAL DE INTÉRPRETES EN LOS SERVICIOS PÚBLICOS ENTRE ESPAÑOL Y SUECO EN SUECIA

Thomas Thomsen

Stockholm University, Sweden thomas.thomsen@su.se

Abstract

Training and state authorization of public service interpreters have been available in Sweden since the 1970s, and yet training and state authorization is insufficient. Previous research has primarily been dedicated to interpreters in general and therefore the aim of the present study is to gain demographic knowledge of the Spanish-Swedish interpreter population in Sweden. This study reports findings from a questionnaire that was conducted to investigate interpreter training and state authorization of Spanish-Swedish public service interpreters in Sweden. A total of 118 Spanish-Swedish interpreters answered the questionnaire. Results show that the age distribution of Spanish-Swedish state authorized interpreters is skewed and that a majority of the Spanish-Swedish interpreter population has interpreter training. Conclusions suggest that there is a need for further studies on the demographic background of public service interpreters in Sweden and internationally.

Keywords

Public service interpreting; State authorization; Interpreter training; Spanish-Swedish interpreters.

Resumen

Desde los años 70 Suecia cuenta con formación y autorización estatal en interpretación de servicios públicos, no obstante, éstas siguen siendo insuficientes en la actualidad. El análisis demográfico de esta población de intérpretes ha sido estudiado con carácter general anteriormente, sin embargo, el presente estudio tiene como objetivo investigar la población de intérpretes de servicios públicos entre español y sueco en Suecia. Para ello, este capítulo presenta los resultados de un cuestionario que investiga la formación y autorización de intérpretes de servicios públicos de esta población. El cuestionario fue respondido por un total de 118 in-

térpretes entre español y sueco. Los resultados muestran que la mayoría de esta población de intérpretes ha realizado alguna formación en interpretación y que las edades de los intérpretes autorizados español-sueco muestra una distribución sesgada. Los resultados promueven la necesidad de realizar más estudios demográficos de los intérpretes de servicios públicos en Suecia e internacionalmente.

Palabras clave

Interpretación en los servicios públicos; Autorización estatal; Educación de intérpretes; Intérpretes españoles-suecos.

1. Introduction

Public service interpreting, also community interpreting or liaison interpreting (Valero-Garcés, 2023: 17; Wadensjö, 1998: 49), is a profession in which public service interpreters work in the public sector using a dialogue interpreting technique when translating orally into the two languages of the event. Historically, professions have been described as full-time activities including both education and authorization (Torgersen, 1972). Professions are described similarly today, especially regarding education, but other aspects have also been emphasized, such as the need for professional organizations and ethical guidelines (Christoffersen, 2017: 35; Molander and Terum, 2008: 18). Professionalization has also implied that education for some professions has gradually become longer throughout the years (Christoffersen, 2017: 32-33) which has also been the case for public service interpreting in Sweden (Tiselius, 2022: 12).

Public service interpreting is a type of interpreting where language direction is a prominent feature of the task, due to the fact that interpreters almost exclusively interpret actively into both of their working languages. Translating orally back and forth between two languages is a complex linguistic task, and yet training and state authorization of public service interpreters in Sweden is insufficient (Almqvist, 2016). Training and state authorization have been available in Sweden since the 1970s and has gradually advanced in order to ensure high quality interpreting (Tiselius, 2022: 1). Previous research also point out that both training (Blasco Mayor, 2015) and state authorization (Kammarkollegiet, 2017a) are important cornerstones in public service interpreting. However, a majority of the Swedish public service interpreters today are untrained and unauthorized (Almqvist, 2016: 1). Furthermore, public service interpreters have been described as a heterogeneous group that differ in lingustic and educational background and that commonly are L2 speakers of the majority language (Tiselius and Englund Dimitrova, 2019: 307). These statements implicitly suggest that some type of training (and state authorization) is necessary for public service interpreters.

1.1. Public service interpreting in Sweden

To fully understand the demographics of public service interpreting in Sweden, a brief review of the profession is essential. Previous studies have been conducted primarily by the special investigations on immigration (SOU, Statens Offentliga Utredning [Public State Inquiry]). Generally, SOUs are preparatory works for legislation which means that their specific aim is political.

Currently, the number of spoken languages in Sweden ranges from approximately 150 to 200 (SOU 2018:83, p. 136) and at least 100 out of these languages have over 500 speakers (Parkvall, 2015: 225). Commonly, multilingual societies in Europe have a high demand for interpreter services, in particular when immigrants need access to public services but lack knowledge of the majority language. As a result of workforce immigration in the 1950s and 1960s (Tiselius, 2022: 3), the Swedish government began, in the 1970s, to develop interpreter training and a system for state authorization of public service interpreters (SFS 1971:290). Public service interpreters played a crucial role in this development, being the only way for authorities to provide information to immigrants (Tiselius, 2022: 3). The right to interpreter services was established early in Sweden in the Code of Public Administration [Förvaltningslagen] (SFS 1971:290). The code was revised in 1986 (SFS 1986:223) and 2017 (SFS 2017:900), reinforcing the wording of 1971 into an obligation. It can therefore be concluded that public service providers in Sweden, since 2017, must employ interpreting services when experiencing linguistic barriers with public service users.

Public service interpreting takes place in a variety of fields every day in Sweden. Typically, a public service provider needs an interpreter when a public service user speaks another language than the majority language, e.g. at preschool meetings, police stations and hospitals (Gustafsson, 2023: 41). Altogether, thousands of interpreter-mediated encounters take place every day in over 120 languages (SOU 2005:37, p. 81) and approximately two million encounters are completed annually according to statistic reports from 2015, 2016 and 2017 (SOU 2018:83, p. 125). The number of active interpreters in Sweden has recently been estimated from 4500 to 6000, including all authorization and training statuses (SOU 2018:83, p. 25). This is also confirmed by searching the websites of three of the largest interpreter agencies in Sweden (Semantix, 2023; Språkservice 2023; Transvoice, 2023).

1.2. State authorization

State authorization of public service interpreters was introduced in Sweden by Kammarkollegiet [the Legal, Financial and Administrative Services Agency] in 1976. The main goal of authorizing interpreters was, and is still today, to provide public service interpreters with advanced language proficiency and excellent interpreting skills to the society (Kammarkollegiet, 2017a: 9). An examination is required for state authorization. Currently there are three types of state authorization, i.e. general authorization, authorization with specialisation in medicine and authorization with specialisation in law. General authorization is open for anyone to apply, but, in order to become authorized in medicine or law, it is necessary to already hold a general authorization. Interpreters can also obtain authorization in several languages, but each language requires the interpreter to repeat the examination for each type of authorization (ibid: 10).

The general examination covers a written exam and an oral exam. The written exam includes three parts in which the interpreter needs to show linguistic knowledge of Swedish, an ability to translate adequately from Swedish into the other working language and theoretical knowledge of areas that interpreters commonly encounter when working, e.g. social care, health care and migration. Subsequently, if the interpreter passes the written exam, the interpreter is invited to an oral exam in which the interpreter needs to show interpreting skills while interpreting simulated role-plays observed by an assessment committee. Examinations for specialisation in medicine and law are conducted similarly but in addition contain an interview in which the interpreter is asked questions regarding medicine or law (ibid: 12-13). Approximately 55 interpreters obtain a state authorization every year in Sweden (Kammarkollegiet, 2017a: 27), and at the end of 2022, a total of 1104 state authorized interpreters were authorized in the national directory of qualified interpreters (Kammarkollegiet, 2023: 65). In general, only approximately 50 languages, compared to the almost 200 languages spoken in Sweden, are available for state authorization (Wadensjö et al., 2021: 4).

Previous studies have pointed out that the age distribution of state authorized interpreters is skewed (Wadensjö et al., 2021: 4) with a mean age above 65 years (Almqvist, 2016: 6). The main reason is described by *Kammarkollegiet* as a consequence of Swedish public services choosing unauthorized interpreters over state authorized interpreters. Consequently, *Kammarkollegiet* (2017b: 8) hypothesize that public service interpreters prefer to remain unauthorized since they then will be assigned a higher number of interpreting assignments compared to state authorized interpreters. However, state authorization of public service interpreters is an important aspect of ensuring interpreters who have advanced language proficiency and excellent interpreting skills. Therefore, *Kammarkollegiet* (2017b: 94-96) is currently working on new ways of spreading information about the significance of state authorization.

1.3. Education and training

In addition to authorizing interpreters in Sweden, *Kammarkollegiet* also administers a national directory of qualified interpreters. Generally, there is a lack of national directories of interpreters in European countries (Wadensjö et al., 2021: 17), except for Sweden and Norway where the national directories include both state authorized

interpreters and trained qualified interpreters (Kammarkollegiet, 2017b: 84). The national directory of qualified interpreters was introduced in 2016 for trained qualified interpreters. Previously, the directory had only included state authorized interpreters (SOU, 2018:83, p. 117). At the end of 2022 a total of 2336 trained interpreters were available in the national directory of qualified interpreters (Kammarkollegiet, 2023: 66). The concept of being a trained interpreter is defined in several ways in Sweden and is often related to both remuneration and state authorization (Kammarkollegiet, 2017a). However, being a trained interpreter is commonly associated with being qualified to appear in the national directory of qualified interpreters. Primarily, there are two alternatives for public service interpreters to become qualified trained interpreters, i.e. University training or training at a Swedish Folkhögskola⁴⁶ (ibid: 25). Training is also provided by interpreter agencies that frequently invite interpreters to participate in workshops and seminars concerning relevant topics for public service interpreters. But these events generally do not qualify interpreters to appear in the national directory of qualified interpreters.

University training is available at two universities in Sweden, Stockholm University and Lund University, while training at a Swedish Folkhögskola is provided by several adult education centers. Interpreter training at a Swedish Folkhögskola includes one term of full-time studies (though frequently offered part-time for several terms) while University training comprises three terms of full-time studies (Kammarkollegiet, 2017a: 25-26). A minimum of high school education is required to be eligible for both studies at a University and a Swedish Folkhögskola. Generally, interpreter training is recommended before completing the examination for state authorized interpreters (Almqvist, 2016: 5).

1.4. The present study

The present study intends to describe the demographic background of Spanish-Swedish public service interpreters in Sweden, i.e. interpreter training and state authorization. Considering that previous research primarily has been dedicated to interpreters in general, i.e. not targeting a specific language group (Tiselius, 2022; Fioretos et al., 2020; SOU 2018:83; SOU 2005:37; SOU 2004:15), the overarching aim is to gain demographic knowledge and to give a background and an overview of these aspects of the Spanish-Swedish interpreter population in Sweden. For example, it has been noted by Wadensjö (2018: 20-21) and Almqvist (2016: 45) that it remains unclear, in the case of Sweden, what qualifications that (public service) interpreters generally have. Since

⁴⁶ The Swedish Folkhögskola is a post-secondary school in which academic topics may appear, although without academic degrees, and "are based on the principle of universal and common education" (Tiselius, 2022: 14).

the Spanish-Swedish public service interpreting group is a well-established group in Sweden, it is therefore a representative group for further studies.

2. Data and method

2.1. Data collection method

Data collection consisted of a questionnaire distributed to Spanish-Swedish public service interpreters in Sweden during the autumn of 2022. The questionnaire focused on questions related to interpreter training and interpreting experience as well as perceived language proficiency and language background. A pilot was conducted by sending an initial version of the questionnaire to interpreters working between Swedish and a language other than Spanish. Thereafter the questions were discussed extensively in a group of translation and interpreting researchers at Stockholm University and subsequently the questions were modified. The final version of the questionnaire included 24 questions. The questionnaire was created in Survey & Report, an online software provided by Stockholm University, which include a digital form of informed consent. Two types of questions were included, multiple-choice questions and open-ended questions. The questions were divided into five different sections from A to E, i.e. (A) biographical information, (B) previous education and interpreter training, (C) language proficiency and language background, (D) interpreting experience and (E) other questions. The present study presents data from sections A, B and D. Furthermore, the project has been approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority.

2.2. Participants

A total of 118 public service interpreters with working languages Spanish and Swedish answered the questionnaire. The inclusion criterion was working as a public service interpreter between Spanish and Swedish in Sweden. Interpreters were invited to complete the questionnaire through two methods. The first and primary was through contact information retrieved from the national directory of qualified interpreters⁴⁷. The second was through collaboration with two of the larger interpreter agencies in Sweden. As previously described in Section 1.3, the national directory of qualified interpreters is an online register, provided by *Kammarkollegiet* [the Legal, Financial and Administrative Services Agency], including contact information and qualifications of state authorized interpreters and trained interpreters in Sweden. Interpreters are invited to include their contact information on the website, but since

⁴⁷ https://www.kammarkollegiet.se/engelska/start/all-services/interpreter/search-interpreter

it is voluntary, far from all interpreters choose to participate. During the autumn of 2022 a total of 135 Spanish-Swedish interpreters were available in the national directory of qualified interpreters. The online directory is available and accessible to the public, unlike the registers provided by the interpreter agencies. These registers are, conversely, not available to the public, and were only administered by the specific agencies, i.e. the link to the online questionnaire was sent to the agencies who subsequently distributed the questionnaire to their Spanish-Swedish public service interpreters. The two interpreter agencies confirmed by e-mail that they had 174 and 110 active public service interpreters between Spanish and Swedish at the time of data collection. It is noteworthy that many interpreters participate both in the online directory of Kammarkollegiet, and also in the registers of the different agencies. There is thus a certain overlap in numbers (SOU 2018:83, p. 434). Therefore, part of the information provided to the participants before filling out the questionnaire, focused on, and emphasized, that the questions should only be answered once by each participant. After thorough analyses, four duplicates were discovered, and a total of 118 separate interpreters were concluded to have submitted their answers.

3. RESULTS

This section presents quantitative and qualitative results of the questionnaire. While quantitative data is provided by the participants' responses to multiple-choice questions, qualitative data is based on the open-ended questions and questions where participants were given the option to add information to a multiple-choice question. The questionnaire was used to provide an insight into the Spanish-Swedish interpreter population in Sweden and the results are based on the interpreters' responses in the questionnaire.

3.1. State authorization

3.1.1. Quantitative data

Table 1 shows an overview of the age span and state authorization of the Spanish-Swedish public service interpreters in Sweden. A total of 118 Spanish-Swedish public service interpreters (94 females, 23 males and 1 other) submitted their answers during the autumn of 2022. The age distribution was predominantly above 30 with only four participants between 18 to 30. A total of 53 interpreters were state authorized interpreters (45 %), and out of these, 24 had only general authorization, 10 were further authorized with specialisation in medicine, 7 further authorized with specialisation in law and 12 further authorized with specialisation in both medicine and law. As described in Section 1.2, state authorization with specialisation in medicine and/or law can only be achieved by interpreters that already hold a general state authorization. None of the state authorized interpreters were under the age of 30 and only 10 of them were under the age of 50. This pattern confirms Wadensjö's statement (2021: 4) that the age distribution of state authorized interpreters is skewed. To confirm that this pattern is statistically reliable a chi-squared test was performed. This test showed a significant effect (χ^2 (4) = 17.825, p = .001) which confirms this skewed distribution.

Age	State authorized						
	General	Medicine	Law	Medicine + Law	Sum	Unauthorized	Total n
18-30	-	-	-	-	-	4	4
31-49	8	-	2	-	10	28	38
50-66	8	4	4	6	22	25	47
67-	7	6	1	6	20	8	28
N/A	148	-	-	-	1	-	1
Total n	24	10	7	12	53	65	118

Table 1. Age span and distribution of state authorization of Spanish-Swedish public service interpreters in Sweden.

3.1.2. Qualitative data

The open-ended questions provided an in depth understanding of differences between working conditions for state authorized interpreters and unauthorized interpreters in Sweden. It has previously been hypothesized by *Kammarkollegiet* (2017b: 8) that public service interpreters prefer to remain unauthorized (which is one of the reasons why the age distribution of state authorized interpreters is described as skewed in Section 1.2), but the results of the open-ended questions show, specifically for the Spanish-Swedish language group, that other aspects such as working conditions also could have an influence.

Five participants described working conditions as generally irregular and emphasized a necessity of having a secondary employment in addition to interpreting. The principal reason described was the economic insecurity of the profession due to an uncertainty of not knowing the number of assignments that will be assigned to each interpreter every month. However, participants also pointed out that economic insecurity can be relieved by achieving state authorization since state authorization increases remuneration and the number of allocated assignments to the state authorized interpreter. Furthermore, participants indicated a value of state authorization by

⁴⁸ The interpreter did not declare age.

stating an urge to prepare for the examination. Therefore, the statements given in the open-ended questions show that there might be several reasons why the age distribution of state authorized interpreters is skewed.

3.2. Educational background and interpreter training

The educational background of Spanish-Swedish public service interpreters ranges from elementary school to a PhD degree. All of the 118 interpreters had completed elementary school and a majority of them had also a completed high school education (115). Over half of the interpreters reported a university degree (70) and among these a total of 5 interpreters claimed to have a finished PhD degree. Only one of these 5 interpreters indicated to be working actively as a researcher today. However, it is noteworthy that the Swedish word used in the questionnaire for PhD was Licentiat/Doktorsexamen which could be misunderstood for the Spanish word Licenciatura. Licenciatura is a university degree directly below a PhD degree according to the Diccionario de la lengua española (Real Academia Española, 2023).

Table 2 shows that a majority of the Spanish-Swedish public service interpreters had interpreter training. A total of 104 interpreters confirmed that they had a finished training program or course from a university, a Swedish Folkhögskola or an interpreter agency. Only 14 interpreters reported a lack of training and out of these 14 interpreters, seven also lacked state authorization. Thus, an overwhelming number of 111 interpreters (94 %) had training and/or state authorization. The results concerning type of training, independently of the length of the training program or course, generally suggest that Spanish-Swedish interpreters have interpreter training. Traditionally, Swedish Folkhögskola have been the primary way for public service interpreters in Sweden to achieve training as an interpreter (Almqvist, 2016: 14). This is also reflected in the results, in which 68 interpreters had training from a Swedish Folkhögskola. Interpreters were given the option to choose more than one answer, for example both University training and training at a Swedish Folkhögskola. Therefore, the results presented in Table 2 indicate the highest level of education for each interpreter, University being the highest level and training at an interpreter agency the lowest. However, a majority of the interpreters (77) reported only one type of previous interpreter training.

Years of	Trained						
interpreting experience	University	Swedish Folkhögskola	Interpreter agency	Other	Sum	Untrained	Total n
< 1	-	8	-	-	8	2	10
1-5	-	12	-	1	13	2	15
6-10	5	10	5	-	20	3	23

Years of	Trained						
interpreting experience	University	Swedish Folkhögskola	Interpreter agency	Other	Sum	Untrained	Total n
11-20	3	18	-	-	21	3	24
21-30	3	8	-	-	11	-	11
31-40	14	9	-	-	23	3	26
> 41	3	3	-	2	8	1	9
Total n	28	68	5	3	104	14	118

Table 2. Distribution of education and years of interpreting experience for (un)trained Spanish-Swedish public service interpreters in Sweden.

Regarding years of interpreting experience in Table 2, all age groups include some type of training, although university training appears only after at least 6 years of interpreting experience. The highest number of participants with university training was found in the age group 31-40, which included 14 interpreters. A chi-squared test was also performed on these data and the result showed a non-significant effect (χ^2 (6) = 2.192, p = .901) confirming that there is no influence between years of interpreting experience and interpreter training.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The present study has intended to describe the demographic background of Spanish-Swedish public service interpreters in Sweden, based on interpreters' self-reports in a questionnaire regarding interpreter training and state authorization. It is assumed that a majority of the Spanish-Swedish interpreter population in Sweden has participated and submitted their answers to the questionnaire (118). The assumption is based on three arguments. First, as previously indicated, studies have estimated the number of active public service interpreters in Sweden between 4500 and 6000 (SOU 2018:83, p. 25). A total of 118 interpreters out of 6000 (which is indicated to be the absolute total in Sweden) would imply that the total percentage of Spanish-Swedish interpreters in Sweden is 2 %. Considering that interpreter-mediated encounters take place in approximately 120 languages each day in Sweden (SOU 2005:37, p. 81), the number seems plausible. Second, according to the national directory of qualified interpreters, there was a total of 135 Spanish-Swedish public service interpreters listed in the directory at the time for data collection, including both state authorized interpreters and trained qualified interpreters. Third, two of the largest interpreter agencies in Sweden confirmed that they had 174 and 110 active Spanish-Swedish public service interpreters in their registers. Since it has been concluded previously

that interpreters can participate in both the national directory of qualified interpreters and the several registers of different interpreter agencies (SOU 2018:83, p. 434), it could be presumed that the number of Spanish-Swedish public service interpreters in Sweden is at least 174 (which was the highest number declared by one interpreter agency). Considering this number in comparison with the 118 interpreters that participated in the present study, a total percentage of 68 % of the Spanish-Swedish interpreter population is assumed to have submitted their answers to the questionnaire.

Regarding interpreter training, it was noted in the introduction that public service interpreters in Sweden are generally unauthorized and untrained (Almqvist, 2016: 1). However, in the case of Spanish-Swedish public service interpreters, the results show that this group of interpreters generally have a finished high school degree and interpreter training (104 out of 118 reported to be trained). When it comes to the most common type of interpreter training in Sweden, results are in line with previous research (Almqvist, 2016: 14), confirming that also Spanish-Swedish interpreters generally have opted for interpreter training at a Swedish Folkhögskola (68 out of 104 reported this type of training).

Concerning state authorization, the results show that 45 % out of the Spanish-Swedish interpreters are state authorized. As indicated in Section 1.2, a majority of state authorized interpreters in Sweden are close to the age of retirement, which is also confirmed in the present study. Spanish-Swedish state authorized interpreters are predominantly above the age of 50, which is in line with previous studies (Wadensjö, 2021: 4; Almqvist, 2016: 6). However, it has been suggested by Kammarkollegiet (2017b: 8) that the main reason for this skewed age distribution is that public service interpreters prefer to remain unauthorized due to the fact that Swedish public services often choose unauthorized interpreters instead of authorized interpreters. The reason is generally because of the low cost that unauthorized interpreters imply (although quality frequently also is lower). As seen in the present study, there are several reasons to argue that this issue is more complex than previously hypothesized by Kammarkollegiet, e.g. unauthorized Spanish-Swedish interpreters indicate that they do want to become authorized.

In the light of these results, the principal conclusion of the present study, is that Spanish-Swedish public service interpreters in Sweden generally are trained interpreters and that state authorization is valued by this specific language group. Further studies are suggested on public service interpreters with other language backgrounds than Spanish-Swedish, both in Sweden and internationally, as well as research on other demographic aspects of public service interpreters in general, e.g. their linguistic background. Public service interpreters have been described as L2 speakers of the majority language (Tiselius and Englund Dimitrova, 2019: 307) which could suggest that public service interpreters have a migration background. However, further research is needed on this topic. Furthermore, the demographic background of public service interpreters needs to be further investigated in order to disentangle, for example, the reasons why state authorized interpreters' age distribution in Sweden is skewed.

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