

PUBLIC CONCERN, PUBLIC POLICY AND PSI: THE PUBLIC DIMENSION OF LANGUAGE INTERPRETING*

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ABSTRACT

PSI is a unique form of interpreting because it addresses a matter of public concern. After exploring what constitutes a matter “of public concern” and looking at arguments for government intervention, this article draws on theoretical frameworks from the academic field of public policy analysis to consider how an issue enters the public policy cycle. As a result, agenda-setting is identified as the first point of intervention in institutionalizing professional PSI. Further, it is argued that de-emphasizing language difference and focusing on communication rights is an effective strategy for framing PSI as a matter of public concern.

KEYWORDS: Community Interpreting, Public Service Interpreting, Communication Rights, Institutionalization, Public Policy.

RESUMEN

La ISP es un tipo de interpretación singular porque responde a una cuestión de interés público. Después de explorar qué constituye una cuestión «de interés público» y de considerar argumentos que justifican una intervención gubernamental, el presente artículo recurre a contribuciones teóricas del ámbito académico del análisis de políticas públicas para entender bajo qué circunstancias una determinada cuestión desencadena un ciclo de política pública. Como resultado, el llamado *agenda-setting* queda identificado como primer punto de intervención hacia la institucionalización de la ISP profesional. Se aboga además por restarle énfasis a la diferencia lingüística y poner el acento en el derecho a la comunicación como estrategia más eficaz para fomentar una percepción generalizada de la ISP como cuestión de interés público.

PALABRAS CLAVE: interpretación en el ámbito comunitario, interpretación en los servicios públicos, derecho a la comunicación, institucionalización, políticas públicas.



1. INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly interconnected world with increasingly multicultural societies, legislators and policy makers have yet to catch up with new needs arising from encounters that involve disparate languages. The need to communicate effectively is often poorly addressed in such encounters. Generally speaking, measures to ensure interpreting services that meet adequate quality standards are either insufficient or patently nonexistent.

In this article I address the public dimension of public service interpreting (PSI). I reflect on the role that public institutions play in the development of this sector of interpreting and the role that interpreters, interpreting scholars, and citizens at large can have in influencing public institutions and their agendas. My analysis is informed by direct observation in Spain and the United States and in-depth field study research in Ontario, Canada.

The exceptionality of PSI lies in the fact that it addresses a matter of public concern. After exploring what it means for PSI to be “of public concern” (Section 2), I review some theoretical frameworks to clarify what is required for an issue to be addressed by policy (Section 3). Agenda-setting, as the first stage for any public issue in its journey toward public policy, offers interesting insights for the development of PSI and the role that professionals and interpreting researchers can play in the (further) institutionalization of this maturing profession. In light of such insights, Section 4 concludes with a suggested framework within which to take initiatives for the development of PSI.

2. PSI AS A UNIQUE KIND OF INTERPRETING

Conference interpreting has reached a mature stage of professionalization through supply and demand market mechanisms (whether serving the needs of supranational institutions or those of local private markets). PSI, on the contrary, responds to social needs, which are not driven by market forces. Thus, quality service provision typically requires governments to intervene in the public interest. The next few paragraphs explain why the combination of these two characteristics (PSI as a social need and the absence of a market drive) qualifies PSI as a matter of public concern.

2.1. PSI IS A SOCIAL NEED

The term PSI reflects a specific approach to welfare in which government intervention has traditionally been central. “Public Service Interpreting” reflects an

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assumption that basic services are, and should be, publicly managed. Under this model, the role of public administration is prominent: government-based organizations identify and provide welfare services. Sweden or France are typical examples of countries that employ this model. However, it is not universal; other countries rely heavily on a third sector of non-profit and non-governmental organizations for the provision of some or all social services. The United States and Canada are good examples. Not surprisingly, in these countries this sector of interpreting is referred to as “community interpreting”.

Roberts distinguishes between three sectors of interpreting: conference interpreting, court interpreting, and community-based interpreting. Under the rubric of PSI, court interpreting and interpreting in community-based settings (including healthcare, social services, and education settings) fall under one shared umbrella because interpreting is offered to assist with the provision of services that often fall in the public realm.

Welfare models and nomenclature considerations aside, the social value of interpreting services remains, regardless of whether the services support the first sector (private), second sector (government) or third sector (nonprofits and NGOs). Children’s education, for example, can be taken on by private initiatives, offered by the public sector, or through third sector organizations. For the provision of such a critical service to all children, effective communication with parents from diverse backgrounds is essential and interpreting fills this social need regardless of the sector. The same observation holds true in healthcare. Communication with patients is critical to effective service provision whether it is in the private, public, or third sector realm, and the lack of a system to ensure effective communication can result in a service breakdown.

In his article about the factors that determine the provision of public service interpreting, Ozolins remarks that, in many countries, interpreting for welfare services is often ensured through the intervention of third sector organizations.

Several countries deliver a good proportion of social services through NGOs, religious or voluntary associations—both Japan and a string of Mediterranean countries place heavy emphasis on NGOs supplying interpreters, usually from small organisations assisting refugees, migrants or foreigners, and there is often little government interest in regulating or supplementing these functioning bodies. Germany has largely considered interpreting needs outside of court interpreting to be adequately met by voluntary or NGO provision. (198)

Third sector organizations, the argument goes, are in the right position to identify social needs that neither the public nor the private sector have been able or willing to address. Language barriers between provider and client are a very real impediment to service provision and compromises the basic rights and freedoms of service users. Given the role of the third sector in society, it is not surprising that non-profit organizations often take on the responsibility of covering interpreting services. Because third-sector organizations are prohibited from distributing any surplus they generate to their investors, directors, or stakeholders, they are better positioned to serve the broader public interest (Lester and Sokolowski).



Looking at concrete real-life scenarios is often the best way to demonstrate the necessity for PSI and a system to support it. The situation below is shared online by the Washington State Coalition for Language Access (WASCLA). It is the story of a non-English speaker who is unable to engage available systemic help due to language barriers; the consequences are fatal to her and traumatic to her children.

A monolingual Spanish-speaking woman called 911 on a Friday morning. She was not able to speak to the operator because of the lack of language and eventually hung up. However, two non-Spanish-speaking officers did show up at the apartment where she and her husband were living with their two children and extended family. The family woke up a 17-year-old nephew sleeping on the couch to act as the interpreter. Officers did not arrest the husband. After they left, the woman went to the Mexican Consulate seeking help. The Consulate told her about getting an Order for Protection. The woman, accompanied by her relatives, went to the Courthouse where she filed a Petition for an Order for Protection with the assistance of the court facilitators. By the time she completed the paperwork, it was too late for the Commissioner to hear the case. The woman was told to return on Monday. The husband killed her on Sunday morning, at the family home, while the rest of the family was in the apartment, including the children. (New York, 2000)

This is a dramatic example of systemic failure at multiple levels. The cross-linguistic communication disconnect is only one level, but it failed repeatedly: with the 911 service, when resorting to a minor to communicate with police officers in the home, and at the Courthouse. Sadly this case is not unique and the experiences of non-dominant language speakers who are victims of gender-based violence are symptomatic of a general systemic deficiency in the provision of adequate interpreting services.

There are at least two ways in which language barriers in institutional responses to gender-based violence are indicative of larger problems. The first pertains to the encompassing nature of programs that address domestic violence issues. The variety of services that are involved in helping a victim out of the abusive situation—emergency services, security, housing, healthcare, public benefits, law enforcement, etc.—necessitate a holistic and coordinated approach to service provision. Failure to consistently and adequately address language barriers across the range of services is a striking symptom of institutional short-sightedness. Disregard for cross-linguistic communication negates appropriate access to many critical services for significant segments of the population, and reflects the failure of stakeholders in multiple sectors to exert sufficient influence to advocate for appropriate cross-linguistic assistance.

Since abusers typically isolate their victims, access to cross-linguistic communication support can literally mean the difference between life and death. Readily available interpreting services, at all points of the holistic institutional response, preserve the victim's autonomy and ability to communicate despite language barriers. Given that the wellbeing, and even life, of victims, some of whom are children, are at risk in gender-based violence situations, it is difficult to imagine a more urgent and compelling reason to develop and implement effective policies to ensure consistent access to interpreting services. Yet, as the story above illustrates, these policies are



not in place —with a few notable exceptions— in most countries. Thus the second reason the story above highlights larger problems is that if, even under the most dire circumstances of gender-based violence, interventions that are in place to assist victims fail due to language barriers, it is likely that non-dominant language speakers seeking assistance for other reasons also experience deficits in adequate interpreting services.

One notable exception is in Ontario in the context of programs that assist women affected by gender-based violence. Ontario, in the 1980s, adopted innovative initiatives which have shaped the current state of professional interpreting in that province. The Ontario Women's Directorate of the Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration led the development of interpreter training and service provision by identifying the need to ensure quality cross-linguistic communication assistance in the field of gender-based violence (García-Beyaert, *Cross-Linguistic Communication and Public Policy: The Institutionalization of Community Interpreting*).

The Women's Directorate initiative ensures service provision to thousands of survivors to this day. Most significantly, its ripple effects have gone beyond the field of gender-based violence, spearheading the professionalization of community interpreting at large. Had interpreting services relied on market drives or third sector initiatives only, the profession in Ontario would not have reached its current level of maturity.

2.2. ABSENT MARKET DRIVE

The need for interpreters is an increasing social need. Logically, the demand for effective cross-linguistic communication assistance should bring about an increase in the supply of reliable professional interpreters ready to respond to the need. Yet, Mikkelson's observation highlights the disparity between actual need and the short supply of *qualified* interpreters:

As I've traveled around the world meeting interpreters of myriad languages working in a vast array of settings, I've been struck with another irony: Interpreting is becoming an increasingly common activity that is now an essential part of human interaction at all levels; more and more people are employed as interpreters in government and public agencies, non-governmental organizations, and private industry —yet the interpreters I talk to are almost unanimous in complaining that they are underpaid, undertrained, and underappreciated. In a situation that would appear to defy the law of supply and demand, the demand for interpreters far exceeds the supply (of qualified interpreters, that is —or in some cases, even unqualified ones), while the pay and working conditions deteriorate. Although the number of interpreters in the world is not keeping pace with the need for their services, it is growing in absolute terms. (Mikkelson)

In the context of supranational organizations (such as the EU and the UN), multinational business partnerships, or international gatherings, conference interpreting was developed and is sustained through market mechanisms of supply



and demand and the corporate organization of professionals. Individuals in the business sector and in high levels of government enjoy the availability of high quality interpreting services thanks to the functioning of market rules (García-Beyaert, *Key External Players in the Development of the Interpreting Profession*). Demand and supply meet through the exchange of existing economic resources. However, in sectors where economic resources of end users are limited and different actors have opposing interests, market logic cannot work its magic. In such circumstances, service provision is tenuous and professional development for interpreters is often limited and precarious.

Markets work to satisfy societal needs under certain premises. One premise is that all actors participate in the market under equal conditions, thus, they all need to have equal access to relevant information and an equal ability to act on their own behalf. Without such conditions, the market cannot find an efficient equilibrium between supply and demand that can simultaneously satisfy both the needs of consumers and suppliers through exchange, and therefore cannot effectively respond to societal needs.

In the case of PSI, consumers —defined as both service providers and speakers of non-societal languages— are usually either ill-informed or lacking in agency, or both. Let's consider service providers first. They are typically not in a position to accurately assess the need for interpreting services or to judge how well the need is being met. Generally speaking, (public) service providers have low levels of intercultural competence, and ad-hoc solutions to cross-linguistic communication are the default approach (the nephew woken up to interpret is an example). In the case of organizations that have recognized the need to address language barriers in a systematic and professionalized way, evaluation of the quality of the interpreting service is difficult since the consumer is competent in only one of the languages involved.

As for speakers of non-societal languages who use PSI, they often have limited agency. Agency is the ability of an individual to independently and freely take action for their own benefit. Yet, any individual's agency is constrained by cultural norms and societal structures. Differences in economic and social standing mean that some people face fewer constraints on their agency, or latitude for action, while others face more. Among the consumers who would benefit most from high-quality PSI are immigrants, refugees, and occasional visitors. Constructed as outsiders, in the eyes of society and in their own eyes, members of these groups are not well positioned to exercise their agency in obtaining the high-quality interpreting services they need for their wellbeing. Their typically limited economic power and their silenced political voice means that there is a power imbalance in PSI that renders speakers of non-societal languages effectively, if not in fact, agency-less.

Thus, consumers of public interpreting services either are (or perceive themselves as) powerless to obtain appropriate services (typically the case of speakers of non-societal languages), or, despite enjoying factual agency, are not in a position to judge low quality service provision (typically the case of speakers of the societal language who are providing services).

If consumers cannot appreciate the difference between high-quality services and low-quality services, they have no incentive to opt for the more expensive op-



tions. On the other end of the exchange, qualified interpreters who provide quality services —individuals who are trained, who engage in professional development and who prepare for their assignments— should be able to expect a compensation that is up to their level of professionalism. In the absence of compensation, they will either provide services in other sectors of the profession that pay appropriately (namely conference interpreting) or they will abandon the profession. Thus, under these circumstances, PSI attracts mainly unqualified interpreters that can only do the job in between other commitments (Dubslaff and Martinsen, cited in Ozolins).

Without a broader infrastructure that can guarantee adequate training, fair remuneration of professionals, and the monitoring of quality, among other things, it is unlikely that the societal need for effective cross-linguistic communication can be adequately met.

2.3. PUBLIC CONCERN

When a matter is understood as being of public concern, public resources can be allocated to guarantee public welfare. In the absence of market drive, governments play a crucial role in ensuring social needs are met. A combination of coercive power (authority) and managerial capacity (administration) explain why governments are in a unique position to help advance PSI as a matter of public concern. In the case of PSI, there are at least three ways in which government intervention to reallocate public resources is justified: professional regulation, developing infrastructure and ensuring sustainability.

The first way in which government intervention can help is through professional regulation. Different countries operate under different models of regulation for professions and occupations. In some countries the government's role is limited to legislating the requirement for professional regulation. The actual execution and implementation is relegated to professional boards, which are responsible for screening professionals and issuing licenses. In other countries, government bodies at different levels assume all functions of professional regulation, from legislation to execution through government agencies. Despite structural differences, the ultimate goal in all cases is to protect the public. Governments intervene whenever the public's health, safety, and/or welfare may be harmed if services are provided by unqualified professionals. When the public is not in a position to judge the quality of professional service and the consequences could be serious, it is legitimate for the government to arbitrate and eliminate competition from those who might provide cheaper yet sub-standard service. The government's singular and irreplaceable role is to exert its coercive power to protect the public. Just as medical professions are regulated by the government, it is appropriate for interpreting services to be regulated in the interest of the general public.

Second, government intervention is also desirable in PSI to support the development of an underlying infrastructure. An overarching approach is necessary to set up mechanisms for quality monitoring once the profession is regulated. Quality assurance relates both to the performance of each individual interpreter,



and to the performance of the administrative infrastructure that delivers interpreters when and where they are needed. If, for example, it is difficult for service providers to know how to obtain interpreter services when they need them, the system as a whole is not offering optimal quality. The following are some of the aspects that are desirable in a well-functioning system: cross-sectorial service assignment systems (a centralized pool of interpreters with a centralized assigning system that both accounts for sector-specific needs and allows for consistency and cohesion across sectors); data-collection mechanisms to evaluate service delivery programs; awareness-raising campaigns to reach ill-informed (public) service providers, etc. These are all essential components of a quality PSI program that require the intervention of an overarching entity—that is, the government. Through their coercive power and managerial capabilities, governments are in a unique position to cater to these needs for PSI advancement. A helpful analogy in this case is the role of governments in ensuring the development of roads and highway networks. They constitute the underlying infrastructure that allows for the movement of goods and travellers, ensuring benefits for the public at large, which no individual actor could achieve in isolation.

The third way in which PSI can effectively be supported by government as a matter of public concern involves system sustainability and comprehensive service provision. Collaboration between regions allows for coordination of problem solving, such as problems related to less common languages. An overarching approach that pursues general sustainability (rather than maximizing profits) can support services in languages of lesser diffusion through two possible mechanisms: (1) when it is difficult to maintain qualified interpreters for languages of lesser diffusion, the geographic service area can be expanded; and (2) income generated from services in languages that are more prevalent can subsidize services in languages of lesser diffusion. The most rural post office in the U.S. illustrates this point: mules deliver mail daily to the bottom of the Grand Canyon in Arizona to service the Havasupai Indian Reservation. The U.S. post office was created as a system to enable communication across the nation serving all people (Gallagher). This post office, taken individually, might not be cost-effective from a business point of view, however, the public interest is served when the system ensures access to communication to everyone.

The need for cross-linguistic communication increases with growing migrations. Since in multicultural social fabrics cultural differences are most often accompanied by language differences, failure to properly address PSI risks compromising both wellbeing and basic rights. Underlying infrastructures and basic standards are necessary to guarantee the availability of professional assistance in the face of language barriers. Public regulations and allocation of public resources are needed to support effective intercultural communication and safeguard social welfare.



3. FROM PUBLIC CONCERN TO PUBLIC POLICY

Many in the field of interpreting studies lament the lack of intervention from public institutions. For instance, Franz Pöchhacker pointed out that the search for joint solutions between public institutions and educational institutions is an interdisciplinary effort, and noted that there is a gap between data-based knowledge (research) and legal, institutional, or political action. In spite of the existence of useful research, legislators and policy makers have yet to effectively respond to new cross-cultural communication needs. What does it take for institutions to find the political will and organizational focus to address matters of public concern?

3.1. PUBLIC POLICY

Asking whether an issue is of public concern or not, often equates to asking whether such an issue requires intervention from public institutions. That is clearly Parsons' take in his definition of "public":

The idea of public policy presupposes that there is a sphere or domain of life which is not private or purely individual, but held in common. The public comprises that dimension of human activity which is regarded as requiring governmental or social regulation or intervention or at least common action (3)

In practice, however, public concern does not necessarily mean that actual public policy will follow. In fact, far from being automatic, for an issue of public concern to be publicly regulated, a complex multi-stage process needs to be set off. From a theoretical perspective, the development of policy measures is thought to follow a cycle. Commonly, a differentiation is made between (1) agenda-setting, (2) policy formulation, (3) decision making, (4) implementation, and (5) evaluation. These stages were crystalized toward the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, mainly through the versions of the model proposed by Brewer and deLeon, Jenkins, and Anderson.

Public policy is such an encompassing concept that pinning down a definition can be elusive. Nevertheless, Klein and Marmour take a pragmatic and simple approach: public policy is "what governments do and neglect to do" (892). Since governments generally neglect developing and implementing measures to support cross-linguistic communication, it is apparent that policy around PSI is generally in its infancy. Efforts need to focus on entering the agenda (the first step of the policy cycle). In the next section I explore the concept of agenda-setting as a way to position cross linguistic communication as a public issue.



3.2. COMPETING FOR THE AGENDA

The concise definition that we adopted for public policy above glosses over considerable complexity. Which governments should do what for whom and in which ways? This question encapsulates complex considerations deeply intertwined in policy actions of any sort. Within the ubiquitous constraints of limited resources—time, money, attention, etc.—divergent interests compete for attention in the public realm. In this context of fierce competition, developing effective reference frameworks is critical to the effective formulation of policy issues as matters of public concern and for the latter to become part of the agenda.

Cohen first introduced the use of “agenda” as a metaphor in describing institutional action, though the actual term “agenda-setting” was coined by McCombs and Shaw in 1972. Birkland offers this definition of the concept of agenda in public policy:

An agenda is a collection of problems, understanding of causes, symbols, solutions, and other elements of public problems that come to the attention of members of the public and their government officials. An agenda may be as concrete as a list of bills that are before a legislature, but also includes a series of beliefs about the existence and magnitude of problems and how they should be addressed by government, the private sector, nonprofit organizations, or through joint action by some or all of these institutions. (63)

In short, an agenda consists of problems facing the public that have been identified and attended to by the public and/or the government and judged appropriate for institutional intervention. Some elements are inevitably prioritized over others because finite time and institutional resources limit the number of issues that can be addressed (Birkland; Majone). Agenda-setting therefore consists of influencing the selection of social problems for which official collective action will be taken. In developing their definition of an agenda, Vazquez and Delaplace reflect on the difference between an issue as a public concern and an issue as a public problem that requires institutional action:

There may be issues that belong to the public sphere that are not necessarily part of the public agenda. The public sphere is one of social dialogue with multiple discursive nodes: the media, public plazas, collective interest, etc. However, there may be issues discussed in the public sphere that are not necessarily part of the government agenda. For an issue to become a public problem, it must be put on the public agenda and taken up by government offices so that it can motivate the analysis of public policy and jumpstart the public policy cycle. (35)

Public policy scholars recognize that problem definition is a key factor in successfully putting an issue on the public agenda. How a problem is defined and marked as deserving attention affects its journey throughout the agenda-setting process.



3.3. PROBLEM DEFINITION AS A CONSTRUCT

Problems are constructs rather than givens. Problems are not objective entities, they are conceptual tools (Dery 40). As such, whether an issue is considered a public problem or not depends on shared understandings of the world around us. Social consensus may be elusive as different groups, considering the same issue from varying perspectives, construct different definitions of the problem. Some important implications follow from an understanding of problems as constructs rather than objective givens and can be summarized as follows:

- (1) The feasibility of solutions is a determinant of problem definition (Dery). In fact, policy analysis is defined as “creating and crafting problems *worth solving*” (Wildavsky, 389, cited by Dery, emphasis mine).
- (2) Divergent interests can generate divergent definitions of problems and solutions (Cobb and Elder 177). Thus, it is not uncommon for individuals and organizations with divergent interests or perspectives to have conflicting definitions of a particular problem and, consequently, advocate for different, or even conflicting, solutions.
- (3) Different depictions of an issue are possible even after the issue has reached the agenda. “Even when an issue gains attention, groups must fight to ensure that their depiction of the issue remains in the forefront and that their preferred approaches to the problem are those that are most actively considered” (Birkland 63).

Ultimately, how an issue is defined has consequences for agenda-setting and policy outcomes, including: which groups align around a given issue; how the issue is perceived by outsiders; which solutions are adopted, etc. According to Vazquez and Delaplace:

The set of solutions will depend on how the problem is framed: there is no single solution to a given problem. The framing of the problem and the design of multiple solutions, together with the decision-making phase, are the most “political” parts of the public policy cycle. (35)

What is the best way to frame the issues of cross-linguistic communication in public service provision? What construction of the problem is the most likely not only to help the issue enter the public policy cycle but also to generate the best outcomes? These questions are of the utmost relevance to PSI as a matter of public concern.

3.4. AN EFFECTIVE CONSTRUCT FOR PSI

Contextual circumstances have an undeniable impact on the strategic construction of policy issues. For example, the existence of Title VI of the Civil Rights



Act and its implementing regulations providing that no person shall be subjected to discrimination on the basis of race, color, or national origin under any program or activity that receives federal financial assistance is the backdrop against which most initiatives in the US have arisen. Anti-discrimination legislation does not exist in countries with a less multicultural recent history, and their strategic approach to problem definition will therefore be different. The general conceptualization of the problem can also vary from sector to sector: from protection of vulnerable populations in the case of gender-based violence, to risk management and social wellbeing in healthcare, to due process and equal access to justice in the courts, to disability rights in the case of sign language interpreting, etc. General circumstances such as a country's welfare system, cultural beliefs around language and identity, or the financial health of its government coffers, also bear on strategic approaches to problem definition.

However, it is possible to make some general observations on the effective construction of problems related to PSI. One general consideration holds true internationally and can help inform the construction of effective frames for the advancement of PSI everywhere. Since language is almost universally understood as a symbol of national unity and identity, those who do not speak the dominant societal language are constructed as outsiders and, effectively, positioned as undeserving of public resources. Additionally, those deemed to be outsiders, who are most in need of high-quality communication assistance, typically have the least political voice and social agency.

I propose that legitimizing the claim and the claimants by framing recipients as deserving is critical to effective problem definition and effectively advancing PSI. Based on my research in Ontario, I have argued for a framework that highlights the elements of this public problem that are shared by all, defying the outsider/insider dichotomy. I propose defining the issue with an augmented focus on communication, leaving language difference in the background (García-Beyaert, *Cross-Linguistic Communication and Public Policy: The Institutionalization of Community Interpreting*). By focusing on communication we highlight the common ground that makes us human. It is easier to build empathy and connection, and tap into the general moral conscience, when evoking commonly held social and political values and needs rather than cultural and linguistic differences that set us apart. Therefore, the most effective argument for PSI is not so much that language diversity as such requires public support as it is that communication is critically important for preserving the shared values of public safety, respect for individual dignity, and civil rights. This is, or should be, the cornerstone of the argument for directing public attention and resources to support cross-linguistic communication.

The benefit of a framework that focuses on communication rather than language difference is twofold. First, because communication intrinsically involves at least two parties, the beneficiaries of institutional support for PSI are clearly understood to be not only members of the so-called outsider group, but also those who need to communicate with them (service providers) and society at large. Second, a focus on communication de-emphasizes difference and emphasizes human dignity—a shared value. Language is not the end-goal, communication is. And



communication is a defining characteristic of the human species. Whereas language identity divides us (insiders vs. outsiders), communication brings us together. Hence, I propose that communication rights, rather than language rights, should be the umbrella framework under which sector-specific and country-specific problem definitions are constructed.

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this article I have shown how PSI is a matter of public concern. I have explained that matters of public concern require governmental action through public policy, and since public policy involves the use of (limited) resources, different social issues compete for institutional attention. Therefore gaining access to the institutional agenda becomes critical and requires strategic framing of the problem at hand.

Highlighting the aspects of a problem that are shared by all—and therefore align with everyone's interests—is an effective strategy within the reach of interpreter professionals and researchers. A framework that focuses on communication as the issue, rather than focusing on language difference, emphasizes commonly held values.

For this reason, I suggest that stakeholders in different sectors (academic, professional, civic, etc.) frame their efforts in terms of successes and failures in communication, communication rights, or the direct connection between autonomous communication and human dignity (García-Beyaert, *Communicative Autonomy and the Role of the Community Interpreter*), to give but a few examples. Whether they focus on awareness-raising strategies, solution quests, or problem definition efforts, stakeholders' interests will be best served through the lens of effective communication. The right to effective communication is, in my analysis, the essence of what professional PSI offers and the reason why it is a matter of public concern.

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