

SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF THE CONFERENCE INTERPRETING PROFESSION IN MALTA AND THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND: A COMPARATIVE OVERVIEW

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Abstract: With the rise of multilingual international organisations over the past eight decades, the conference interpreting profession has developed accordingly. In the case of the European Union (EU), the range of official languages now includes less widely spoken languages such as Maltese and Irish. Through examination of the domestic professional landscapes of the conference interpreting professions in two EU member states, Malta and the Republic of Ireland, this exploratory contribution offers a comparative overview of the historical and contemporary development of the domestic conference interpreting profession in both countries, together with contextual information regarding multilingualism policy and the specific cases of Maltese and Irish as official languages of the EU. As such, core details regarding education, training, and professional organisations for conference interpreters in both Malta and the Republic of Ireland are outlined and compared, thereby offering a suitable basis for subsequent empirically-based research.

Key words: Conference interpreting, professional status, Irish, Maltese, European Union

1. Introduction

As conference interpreting draws closer to celebrating its eightieth anniversary, it is clear that the profession has evolved considerably since the relevant simultaneous interpreting technologies were invented and implemented in the mid-twentieth century. Indeed, the multilingual international institutions which emerged after World War Two have played an important role in the global development and spread of conference interpreting over the past few decades. Of these ‘babelic organisations’ – that is, those international bodies which “use multiple languages and seek uniformity in lexical selection through the medium of interpretation and its governance” (Jones 2022: 1) – it is the European Union (EU), with its founding core commitment to multilingualism and its two dozen official languages, which has arguably influenced the scope of the wider conference interpreting profession to include languages that once were not considered traditional languages of high-level international communication.

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As noted by the author in his previous work, these tongues include Maltese and Irish, the official languages – alongside English – of the EU member states of Malta and Ireland respectively, and which became official languages of the EU in the first decade of the current century. Indeed, the author's prior research (Hoyte-West 2019), which explored issues of linguistic equality and the recognition of Maltese and Irish as official EU languages, links directly to his research in translation, conference interpreting, and multilingualism in the Irish context, which has included an interview-based study with conference interpreters active in the Republic of Ireland (Hoyte-West 2020a). The latter publication observed that, as a relatively new conference interpreting market, the fortunes of the domestic profession appear to have been linked to the decision to make Irish one of the official languages of the EU. Given the author's additional research interests in the Maltese linguistic and sociocultural context, it was decided to also explore the situation with regard to the specifics of the conference interpreting market there, with the aim of providing potential insights into any possible shared characteristics or distinct divergences exhibited by the two case studies.

As such, the aim of this contribution is to offer a brief comparative overview of the conference interpreting profession in Malta and the Republic of Ireland, offering relevant historical, sociolinguistic, professional, and practical information. This area of focus is in alignment with the growing number of studies which focus on specific aspects of the professional status of translators and conference interpreters at the national and multinational levels. Just to offer a few examples from the past decade, these include publications by Pym, Grin, Sfredde, and Chan (2012); Gentile (2013); Dam and Zethsen (2013); Chan and Liu (2013); and Tyulenev, Zheng, and Johnson (2017).

2. Methodological Approach

As previously outlined in the findings from the author's interview-based study (Hoyte-West 2020a), the small size and relative novelty of the conference interpreting profession in the Republic of Ireland illustrated the potential for added value through comparative work with similar conference interpreting markets elsewhere in the EU. As a first step, therefore, it was decided to conduct an exploratory literature-based analysis using Malta as a selected case study, paying particular attention – as mentioned in the introductory section - to historical and sociolinguistic factors, as well as to aspects pertaining to training and relevant professional associations. Though the limitations of a literature-based approach are of clear, several studies, including Pym et al.'s (2012) key examination of translator status and the translation profession in the global context, have also adopted a similar technique (Fraser 2016: 270). Accordingly, the following two interlinked research questions were devised:

- i. What is the conference interpreting profession like in Malta and the Republic of Ireland?
- ii. How do the professional landscapes for conference interpreters in Malta and the Republic of Ireland compare with each other?

As case studies are used frequently within translation studies (for example, see Susam-Sarajeva, 2009), it was felt that the chosen method aligned well with the preliminary nature of the current overview. In addition, evidence from the scholarly literature illustrates that documents are well-suited to case study approaches, given that they can provide background and context, as well as tracking changes within a given situation (for example, see Bowen, 2006; Gross, 2018). The exploratory case study approach was selected as, although descriptive in nature, the generalised information obtained can be useful for subsequent empirical work (for example, see Yin, 2009; Baškarada, 2014). For the purposes of this exploratory overview, this proved ideal, thereby allowing the two countries’ conference interpreting markets to be outlined and contextualised appropriately using data sources such as institutional websites and relevant scholarly literature.

3. Conference Interpreting Profession in Malta and the Republic of Ireland

Country	Population (as at 01.01.2022)	Official languages	Year of EU accession
Malta	516,100	Maltese, English	2004
Republic of Ireland	5,006,324	Irish, English	1973

Table: Relevant data regarding the two case studies under analysis.

Source: The author, based on European Union (2022).

The table presented above provides some relevant data regarding the two case studies under discussion. By way of introduction to the Maltese historical and sociolinguistic context, in geographical terms the Republic of Malta consists of an archipelago of islands situated in the southern Mediterranean between Italy and the coastline of northern Africa. With its capital city at Valletta, the country’s population of just over half a million makes it the smallest of the EU’s twenty-seven member states. During the medieval and early modern era, Malta’s fortunes were closely linked with Sicily, its northern neighbour, and the islands were ruled successively by a range of different powers, including the Byzantines, Arabs, and Normans. In the sixteenth century, the islands were granted to what would become the Sovereign and Military Order of the Knights of Malta, whose rule lasted until the Napoleonic invasion of 1798. In 1800, British forces captured the islands, and Malta remained under British control until 1964, when the island became independent. Like Croatia, Slovakia, and Slovenia, Malta joined the EU in 2004, and Maltese became an official language of the organisation (Pace and Borg 2017: 72-75; Briguglio and Busuttill 2022).

Malta’s complex history is reflected in its linguistic heritage. Maltese, the only Semitic language accorded EU status, is official alongside English; Italian was also an official language until the mid-20th century. Initially, as observed elsewhere (for example, see Somssich 2016: 106), Malta originally selected English for its dealings with the EU during the accession process, and it was not until subsequently the government asked for Maltese to be recognised as a full and official working language,

which was not necessarily a straightforward process (see Portelli 2017: 100). Although it is now clear that official EU status for Maltese has had a wide-ranging and positive impact on the development and status of the language (Harwood 2021: 11-12), this change in policy initially caused challenges regarding the provision of relevant conference interpreting-related services. As noted by Cauchi (2005), the few interpreters working with Maltese at that time had either followed an interpreter training programme outside the country, or had proven themselves through self-study and professional practice. However, demand from the EU institutions greatly outstripped supply, and challenges in the sourcing of linguists – especially, as Pace and Borg (2017: 75) note, of interpreters – meant that requirements for full Maltese language provision at the European level were not met by the time Malta joined the EU in 2004. A three-year linguistic derogation, which expired in May 2007, was put into place in order to gain time to obtain the necessary amount of linguistic personnel (Malta Independent 2007).

Regarding conference interpreting, the need for the derogation was significant as there was then no interpreter training programme available in Malta. To remedy the situation, a number of steps were taken during the transitional period. Initially, a group of four trainee conference interpreters were trained at the University of Westminster in London, who then passed the necessary accreditation examinations for the EU institutions. Subsequently, once the necessary infrastructure and pedagogical support was in place, a postgraduate diploma in interpreting was made available at the University of Malta from the 2005/2006 academic year onwards (European Parliament 2005; also Portelli 2017: 101). Indeed, at present, the University's Master of Interpreting Studies (M.Interp (Melit)) remains the only such course available in Malta. It offers simultaneous and consecutive interpreter training for students with active and passive Maltese, English, French, Spanish, Italian, and German (University of Malta 2021). During the 2019/2020 academic year, DG Interpretation, the European Commission's interpreting service also offered wide-ranging assistance to the course, including pedagogical support, study visits to the EU institutions, virtual classes, student bursaries, and other grants (European Commission 2020).

Turning to wider professional issues, although AIIC, the International Association of Conference Interpreters, currently records two members with domiciles in Malta (AIIC 2022), the country's translational landscape is marked by a distinct absence of a relevant national professional body for translators and interpreters, a fact also noted by Pym et al. (2012: 38). There is, however, a specialist Court and Police Interpreters and Translators Association (CPITA) (Malta Online Dictionary 2022). In addition, it appears that an organisation called the Professional Interpreters' Association of Malta (PIAM) did exist around the turn of the new millennium, though evidence of its current activity has not been found. As such, the PIAM aimed to represent and bring together all of the interpreters who were working in the country at that time, which was before Malta joined the EU (Cauchi 2003). In addition, all of the Maltese interpreters who were working for the EU institutions – presumably on a freelance basis – were also members of the association (Cauchi and Scerri 2003). Moving to the present, however, new efforts are being made to establish an association for Maltese language professionals. An illustration of this is a Translating Europe workshop, which took place two years ago, on the state of play of the translation industry in Malta (Translation and Interpreting Studies

at UM 2020). As highlighted by Vella (2020), one of the guest presentations at this event aimed to present the development and implementation of the Latvian Association of Interpreters and Translators (*Latvijas tulku un tulkotāju biedrība, LTTB*), thereby providing a possible template for the domestic Maltese context with potential implications for the future professionalisation and certification of conference interpreters in Malta.

Moving to the Atlantic and the north of Europe, as mentioned previously, the Irish context regarding translation and conference interpreting has formed a significant part of the author's recent research (for example, see Hoyte-West 2019; 2020a). In geographical terms, the Republic of Ireland comprises the larger portion of the island of Ireland, and has been an EU member state for almost five decades. Following the country's independence from British rule in the early twentieth century, Irish – a Celtic language – was recognised as the country's first official language, yet the long shadow of sustained social and linguistic marginalisation has meant that it still remains a minority language, despite the important place it occupies in Ireland's sociocultural heritage and identity, as well as in its primary and secondary education system. This is despite the fact that until early modern times, Irish was the predominant language spoken on the whole island. However, formal annexation by the British in the sixteenth century and the imposition of harsh policies designed to lessen the role, status, and importance of Irish and its speakers over the centuries meant that English became dominant by the late nineteenth century, a situation which has remained unchanged over the intervening decades (for more information please see, for example, Campbell 2013; Doyle 2015, etc.).

At present, according to data from the country's Central Statistics Office (2022), feedback from the most recent census illustrated that fewer than one in twenty people reportedly used Irish every day, although over a third of the population identified themselves as being able to speak the language. Accordingly, in the light of the complex linguistic and cultural history of the Irish language, it could be perhaps viewed as unsurprising that when the Republic of Ireland acceded to the EU in 1973, English was accepted as its main language at the supranational level (Hoyte-West 2019). Consequently, it took until the early 2000s – in part, stimulated by the debates regarding Maltese outlined above – for perspectives to change and for Irish to be awarded official EU status in the year 2007. However, as noted in the previous paragraph, the specific sociolinguistic situation regarding Irish – and the resultant shortage of linguists, including interpreters – meant that a lengthy derogation was required. In the case of Irish, this was only lifted at the beginning of this current year, in January 2022 (European Commission 2022).

Concerning matters of training possibilities for future conference interpreters, as noted elsewhere (see Hoyte-West 2020b), the MA and postgraduate diploma course in conference interpreting at NUI Galway opened to students in 2007; however, before that course was inaugurated, the first group of Irish-language conference interpreters were trained in London at the University of Westminster (European Commission 2007). In a similar vein to the course at the University of Malta, the programme at NUI Galway accommodates a range of language combinations, with training offered for active and passive Irish and English as well as major world languages such as Spanish, Italian,

French, and German. Recent support from the European Commission's DG Interpretation has also comprised pedagogical assistance, virtual classes, study visits, and student bursaries (European Commission 2020). And though Irish now has full status as an official and working language of the EU, efforts to raise awareness and ensure the continued recruitment of high-quality linguists with the language are still active, as demonstrated by a recent posting on social media by the European Commission Representation in Ireland (EU Commission in Ireland 2022) which highlights upcoming employment possibilities for translators with Irish as their main language.

In terms of professional matters, conference interpreting is generally viewed as a rather recent activity within the Irish context. However, the author's previous interview-based study (Hoyte-West 2020a) found that there were certainly solid reasons to demonstrate that the domestic conference interpreting profession is viable, as demonstrated by the compact and cohesive professional community. In addition to knowing of the significance of keeping their professional work aligned with best practice, the findings from the interviewees illustrated that conference interpreters were highly cognisant of relevant professional organisations. In the Republic of Ireland, it is the Irish Translators and Interpreters Association (ITIA) which acts for the interests of conference interpreters at the domestic level, and has been doing so for over thirty-five years. Noting the value of professional bodies as advocates for change (Greenwood, Suddaby, and Hinings 2002), the ITIA upholds professional and ethical standards and also advocates for raised awareness about the translational professions at the national level and beyond (Irish Translators and Interpreters Association 2022). At the international level, eight members domiciled in the Republic of Ireland are currently listed in the directory of AIIC, the aforementioned international association of conference interpreters (AIIC 2022).

4. Discussion and Conclusions

As this brief comparative overview has illustrated, the conference interpreting professions in Malta and the Republic of Ireland are characterised by several common features. Both nations are located on islands, with a present reality moulded by a history of colonisation by Britain and language contact. Both countries also have, as their first official language alongside English, a language which did not have a long pedigree as an international conference language, and despite the enduring presence of bi- and/or multilingualism in both the Maltese and Irish contexts, neither country had previously established practices and professional frameworks regarding the provision of conference interpreting prior to EU official status for the two languages, as evidenced by the requirements for linguistic derogations at the European level.

In addition, initial training for both languages was conducted abroad, in the United Kingdom, and domestic courses were only created after the recognition of the respective languages as EU official languages. Both courses offer training in a range of languages and are, at present, the only postgraduate conference interpreting courses available in each country. However, while AIIC is represented in both countries, at the national level a major difference relates to the issue of professional associations for conference

interpreters, with the Republic of Ireland possessing a long-running professional organisation open to translation and interpreting professionals, whereas the Maltese context does not appear to currently offer a domestic generalist professional organisation which can include conference interpreters. As hinted at by the limitations listed in the methodological section of this overview, there are a number of possibilities for further research in the field to explore whether these points of apparent synergy can also be supported by evidence from the field. For instance, this could take the guise of a questionnaire distributed to conference interpreters in both the Republic of Ireland and Malta, which would seek to gain deeper insights into practitioners' views on the profession in each market. This could also be supplemented by semi-structured interviews, and comparing practitioners' observations on relevant topics.

It is important to note, however, that the world of work is changing, and the translational professions – as noted in Firat's (2021) article on the paradigm shift of "uberization" – are not immune to these changes. In common with many other spheres of professional activity, conference interpreting too is currently undergoing a transformation of its own. As also outlined in the author's recent review (Hoyte-West 2022), the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic and the lengthy travel and social mixing restrictions have impacted the profession in myriad ways, not solely in terms of the technological shift to remote simultaneous interpreting but also with regard to broader issues relating to the wider training, development, and professional status of conference interpreters. In addition, environmental and geopolitical aspects seem certain to play an ever more important role for the conference interpreting profession as the century progresses. These may be regarding modes of travel and conference organisation, the greater uptake and recognition of indigenous and minority languages, or differences in the structures, requirements, and multilingual provision of those babelic international organisations mentioned by Jones (2022). Nonetheless, in the light of these interesting and far-reaching potential developments, it seems clear that there will be a strong need to undertake further comparative research on the conference interpreting profession in the years and decades to come.

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