



Recibido: 09/07/2024


Aceptado: 17/03/2025

Publicado: 04/04/2025

Public service interpreting in Finland: legal framework, education, and current trends / La interpretación en los servicios públicos en Finlandia: marco jurídico, formación y tendencias actuales

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Abstract: The article describes the current state of public service interpreting in Finland. The situations where authorities must provide interpreting services and the individual rights of access to interpreting are defined in the national legislation. The legislation on linguistic rights covers the two national languages of Finland, Finnish and Swedish, as well as other languages with a statutory special status, such as the Sámi languages, the Finnish sign languages, and migrant languages. An overview of the languages spoken in Finland and education and the training in public service interpreting is presented as the basis for further discussion in the article.

How to cite this article / ¿Cómo citar este artículo?

Vik, G.-V., Viljanmaa, A. & Segler-Heikkilä, L. (2025). Public service interpreting in Finland: legal framework, education, and current trends. *FITISPos International Journal*, 12(1), 218-233. <https://doi.org/10.37536/FITISPos-IJ.2025.12.1.396>

The article discusses how the statutory right to public service interpreting is implemented in practice. Recent developments and current trends in the domain of public service interpreting in Finland are discussed on the basis of interviews with practising public service interpreters and representatives of associations of interpreters and translators.

Keywords: Public service interpreting; Interpreter education; Linguistic rights; Societal megatrends

Resumen: Este artículo describe la situación actual de la interpretación en los servicios públicos en Finlandia. El marco para que las autoridades proporcionen servicios de interpretación y los derechos individuales a tener acceso a la interpretación están establecidos en la legislación nacional. La ley sobre derechos lingüísticos abarca las dos lenguas nacionales de Finlandia, el finés y el sueco, así como otras lenguas a las que se ha concedido un estatus especial, como las lenguas sami, las lenguas de signos finlandesas y las lenguas de los inmigrantes. Se presenta una visión general de las lenguas habladas en Finlandia y de la formación y capacitación para la interpretación en los servicios públicos como marco para la ulterior discusión en el artículo.

Este artículo trata la forma en la que el derecho a la interpretación en los servicios públicos otorgado por la ley se lleva a cabo en la práctica. Los últimos avances y las tendencias actuales en el ámbito de la interpretación en los servicios públicos en Finlandia se examinan a partir de entrevistas con intérpretes en activo en los servicios públicos y con representantes de asociaciones de traductores e intérpretes.

Palabras clave: Interpretación en los servicios públicos; Formación de intérpretes; Derechos lingüísticos; Megatendencias sociales

Information on author contribution: The article is jointly written by PhD Gun-Viol Vik, PhD Anu Viljanmaa and PhD Lena Segler-Heikkilä. The Introduction (Chapter 1) as well as Conclusions and recommendations (Chapter 6) have contributions from all the writers. The main contributor to Chapter 2, Languages spoken in Finland, and Chapter 4, Public service interpreter education and training in Finland, is Gun-Viol Vik. Lena Segler-Heikkilä is the main writer of Chapter 3, Linguistic rights and right to interpretation. Anu Viljanmaa and Lena Segler-Heikkilä have both contributed to Chapter 5, Current issues and trends.

1. Introduction

Finland has two official languages, Finnish and Swedish. The linguistic rights of users of these languages as well as users of other languages are defined in the national legislation. Finland is also a party to several international treaties concerning linguistic rights.

In Finland, the number of foreign-born residents is smaller than in most Western European countries. Migration in any significant numbers started in the 1980s and has increased during the last two decades. Immigration is affected by political and international changes, as in 2015, when more than 32,000 asylum seekers arrived in Finland.

There is no national register of public service interpreters in Finland, and only estimations about the number of public service interpreters. In a report on the current state of public service interpreting in Finland (Karinen *et al.*, 2020), the number of public service interpreters was estimated to be far over 1,000. A register of legal interpreters was established in 2016.

At the moment, this register has more than 150 registered legal interpreters and covers almost 30 languages. (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2023a.) A separate register exists for authorised translators. This register includes more than 2,600 translators in about 80 different language pairs (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2023b).

In this article, we first describe the linguistic rights and the right to public service interpreting as defined in the national legislation, and then the training of public service interpreters. After presenting this foundation of public service interpreting, we move on to examining current issues concerning the context of public service interpreting in Finland on the basis of recent studies.

2. Languages spoken in Finland

More than 150 different first languages are spoken in Finland. The two official languages, the so-called national languages of the country, are Finnish and Swedish. The population of Finland is about 5.5 million. Approximately 87% of the population speak Finnish as their first language, while 5% speak Swedish. According to the Constitution of Finland, the Finnish- and Swedish-speaking populations are entitled to cultural and social services on an equal basis (Ministry of Justice, 1999, Section 17). Finland was a part of Sweden for roughly 700 years, and since then it has had both Finnish-speaking and Swedish-speaking settlement. Geographically, most of the Swedish-speaking population lives in the western and southern parts of the country.

In addition to the national languages, there are other languages the rights of whose users are also laid down in the legislation: the Sámi languages, Finnish Romani, the sign languages of Finland, and Karelian. These languages all have a long history in Finland. The users of these languages have the right to maintain and develop their own language and culture.

There are about 10,000 Sámi in Finland. Three different Sámi languages are spoken in Finland: Northern Sámi is spoken by about 2,000 people in Finland, while Inari Sámi and Skolt Sámi both have about 300 speakers. The Sámi languages have an official status in the Sámi homeland in northern Finland. Provisions on the right of the Sámi to use their own language before the authorities are further laid down in the Sámi Language Act (Ministry of Justice, 2003a, Sámediggi, 2023).

The Romani language has been present in Finland for approximately 450 years, mainly as a spoken, family-internal and code language. The number of Roma people in Finland is estimated to be around 10,000–12,000, of whom one in three speak the Romani language (Hedman & Åkerlund, 2023). Karelian is an autochthonous minority language and has been spoken here for as long as Finnish itself. There are about 11,000 persons in Finland who speak Karelian fluently (Karjalan sivistysseura, 2023).

Finland has two sign languages, Finnish sign language and Finland-Swedish sign language. Finnish sign language is the first language for about 5,000 persons, of whom about 3,000 non-hearing. There are only about 100 users of Finland-Swedish sign language, which is listed as critically endangered (Kuurojen liitto, 2023).

People speaking some other language than Finnish or Swedish as their first language account for about 0.5 million. Some of the largest language groups are Russian, Estonian, Arabian, English, Somali, Persian (Farsi), and Kurdish. The number of immigrants into Finland was almost 50,000 in 2022. Most of them moved to Finland from Russia, Sweden,

India, Estonia, and the Philippines. (Statistics Finland, 2023). In 2022, the European Union implemented the system of granting temporary protection without an asylum procedure to persons fleeing from Ukraine. In Finland, approximately 60,000 Ukrainians have submitted an application for temporary protection (Finnish Government, 2023a).

3. Linguistic rights and right to interpretation

In Finland, monitoring the implementing of linguistic rights falls under the mandate of the Ministry of Justice. The Unit for Democracy, Language Affairs and Fundamental Rights monitors the implementation and application of the Language Act, gives recommendations and takes other actions in order to intervene in possible shortcomings (Ministry of Justice, 2023a).

Linguistic rights are rights that pertain to the individual and are not tied to Finnish citizenship. In other words, citizens of countries other than Finland have the same linguistic rights as Finnish citizens, to use Finnish or Swedish before the authorities. Individuals have the right to receive service in these languages before the state authorities. Everyone has the right to use Finnish and Swedish before a state authority and an authority in a bilingual municipality (Ministry of Justice, 2023c). Every Finnish citizen has one registered “native language”, entered in the Finnish population information system (Digital and Population Data Services Agency, 2023).

In Finnish schools, the teaching language is Finnish or Swedish. It can also be Sámi, the Romani language, or sign language. Finnish, Swedish and Sámi are taught as mother tongues. Upon request of the child’s guardians, the Romani language, sign language or some other language can also be taught as a mother tongue (Perusopetuslaki [Basic Education Act], 1998).

Sign language users have the right to interpretation and translation services arranged by the authorities, and the right to use sign language. To a great extent, the same rights also apply to speakers of languages other than Finnish or Swedish. The provisions on these rights are laid down in many Acts, such as the Administrative Procedure Act, the Act on the Status and Rights of Social Welfare Clients and the Act on the Status and Rights of Patients. Additionally, provisions in the Act on Interpretation Services for Persons with Disabilities apply to the interpretation services for a sign language user if they are not provided with sufficient and appropriate interpretation service under another act (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 1992; 2001; 2010; Ministry of Justice, 2003c).

3.1 Rights of users of Finnish and Swedish

According to the Constitution, the national languages of Finland are Finnish and Swedish. Every individual has the right to use their language, either Finnish or Swedish, when using services provided by authorities. Additionally, every person has the right to receive all necessary documents in this language. These rights are guaranteed by the Language Act. The Act also mentions that the public authorities shall provide for the cultural and societal needs of the Finnish-speaking and Swedish-speaking populations of the country on an equal basis.

The Language Act (Ministry of Justice 2023a) gives more detailed provisions on the linguistic rights laid down in the Constitution. According to the Language Act, everyone has the right to use either Finnish or Swedish in both spoken and written communication with state authorities and before the courts, and with authorities in bilingual municipalities or bilingual joint municipal authorities.

In Finland, authorities are divided into unilingual and bilingual authorities. This division determines whether the authority has the obligation to use Finnish, Swedish or both languages. The division into unilingual and bilingual authorities has an impact on both the authority's linguistic obligations and the individual's linguistic rights. A bilingual authority has to offer services in both languages and needs to provide information in both Finnish and Swedish. According to the Language Act, authorities are not obliged to use any other language than Finnish or Swedish. Section 2 of the Language Act mentions that an authority may provide more extensive linguistic services than is required in the Language Act. Moreover, according to the above-mentioned legislation, authorities are also obliged to provide interpreting services between the national languages.

3.2 Rights of users of Sámi languages

According to the Constitution, the Sámi have the right to maintain and develop their own language and culture. Provisions on the right of the Sámi to use the Sámi language before the authorities are laid down more specifically in the Sámi Language Act and by the Act on the Sámi Parliament (Ministry of Justice, 2003b; 2023c). The Sámi have the right to linguistic and cultural self-government in their homeland as regulated by law. According to the Sámi Language Act, the Sámi have the right to choose between the Sámi language and Finnish before the authorities.

Although a Sámi-speaking person may also know Finnish, the authorities are obliged to offer service in the Sámi language if the person wishes to speak Sámi. The aim of the Sámi Language Act is to ensure the Sámi persons' right to maintain and develop their own languages, to guarantee the Sámis' right to equitable legal proceedings and good administration regardless of language. Additionally, the aim is to foster the natural and normal character of service provision in Sámi language. The linguistic rights of the Sámi shall also be implemented without a specific appeal to these rights. Furthermore, the objective of the Sámi Language Act is to implement the Sámis' rights to use their own languages directly, not only through interpreting and through translation of documents. The aim of the Act is also to support the use of the Sámi languages in all societal sectors and the preservation of the languages as vibrant and viable.

3.3 Rights of users of sign languages

The Constitution acknowledges the rights of persons using sign language and of persons in need of interpretation or translation aid owing to disability. These rights are laid down in the Sign Language Act (Ministry of Justice, 2015). In the Act, "sign language" refers to the Finnish and the Finnish-Swedish sign languages. The objective of the Sign Language Act is to promote the rights of sign language users in Finland. According to the Sign Language Act, the possibility of sign language users to use their own language and to receive information in their own language must be promoted by the authorities, in other words, courts of law and other government authorities, municipal authorities, independent institutions under public law and Parliament offices.

The right to be taught in sign language and to study in sign language groups is included in the Basic Education Act (Perusopetuslaki, 1998), in the Act on General Upper Secondary Education and in the Act on Vocational Education and Training (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2017; 2018).

4 Rights of users of other languages

According to the Constitution, other linguistic minorities, such as the Roma and the Karelians, also have the right to maintain and develop their own language and culture. However, this right is not laid down in other legislation. In addition, users of other languages have certain linguistic rights in Finland.

According to the Language Act, a person who cannot speak Finnish or Swedish or cannot be understood due to illness or injury, has the right to interpreting services. Under the Language Act, an authority is obliged to arrange interpreting where needed. The interpreting costs are paid by the authority that booked the interpreter. Examples of such authorities are health centres, which are obliged to arrange interpreting for a patient who cannot speak Finnish or Swedish. The Finnish state reimburses the municipality for the interpreting expenses. Another example are reception centres that arrange interpreting services for asylum seekers (Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, 2023).

4. Public service interpreter education and training in Finland

Public service interpreter education is offered both at university level and as vocational education. On a regular basis, Finnish is the national language in the interpreter education, but occasionally Swedish, too, is offered as the national language in vocational interpreting studies.

Public service interpreting, PSI, can be studied as bachelor's degree studies at universities of applied sciences. The most extensive degree in public service interpreting is the 210-ECTS (3,5-year) bachelor's degree programme in public service interpreting at the Diaconia University of Applied Science, Diak. Diak's PSI education for spoken languages contains interpreting between Finnish and migrant languages. The languages are decided on separately for each application round, on the basis of what languages are needed in the country, and each year about ten different languages are offered. Ukrainian is one of the newly added languages. As many of the students in the bachelor's degree programme have a migrant background, it is essential to include studies on Finnish society, such as health care, administration and judiciary, in the programme (Diak, 2023a).

240-ECTS (4-year) bachelor's degree programmes in interpreting in sign language and alternative and augmentative communication are offered by the Diak and Humak Universities of Applied Sciences. The languages in the sign language interpreter bachelor's degree are Finnish sign language and Finnish. Courses in speech-to-text interpreting are also included as optional courses. Humak also offers interpreter training for deaf interpreters and for Finland-Swedish Sign Language interpreters (Diak 2023a; Humak 2023a.) Interpreters specialising in alternative and augmented communication (AAC) work as intralingual interpreters for persons with a wide range of speech and language impairments, using a variety of communication methods. At the master's level, Diak and Humak provide a joint master's degree, Master's Degree Programme in the Development of Interpreting Practices (90 ECTS), and Humak participates in the European master's level programme for sign language interpreters, EUMASLI (Diak 2023a; 2023b; Humak 2023a; 2023 b; 2023c.).

PSI is included in the interpreting courses in the Master's programmes in Translation Studies at three universities in Finland: the University of Helsinki, the Tampere University, and the University of Eastern Finland. They offer courses in interpreting as part of their Master's Programme in Translation Studies. The students are trained in both conference interpreting and public service interpreting. The most common interpreting languages at the universities are English, German, Russian and Swedish, paired with Finnish. The number

of courses in interpreting varies between the universities, but interpreting can be studied up to 35–50 ECTS (Tampere University 2023; University of Eastern Finland 2023; University of Helsinki, 2023).

PSI can also be studied as vocational education. The vocational qualification in public service interpreting is a competence-based qualification intended for practising interpreters. The scope of the studies is 150 competence points. It is also possible to acquire a specialist vocational qualification in interpreting for persons with speech impairments (Finnish National Agency for Education 2023c; 2023d).

An interpreter training programme (25 ECTS) for the Sámi languages was arranged in 2020–2021 by the Sámi Education Institute (SAKK), Diak and the University of Oulu. Thanks to cooperation between these institutions, SAKK's and the University of Oulu's knowledge of the Sámi language and society was combined with Diak's knowledge of interpreting and interpreter training. The programme was designed to respond to the interpreting needs in the Sámi homeland, and it covered both public service interpreting and conference interpreting. The languages included were Finland's three Sámi languages and Finnish.

Interpreters can apply for entry in the Register of Legal Interpreters if they meet the qualifications stipulated in the Act on the Register of Legal interpreters (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2015). Applicants must have completed either a specialist qualification in legal interpreting, or a higher education degree appropriate for the work of an interpreter combined with legal interpreting studies worth at least 35 ECTS or of a similar scope. Of these, studies familiarising the student with the Finnish legal system, legislation and official procedures account for 15 ECTS, and studies in legal interpretation methods and command of the working language account for 20 ECTS. There are several training alternatives for interpreters wishing to specialise in legal interpreting (see Finnish National Agency for Education, 2023c).

Though several educational opportunities are offered, there are still many languages for which interpreters with appropriate interpreter education or training cannot be found. Abrupt changes in society or politics can bring about new needs, and in such situations, there are no or too few interpreters in the language pair needed. In some cases, the need for a certain interpreting language can be very sporadic, which does not encourage people who work only occasionally as interpreters to invest time and money in completing any interpreter training.

5. Current issues and trends

In this chapter, we first look at developments and current issues in the field of spoken-language public service interpreting in Finland. We then focus on megatrends and future perspectives in the field of public service interpreting, as identified and discussed by experts in the field.

5.1 Developments in spoken-language public service interpreting

Whereas sign language interpreters in Finland usually share the same training background (a bachelor's degree in sign language interpreting), the situation is much more varied as regards spoken language interpreters working in the public service sector. As described

in Chapter 4, education on various levels is offered to spoken-language public service interpreters. Depending on the interpreter's working languages, they range from vocational qualifications to university degrees. There is no regular training available for all the migrant languages that are interpreted in Finland, and even if courses might be available nowadays, not all interpreters choose to participate. It is thus still possible to have interpreters working in the PSI setting with only a short orientation to interpreting or even no training at all. There are self-trained interpreters with 20 years of interpreting experience who originally became interpreters by chance and have gained their expertise solely through practice (see, e.g., Määttä 2017, p. 201). There are also interpreters who have entered the profession by chance but have then sought further education in interpreting after recognizing the need for professional training. Finally, there are also interpreters with a university-level degree who have deliberately studied for several years to become interpreters.

For many years, public service interpreters in Finland have formed a very fragmented, heterogeneous and diverse community of practitioners, instead of a unified and united community of professionals. This is due not only to the variance in educational backgrounds, but also to the ethnic divide between interpreters of Finnish and non-Finnish descent, as described by Määttä (2017, pp. 204–205), and the different working loads (part-time versus full-time work).

Until recently, there has been no unified voice for spoken language interpreters, probably mainly because of the fragmentary nature of the community of practitioners described above. At the same time, there have been problematic developments in the field. The pay levels and working conditions of public service interpreters have deteriorated in many places. The developments are, at least partly, related to the organisation of public procurement under the Act of Public Procurement and Concession Contracts (Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment, 2016) and the PSIT market structure. The challenges related to organising appropriate tendering processes for translation and interpreting services were identified as early as 2014, when the two national professional associations of translators, interpreters and language specialists formulated a letter to the Finnish Minister of Labour. In the letter they stated that the new tendering procedures for public procurement do not work as desired in the translation and interpreting industry, due to the specific nature of the professions and the existing market structure. The associations also expressed their fear that the tendering processes could lead to an unhealthy price development in the market, if the role of interpreting quality was not recognized adequately in the tendering (SKTL, 2014).

The difficulty of rating quality and the ease of rating prices in the tendering process have had their effects on the field. In 2020, Karinen *et al.* stated, in their report on the current state of public service interpreting in Finland, that it has been difficult to organise the tendering process for public service interpreting sufficiently well, and that the biggest problem is that the price of services receives too much weight at the expense of quality. They also identified the key challenges in the field to be related to the working conditions of interpreters and the low appreciation of the occupation (Karinén *et al.*, 2020).

In 2021, the voices of public service interpreters demanding the possibility to negotiate their own rates and contract terms became louder. Demands were uttered for legislation to regulate the public service interpreter's profession, mirroring the act that regulates the profession of registered legal interpreters (Ministry of Education and Culture 2015; Finnish Government 2016). The interpreter movement was at least partly inspired by the new Norwegian act *Tolkeloven* (Arbeids- og inkluderingsdepartementet, 2021; Ministry of Labour and Social Inclusion, 2022), which obligates authorities in Norway to use professional public service interpreters. On November 25, 2021, the *Tulkkilaki* (in English, 'Interpreting Act')

movement organised together with their trade union a national interpreter protest where active members of the community ceased working in all of Finland for three minutes to draw attention to the public service interpreters' cause. It was the first time that such a protest was organised in Finland and that different interpreter groups were openly united, i.e., employees and self-employed interpreters, spoken language interpreters, sign language interpreters and speech-to-text interpreters (Marking, 2021). The stoppage was followed by a demonstration in front of the parliament building.

The *Tulkkilaki* activities marked the beginning of a period of even more intense dissemination of information by interpreter activists as well as by the national professional associations of translators, interpreters and language specialists, in their pursuit to promote the regulation of the public service interpreter's profession. In 2023, this resulted in a joint statement by representatives of all stakeholders in the PSI field in Finland (SKTL, 2023). The statement demanded the parliament to set up a working group on the matter of regulating interpreting as a profession. This work is still continuing. The associations in the field have advised public bodies on the specifics of interpreting to improve calls for tenders, and some first tentative changes for the positive have been witnessed in individual calls for tenders. One such example was the preparation of the public procurement of interpreter services by the Finnish Immigration Service in 2023.

Other current issues in the field include the ongoing effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the working environment and the working conditions of public service interpreters. Interpreting during and post-Covid has been characterized by the increased use of remote interpreting, which has been welcomed by some interpreters and disliked by others (Viljanmaa, 2022; 2024). Interpreters welcome remote interpreting as it decreases the need to travel between assignments. Disadvantages include poor acoustics and the lack of visual cues, as noted in many studies (e.g., Wang, 2018, p. 446; Cho, 2023, pp. 1043–1044).

Another new feature dividing the opinions and experiences of public service interpreters is the increased use of mobile interpreting applications in general and the use of On-Demand Interpreting even in non-emergency settings. In interviews by one of the authors on the use of On-Demand-Interpreting, practising interpreters list poor pay (remuneration by minute) and/or poor working conditions (poor or unstable acoustics, fluctuating income and/or difficulty of catching assignments, among others) as the main negative issues related to On-Demand Interpreting in its current form (Viljanmaa, 2023). Advantages linked to this form of interpreting are similar to those linked to remote interpreting in general. They include the possibility to work from home, no need to travel, the possibility to work more, the use of glossaries during interpreting, mostly easy and straightforward brief routine interpreting assignments, and extra income for the empty slots between pre-booked assignments (Viljanmaa, 2023, cf. Viljanmaa, 2024). Remote interpreting seems to have come to stay. The future role of On-Demand interpreting via mobile applications in the public service setting remains to be seen.

5.2 Societal megatrends in the field of interpreting

In January 2023, the Finnish Innovation Fund Sitra published a megatrend report that highlights broad arcs of development from Finland's perspective. The report gives an overall picture of the trends and opportunities affecting our future. The report lists the following five main megatrends: Nature's carrying capacity is eroding, well-being challenges are growing, the battle for democracy intensifies, the competition for digital power gears up and economic foundations are cracking. (Dufva & Rekola, 2023.) In spring 2023, five specialists

in the field of interpreting were interviewed and asked how these societal megatrends are or will be visible in the interpreting sector in Finland (Segler-Heikkilä, 2023): a professor of translation studies, a senior sign language interpreter and entrepreneur, the executive manager of an association of translation and interpreting, a senior employee who works as a translator, a conference and speech-to-text interpreter and the executive manager of the main trade union in the translation and interpreting field. Each of the specialists commented on the above-mentioned topics from the point of view of the interpreting profession. This chapter summarizes the answers and points of view given by the respondents.

5.2.1 Nature's carrying capacity and interpreting

According to the interviews, the increasing number of climate refugees will have a concrete impact on the need for language skills and interpreting services. It is very difficult to foresee and be prepared for the range of languages and volume of interpreting services that will be needed. Short interpreting courses for persons with skills in both Finnish and the language of the client were suggested by the interviewees. These courses would help in acute crises and provide non-skilled interpreters with basic interpreting skills. Another suggestion for preparing for future interpreting needs is a continuous monitoring of the global situation. In connection with the climate refugee discussion, deaf and hearing-impaired persons were also mentioned. Many deaf and hearing-impaired refugees are not able to use any sign language and have no adequate way to communicate. Finnish sign language may be the first language they learn, and the question of organizing the teaching of Finnish sign language should be discussed.

The interviews brought up the fact that basic information on diversity, cultures and languages must be increased in Finnish society, from the primary school onwards, in order to avoid toxic preconceptions and assumptions regarding people from abroad, and to broaden the mental horizon and increase tolerance.

Additionally, the carbon footprint of the interpreting sector was thematized. Although one may easily assume that interpreting services cause no or very little harm to nature, there is no scientific evidence for that assumption. As the prevalence of remote interpreting is increasing, new technical devices must be bought. Moreover, interpreters often drive long distances during their working days.

5.2.2 Wellbeing and interpreting

The interviews were conducted before Finland's new government took office in June 2023. The political alignment concerning immigration is presented in chapter 10.3 of the government programme (Finnish Government, 2023b). The interviewees mentioned that the programme of the new Finnish government may have a negative impact on the quality and availability of interpreting services for deaf and hearing-impaired persons. According to the interviewees, general knowledge in Finnish society regarding the role and importance of interpreting is low. Many people understand interpreting as a luxury service and underestimate its importance as a factor of wellbeing for those who need it. This topic is directly connected to the linguistic rights and wellbeing of those members of Finnish society who either are not able to use the majority languages or are entitled to use their first language. The interviews highlighted the fact that all participants benefit from the interpreting services, not only the one representing the minority language. The interviewees stressed that societal wellbeing is made possible through language and communication.

Moreover, the future situation of hearing-impaired elderly persons was mentioned as a matter of concern. In future, the number of both hearing-impaired persons of Finnish descent and those with an immigrant background will increase. Consequently, the need for sign language teaching and interpreting may grow.

The wellbeing of interpreters was also mentioned. Interpreters, as well as interpreting entrepreneurs, are subjected to great psychological and physical strain in their work. Some of the reasons mentioned for this are the use of remote interpreting, dangerous situations during assignments, and financial insecurity caused by the very stressful competitive tendering for the provision of interpreter services for persons with disabilities, which is carried out every four years (Kela, 2022).

5.2.3 Democracy and interpreting

All specialists agreed that interpreting is a field that supports and fosters democracy, because interpreters facilitate understanding between members of society. Instead of focusing on the financial aspects of interpreting services, emphasis should be laid on quality, the importance of understanding each other and the possibility for everyone to act as an equal member of society. The better the quality of interpreting, the smaller the number of misunderstandings. The better the members can act in society despite possible linguistic barriers, the more democracy will be fostered.

In Finnish basic education, all pupils are required to study at least two languages: the second national language (Finnish or Swedish), and one foreign language (Finnish National Agency for Education, 2019). Nowadays, Finnish pupils and students tend to choose English as a foreign language and very rarely an extra language. This phenomenon is connected to the false belief that English is the only foreign language needed. According to the interviewee, this has a negative impact on the future of the interpreting sector because there will be very few persons with advanced language skills in other languages and with translation and interpreting skills available in working life.

On the other hand, there are also some positive signals concerning the status of minority languages in Finnish society. The young generation is interested in diversity and equality issues. For example, the Sámi language and Finnish sign language are much more visible in public debate than in the previous generation. The appreciation of minority languages and the will to foster them have grown.

As things stand, interpreting is not a regulated profession in Finland. In other words, anyone can work as an interpreter in public administration settings. This can have a severe impact on the quality of interpreting and the fulfilment of the client's rights. In 2023, a joint statement was published by associations of interpreters and interpreter clients, interpreter training institutions and interpreting service providers. The statement, also mentioned in Section 5.1, demands the enacting of interpreting legislation with legal provisions. (SKTL, 2023.)

5.2.4 Digital power and interpreting

Artificial intelligence, the development of technology and the increase of remote work and services have a notable impact on the interpreting sector. For an interpreter in today's world, it is not enough to have interpreting skills but high technical skills and a continuous updating of these skills are also needed. The interviewees pointed out that artificial intelligence, speech recognition and technology in general should also in future be understood as assisting tools,

instead of as methods replacing a human interpreter. An interpreter is constantly making ethical decisions which artificial intelligence is incapable of making so far. A machine or technical device cannot (re)act in a proper way when it comes to ethical questions.

Moreover, the danger of an exaggerated reliance on digitalization was also thematized. According to the interviewees, an interpreter should always maintain their “traditional” interpreting skills with no recourse to digital tools. This is necessary in case no electricity is available, such as in situations of crisis. Traditional interpreting skills should be trained to a sufficient extent, and this should be considered in the education of interpreters.

The benefits of digitalization for the interpreting sector were also mentioned. The interviewees pointed out that remote interpreting enables interpreting in regions where long distances make it difficult to offer face-to-face interpreting. Additionally, remote interpreting can have a positive effect on the client’s agency.

5.2.5 Economy and interpreting

According to the specialists interviewed, the economic situation of a society has a significant impact on the interpreting sector. When it comes to a service financed from public funds, the primary topic of discussion is usually cost, and interpreting services are no exception. As an example, it can be mentioned that in order to save costs, the social security institution Kela has restricted the provision of interpreter services for persons with disabilities in certain situations. At the same time, Finnish society is more and more multilingual and multicultural, with the result that the need for interpreting services is growing. That is why, instead of cutbacks, interpreting services should be promoted and supported by the government.

Another concern relates to the financial situation of interpreters in Finland. The pay rates for interpreters are relatively low. According to the specialists, pay for remote interpreting should be higher than for face-to-face interpreting, because of its higher difficulty level and workload. This is not the case for the moment. The specialists were also worried about whether interpreters are aware of their financial rights and duties. According to them, entrepreneurial, employee and working life skills should be included in the curriculum of any interpreter education.

6. Concluding remarks

Finnish legislation offers a framework for the organization and implementation of interpreting services. In Finland, interpreting education of a high standard provides society with well-educated interpreters in several languages. However, not all the languages needed are represented in interpreter education, and there are interpreters with no interpreter training. At the moment, PSI is not a regulated profession in Finland. A government act on PSI is needed, similar to that for the profession of registered legal interpreters. Associations and institutions that promote the rights and conditions of interpreters aim to impact Finnish authorities and politicians on this issue. The importance of high-quality interpreting needs to be recognized and appreciated.

The developments in the field of spoken-language public service interpreting show that interpreters experience the need to assume a greater agency over their work and working conditions. To achieve improvement, however, the joint effort of all stakeholders in the field is required. Interpreters with different educational, ethnic and working backgrounds will need to start identifying themselves as members of a joint community of interpreting professionals. It is important to speak with a united voice, in order to be heard and to advance

the cause. This is also important in the face of societal megatrends that can be understood as either challenges or opportunities. Societal megatrends push us towards innovations and inevitably cause changes in the interpreting sector. It is crucial to be aware of them, take them seriously and accept them. Then, it will be possible to be proactive and develop new methods and actions that will support and help interpreters in their important work as enablers of understanding. These actions involve legislation, education and professional practice.

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