THE PROFESSIONAL STATUS OF PUBLIC SERVICE INTERPRETERS. A COMPARISON WITH NURSES. / EL ESTATUS PROFESIONAL DEL INTÉRPRETE DE SSPP. UNA COMPARACIÓN CON LAS ENFERMERAS

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Abstract: This paper aims to investigate the relationship between the professional status of public service interpreters and that which sociologists (Etzioni, 1969; Abbott and Meerabeau, 1998) have attributed to semi-professionals such as nurses. Drawing on the sociological theories of professionalization (Albrecht *et al*., 2003) and on certain hypotheses suggested by interpreting scholars (Sela-Sheffy and Shlesinger, 2011), the concept of *semi-profession* will be defined and discussed. Subsequently, the three sociological features shared by the two professions – the lack of specialised training, increasing feminisation and the caring nature of their tasks – will be analysed from a sociological perspective. To test these assumptions, the results of a global questionnaire on the status of public service interpreters – which gathered 888 responses – will be illustrated and commented. The data showed a close relationship between the two professions, which appears to confirm the hypothesis that nurses and public service interpreters are still following the path towards full professionalization.

Keywords: Public service interpreters; Nurses; Status; Sociology; Survey.

Resumen: Mediante este trabajo pretendemos analizar la relación entre el estatus profesional de los intérpretes de SSPP y el estatus que algunos sociólogos (Etzioni, 1969; Abbott and Meerabeau, 1998) han atribuido a semiprofesionales como las enfermeras. Basándonos en las teorías sobre el proceso de profesionalización (Albrecht *et al*., 2003) y en las hipótesis sugeridas por algunos estudiosos de interpretación (Sela-Sheffy y Shlesinger, 2011), vamos a definir y discutir el concepto de *semiprofesión*. Además, las tres principales características sociológicas comunes a las dos profesiones – la falta de educación especializada, la creciente feminización y la actitud solidaria de algunas de las tareas que desarrollan – se analizarán desde una perspectiva sociológica. Para probar estas afirmaciones, los resultados de una encuensta global sobre el estatus profesional de los intérpretes que trabajan en los SSPP – que obtuvo 888 respuestas – serán analizados y comentados. La evidencia ha mostrado una relación cercana entre las dos profesiones, que parece validar la hipótesis de que la interpretación de SSPP y la enfermería todavía están siguendo el camino hacia una mayor profesionalización.

Palabras clave: Intérpretes de SSPP; Enfermeras; Estatus; Sociología; Encuesta.

1. Introduction

The professional status of public service interpreters has always been said to be low and ill-defined. A glance at the current studies on the topic revealed that public service interpreting is a semi-profession, which is defined as an occupation possessing only a few features of fully-fledged professions, but is not sufficiently autonomous to be sociologically classified as such. Although some of them are attributed a certain degree of social esteem, semi-professions "exert power over other occupations, clients and the state, but achieve this to a

lesser degree than a profession" (Van Teijlingen, 2000: 101). Several sociologists include in the category of semi-professionals nurses, teachers and social workers. The American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) has published a list of twelve checkpoints they believe help define what is meant by semi-profession. Among these are found: 1) lower occupational status; 2) shorter training periods; 3) lack of societal acceptance of the value and the level of expertise of the service provided; 4) a less specialised and developed body of knowledge and skills; 5) less emphasis on theoretical and conceptual bases for practice; 6) less autonomy in professional decision-making; 7) a preponderance of women.

As far as the interpreting profession is concerned, scholars in the field have postulated that language professionals are an interesting example of occupational group identity "because of their ambivalent and insecure status as a profession" (Sela-Sheffy and Shlesinger, 2008: 80). Consequently, "their starting point in the competition for professional prestige is inevitably weaker than that of professions with high scientific authority and codified procedures, such as medicine, law or engineering" (*ibid*.: 81). Particularly, Shlesinger (2011: 3) advanced the hypothesis that:

> Translators and interpreters are an extreme example of an understudied semi-professional group. Among other occupational groups that are under-professionalized or marginalized – such as school teachers, nurses or craft-artists – translators and interpreters serve as a case for examining how a group deals with its marginality.

One of the main reasons for this supposed low status is that translators and interpreters rely on linguistic and textual skills and belong to the applied professions in the Humanities. The predominance of women was also considered a characterising factor which determined the low status of these professionals. Indeed, according to Bartlett (2014: 108), "teaching and nursing are primarily and historically feminized, low status, semi-professional occupations", a statement which confirms that the high number of women in some occupations influences the public perception of the status of these professionals. Considering that the empirical validity of these hypotheses has never been investigated, this paper seeks to scrutinise the main reasons why public service interpreters have been compared with nurses and if interpreters themselves compare their occupational status with that of nurses and other semi-professionals. To that end, the results of a global survey on the professional status of public service interpreters – which obtained 888 responses – will be shown and discussed.

2. Public Service Interpreters and Nurses: a Sociological Insight

In sociological literature, nursing has long been regarded as a semi-profession for three main reasons: the first is of sociological nature and concerns the level of training deemed necessary for it to be regarded as a fully-fledged occupation. The second and the third motives – which are closely related – concern the high number of women in the profession and the supposed "caring" attitude that nurses bring to the core tasks they carry out.

2.1 Level of Education

One of the main reasons why nursing has been considered a semi-profession can be found in the sociological hypothesis advanced by the trait theory, whose main objective was to catalogue and classify the unique features (or *traits*) of a profession (Albrecht, Fitzpatrick and Scrimshaw, 2003). Greenwood (1957), for example, listed its five key characteristics: a body of abstract knowledge, professional authority, sanction of the community, a regulative code of ethics and a professional culture. Although nursing possesses some of these characteristics,

sociologist Etzioni (1969: V) suggested that nursing and social work were semi-professions because "their training is shorter, their status is less legitimated, their right to privileged communication less established, there is less of a specialised body of knowledge and they have less autonomy from supervision or control". This notion is confirmed by Ghadirian *et al.* (2014: 1), who argue that "some factors such as slow formation of scientific fundamentals of nursing, disagreement in educational requirements for nurses, lack of academic education at the entry level of nursing courses, and lack of theory and theory-based research were considered barriers for nursing". According to Moore (1970: 141), the role of an underlying science is considered crucial, as the two main pillars of professionalism are "the substantive field of knowledge that the specialist professes to command', together with the 'technique of production or application of knowledge". These eminent sociologists indicate that a profession combines theoretical and practical aspects, because they possess a body of knowledge (i.e. abstract and codified) which is applied in a certain way to solve a particular social problem. Hence, the lack of long and specialised training and the inability to develop exclusive skills in a certain area of knowledge are regarded as factors which prevent nursing from becoming a fully-fledged profession.

As far as public service interpreting is concerned, research suggests that "little training for interpreters working in community settings is offered at academic level" (Pöchhacker, 2004: 30). Hale (2007: 167) insists upon the need for training, which is regarded as the only factor that can contribute to the enhancement of the status of public service interpreters. Training tends to be a discriminatory aspect because "other professionals who work with interpreters, who have been required to acquire professional qualifications in order to practise, understandably tend not to treat interpreters as equals". Tryuk (2008: 88) also underlines that professionalization is only the third stage after training and academicisation: "only in this way market regulation could be achieved, an appropriate regulatory framework for the profession could be created and, as a consequence, the interpreter's status could be defined". As recently postulated by Rudvin (2015), the missing traits that interpreting needs to professionalise are: exclusive monopoly, a form of legal protection of the title and stricter control of those who enter the profession, which would, in the long run, contribute to regulating the T&I market. Even though progress has been made in recent years as far as the provision of training for public service interpreters is concerned (Salaets and Balogh, 2015), the lack of specialised education is a shared factor of these two professional categories, which renders them still involved in the long path towards professionalization.

2.2 Nursing and Public Service Interpreting: Two Feminised Professions

The second aspect which could have hindered the advancement of the professionalization process is the predominance of women in the nursing and interpreting profession. Nurses are seen as cheerful and loving, and 'nurturance' is a fundamental ingredient of traditional nursing (Gordon, 2006). As Abbott and Meerabeau (1998: 10) further specify, "caring is seen as a natural attribute of women and is, therefore, downgraded and devalued, not recognized or rewarded for its skills". In general, "nursing is often understood as an extension of women's care work in the home, and this belittling view is reflected in pay inequity and degrading treatment" (Stryker and Gon, 2014: 212). Recent research (Wilkinson *et al*., 2016: 40) has shown that power inequalities between nurses and physicians stem from the stereotypes attributed to the work of nurses:

> It is not merely the high proportion of women to men within nursing that causes problems for those taking on hybrid roles, but the continuing adherence to a professional identity stereotype, encouraging a protective stance from nurses towards feminized ideals and behaviours.

Although the relationship between feminisation and the low professional status of public service interpreters has hardly been scrutinised, the study on the status of translators carried out by Dam and Zethsen (2010: 214) suggests that "a translator is considered a housewife if she works freelance or a secretary/coffeemaker, with a slightly higher status, if she works in a company". This view is strengthened by the open comments to the questionnaire carried out by Setton and Guo (2011), in which several female interpreters compared their status with that of nurses. On the other hand, Pym (2012: 86) does not see a connection between feminisation and low status by noting that "the consequences for professionalization concern the variables of part-time work and freelancing (dealt with below), not the predominance of women as such". Since an increasing number of recent studies in the field of interpreting studies (Bodzer, 2014; Valero-Garcés, 2015a) suggest that public service interpreters are mostly women and that public service interpreting is a highly feminised profession, it could be argued that the feminisation of the interpreting profession has an impact on their self-perceived status and on the image that laypeople have of them.

2.3 The Caring Nature of Nursing and Public Service Interpreting

Another aspect which is closely linked to the feminisation of nursing and interpreting concerns the caring nature of these occupations. As Abbott and Meerabeau (1998) point out, caring is seen as a positive experience of an inner emotional state, which partly explains why the so-called "caring professions" – such as nurses, social workers and teachers – are mostly carried out by women. Hence, "the concept of 'emotional work' – supporting, dealing with and necessarily controlling the emotional state of the cared-for person – has been used to refer to this form of labour" (*ibid*.: 10). According to sociologist Macdonald (1995), the main factors which distinguish caring professionals such as nurses and social workers from doctors and dentists are mediation and knowledge.

The caring professions are mostly *mediative* in their nature, which means that "a third party mediates between the producer and the consumer, defining both the needs and the manner in which the needs are met" (MacDonald, 1995: 134). This aspect can be said to be true for nurses, who often mediate between patients and doctors and public service interpreters, who act as gatekeepers between the parties of the communication.

The second aspect concerns knowledge. As already specified in paragraph 2.1, the main difference between fully-fledged and semi-professions is that "in the caring professions there is a considerable body of opinion that holds that practice is the most important aspect of training" (*ibid*.: 134). Indeed, the survey carried out by Katan (2011: 80) showed that language professionals tend to prefer practice over theory by stating that "there is also total agreement that the most important aspect of the 'academicization of the translator and interpreter training' […] is that which is least academic: practice". This assumption ties in nicely with the results of another survey carried out on the status of nurses (MacDonald, 1995), which found an outright rejection for the concept of 'academic nurse'.

Another aspect related to the similarities between public service interpreting, nursing and social work is that they are often regarded as professionals dealing with people who live at the margins of society (Bauman 1998). The view is strengthened by the large number of volunteers who work in the field and consider the job a mission rather than a profession. Moreover, job perceptions of interpreters' professional tasks are also greatly influenced by users and their degree of social prestige. In a study on the nursing profession, Freidson and Lorber (2008) suggest that one of the means of identifying highly professional groups is by the clients they serve. As Larson (1977: 221) observed: "the socioeconomic status of the client not only influences the quality of the service, or the nature of the use-value, that a professional provides; it also influences the professional's own status and ranking, most

especially in the personal professions". In the case of the professionalization process of nurses, it was observed that "efforts to advance the prestige and status of the group may lead members to view dealing with the lower class or the poor as an obstacle to the quest for higher professional status" (*ibid.*: 271). They conclude that some sort of transference of this stigma is feared by the professionals working with the poor, a notion which could be easily applied to public service interpreting. In this regard, Prunč (2012: 3-4) states that:

> As a medium and allies of the "winners of globalisation", conference interpreters could not only acquire economic capital in the field of interpreting, but also profit from the (social) status of their clients and the high status of their working languages […]. Conference interpreters were, as mentioned above, on the winning side of globalisation, while community interpreters were, to use the words of the Polish-British sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (2004), left to deal with the wasted lives and the outcasts of modernity.

The case of nurses is emblematic because, like medical doctors, they work with all kinds of people of all statuses. The only difference between these professions is that, at least according to the trait theory, nurses do not possess sufficient autonomy to claim a higher professional status. Indeed, they are often seen in a position of subordination to physicians, also because they often carry out the instructions given by doctors, which is often the case of interpreters working in public services. Studies on the status of nurses (Kumar Lal and Khanna, 1988) have shown that when nurses' professional profile was unclear and not perceived as such, doctors and patients tried to define their roles in ways convenient to them. Such role confusion has led to conflicting role expectations and discrepancies between the ideal and the actual role of nurses. The same has been shown to be true in the case of public service interpreters (cf. Gentile, 2014).

3. Methodology

To ascertain whether public service interpreters compare their status with that of nurses and other semi-professionals, a questionnaire was designed and distributed. In order to reach the largest population possible, professional associations of interpreters were contacted in 64 countries.[1] In addition, snowball sampling was used (Black, 2011). The method consisted of choosing survey subjects upon referring to other survey respondents: during the survey distribution process, several respondents asked whether they could send the link to the questionnaire to other colleagues. The total number of responses was 888. After carrying out a pilot study, the questionnaire was distributed in November 2014 and was closed at mid-January 2015. It was designed with the help of the FITISPos group at the University of Alcalá de Henares and placed on the online survey portal *Surveymonkey.com*. It consisted of 37 close-ended questions with a space for comments which was placed at the end of the survey. The questionnaire is made up of eleven sections, which are:

1. Demographics (sex, age, country of residence);
2. Professional identity (years of experience, professional associations, free-lance or staff, interpreting as a full time profession);

[1] The countries where the questionnaire was distributed are: Albania, Argentina, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Brazil, Bulgaria, Canada, Chile, China, Colombia, Costa Rica, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Ecuador, Egypt, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Guatemala, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Iraq, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Jordan, Latvia, Lebanon, Lithuania, Malaysia, Morocco, Mexico, Moldova, Norway, New Zealand, The Netherlands, Paraguay, Peru, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Spain, South-Africa, South Korea, Switzerland, Taiwan, UK, USA, Turkey, Ukraine, Uruguay and Venezuela.

3. Opinions on public service interpreting;
4. Education and opinions on research in interpreting;
5. Remuneration;
6. Exposure of the interpreting profession in the media;
7. Self-perception of status;
8. Self-perception of prestige and the social value of interpreting;
9. Self-perception of role;
10. Considerations on the future of the interpreting profession;
11. Opinions on the European Directive 2010/64/EU.

Although interesting findings were obtained from all the questionnaire sections, this paper will show the results obtained from the sections on demographics, education and self-perception of status to determine the degree of feminisation of the profession, the level of education of respondents and the way they believe society perceives their occupational status. The latter aspect was analysed by drawing on the theories of the *looking-glass self* (Manna and Chakraborti, 2010), which describe how an individual's self-concept is the result of communication and interaction with others; therefore, sociologists argue that individuals evaluate themselves on the basis of how they think that society perceives them and, in turn, the individual develops a self-concept of who (s)he is. In the light of this view, interpreters were asked to express their subjective opinions on the supposed degree of societal recognition of their profession.

4. Results

The first question of the survey collected information on the gender of the participants. The answers are as follows (figure 1):

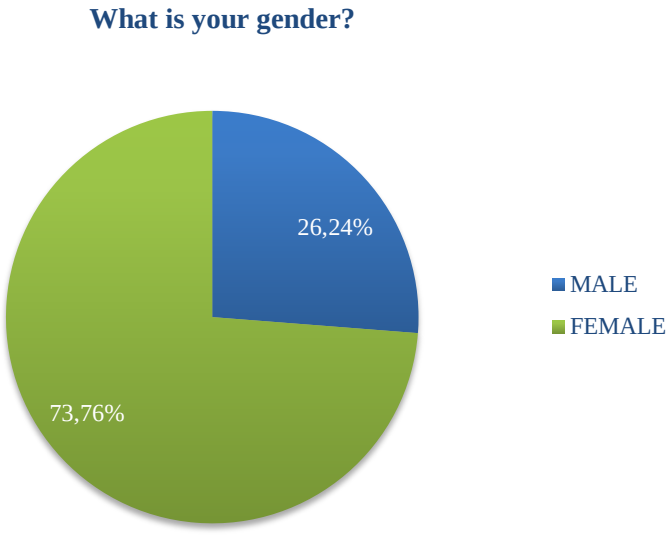

Figure 1: gender of respondents

Out of a total of 888 respondents, 73.7% of respondents are women (n = 655), whereas men account for 26.2% of the sample (n= 233). The results of the first question confirm the high feminisation of public service interpreting.
As far as education is concerned, interpreters are asked whether they have a postgraduate degree in T&I. One of the main reasons why the question was formulated in this way can be

found in the words of sociologists Ponnusamy and Pandurangan (2014: 169), who argue that "most jobs of high remuneration and status will be acquired through an advanced degree, probably beyond the bachelor degree".

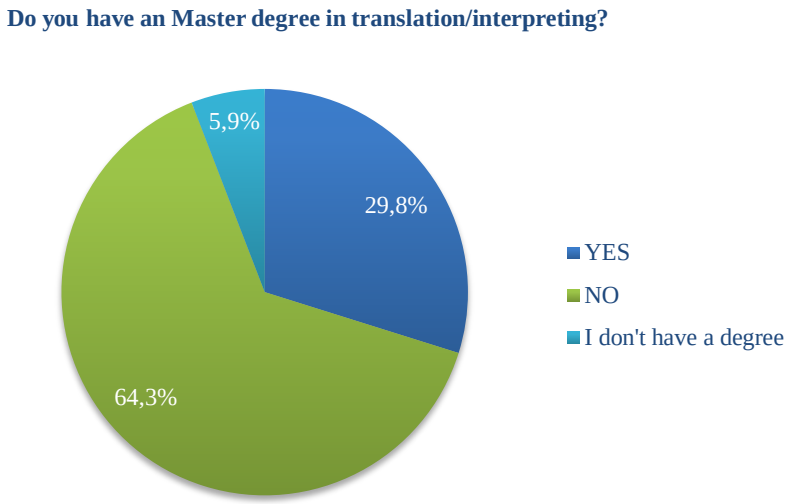

Figure 2: respondents' level of education

As the graph shows, the majority of respondents (64.3%, n = 571) do not have a degree in translation and interpreting and 5.9% (n = 52) do not have a degree at all. The results confirm that public service interpreters do not possess specialised training in translation and interpreting, although a high number of those who ticked the option "NO" hold a specialised degree in "foreign languages and literatures" (46%, n = 286), which could be regarded as a related discipline.

As far as status is concerned, interpreters were asked to evaluate the way they believe society perceives their work. The results were as follows (figure 3):

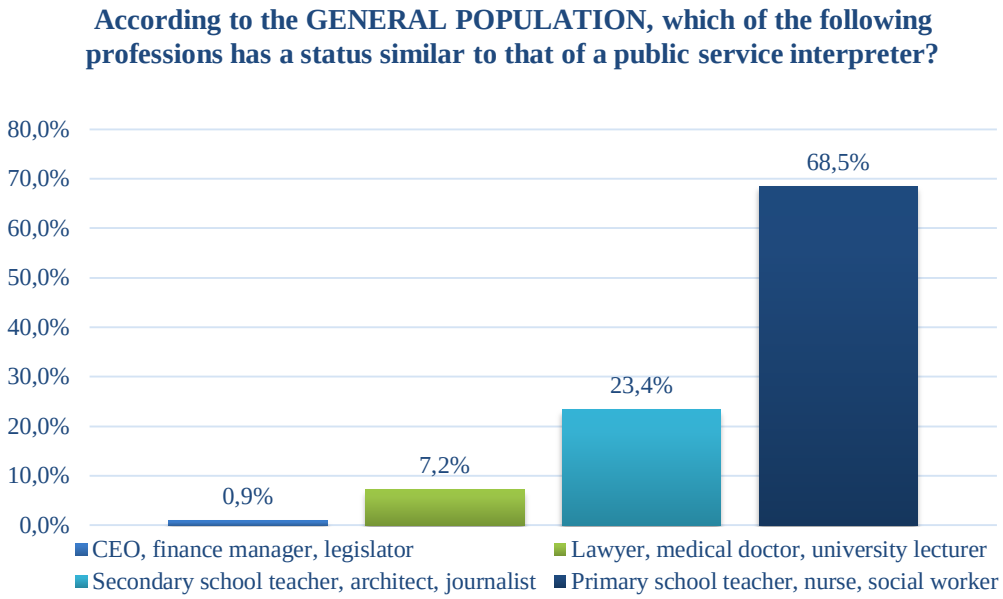

Figure 3: respondents' opinions on how they believe society sees them

The graph confirms the initial assumption that the general public sees interpreters as low-status professionals. Indeed, 68.5% (n = 608) of respondents believe that society sees them as

akin to semi-professionals such as nurses and social workers. Together with the data obtained from the questions on gender and training (which is still underdeveloped or lacking altogether in certain countries), the results seem to indicate that public service interpreting has not yet developed all the sociological features which render it a fully-fledged profession, which is consistent with the assumptions put forward by Sela-Sheffy and Shlesinger (2011), who compare public service interpreters with nurses. At statistical level, non-significant differences were found between men (n = 233, M = 3.46, SD = .79) and women (n = 655, M = 3.55, SD = .77) according to a *t*-test (t = -1.497, p > 0.05), although men appear to be slightly more self-assured than women, as shown in the table below (table 1):

Contingency table What is your gender?/ According to the GENERAL POPULATION, which of the following professions has a status similar to that of a public service interpreter?							
			According to the GENERAL POPULATION, which of the following professions has a status similar to that of a public service interpreter?				Total
			CEO, finance manager, legislator	Lawyer, medical doctor, university lecturer	Secondary school teacher, architect, journalist	Primary school teacher, nurse, social worker	
What is your gender?	MALE	Count	3	26	61	**143**	233
		Expected count	2,1	16,8	54,6	**159,5**	233,0
	FEMALE	Count	5	38	147	**465**	655
		Expected count	5,9	47,2	153,4	**448,5**	655,0
Total		Count	8	64	208	608	888
		Expected count	8,0	64,0	208,0	608,0	888,0

Table 1: chi-square test showing the differences in men and women's considerations of external status.

A comparison between the actual and the expected response count shows that a lower number of men chose the low status option (primary school teacher, nurse, social worker), whereas a high number of women than expected answered in the same way. The data confirms that men and women perceive their profession in a different way; sociological studies have shown that, despite being highly educated, women hold lower professional expectations than their male colleagues and lack self-confidence, especially when they are not provided with a clear feedback on their job. An analysis of the status of women in dentistry (Adams 2005) demonstrated that, socio-economic status being equal with men, women tended to be less self-assured than men, unless they were provided with a detailed feedback of their performance. In the light of the results, it could be safely argued that – in a highly feminised profession like public service interpreting – there is a high need to train women not only to acquire the skills needed to perform the job, but also to be more self-confident. Moreover, the findings obtained from the survey suggest that women's self-perception of the interpreting profession is a topic which deserves further investigation.

5. Conclusion

The objective of this paper was to establish whether there is a connection between the self-perceived status of interpreters and the status attributed to semi-professionals such as nurses. According to sociologists (Abbott and Meerabeau, 1998), a majority of women and a lack of specialised training are the main features marking the difference between fully-fledged and semi-professions. To validate these assumptions empirically, the results of a global survey on

the status of public service interpreters – which collected 888 responses – were illustrated. The findings confirmed that public service interpreting is a highly feminised profession whose members lack specific training in translation and interpreting. Drawing on the sociological theories of the *looking-glass self* (Manna and Chakraborti, 2008), interpreters were asked to assess which group of professionals they believe society compares them with. Their answers confirmed that interpreters believe that laypeople compare their status with that of semi-professionals and social workers, thus confirming the hypothesis advanced by Sela-Sheffy and Shlesinger (2011) according to which public service interpreters are still very insecure about their professional status. However, recent approaches in nursing (Nehring and Lashley, 2013) and interpreting education (Valero-Garcés, 2015b) indicate that progress is being made to train interpreters for the future which, in the long run, could have a positive impact on their self-perception of the profession.

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