In a few words, how would you define the profession of interpreter?

It is often believed that it is sufficient to master a foreign language to be an interpreter, but the job of interpreting is much more complex than that. To be an interpreter is to learn to say in another language what someone has said in one’s mother tongue. To do this, we must master both cultures, obviously also both linguistic systems, while having a lot of tact and skill not to hinder the dynamics of the interview. All this requires a real technical know-how.

You are interested in the interpretation of public service, can you tell us about it?

The public service interpretation is one that allows the accessibility of all public structures of a country to those who do not speak the current language either because they are foreigners or because they are deaf. These are the interpreters who will work in hospitals, asylum centers, police and justice services, providing their knowledge and skills to foster interpersonal contact. In many cases, this form of «intra-social» (within society) interpretation, which is a fundamental public service interpretation, is not given enough importance.

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At present, are there specific training in public service interpretation?

There is few of it. In countries that have a tradition of welcoming and respectful of communities (eg Anglo-Saxon countries), there are very interesting trainings and research. In France, as there is this republican assimilationist tradition according to which everyone must renounce all forms of belonging (language, culture of origin ...) at the entrance of the territory, it is expected that the people speak French as soon as they arrive. Of course, it is much more complicated than that ...
Until now, public service interpretation was therefore more of a solidarity or associative activity. Little by little we realized that there were things to be done and, recently, things are starting to change. Universities, for example, are beginning to think about and open courses dedicated to public service interpretation. It’s a beginning.

In practice, what are the most obvious obstacles / difficulties that we are faced with in the context of asylum?

In the context of asylum, there is, first of all, a technical constraint since the vocabulary is specific, often legal. We must understand and then explain in the language and culture of the other. Then, what must be understood is that, often, we have a person who represents the power / the majority culture that will welcome a person dominated at the sometime difficult course and who is likely to self-censor. In these moments of public service interpretation, there is a glaring imbalance. Will represent the foreigner, be assimilated to the asylum seeker, and that can go wrong. There are also cases where the asylum seeker is going to want to confide too much, since this is the first time he has met a linguistic alter ego, or, on the contrary, he may also be wary of it. Not to mention that if the path of the asylum seeker echoes that of the interpreter, it may disturb him; you have to know how to distance yourself.

For more information on public service interpretation:

- Sophie Pointurier Blog
- Facebook page