

# In search of quality interpreting services – The National Parliament of South Africa as a case study

*Harold M. Lesch*

*Corresponding author*

*Department of Afrikaans and Dutch, Stellenbosch University,  
Stellenbosch, South Africa  
hlesch@sun.ac.za*

*Thomas Ntuli*

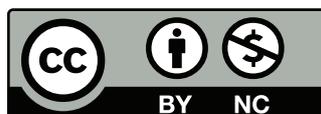
*Department of Afrikaans and Dutch, Stellenbosch University,  
Stellenbosch, South Africa*

## **Abstract**

The aim of this study is to investigate the interpreting services in the Parliament of South Africa as it sets out to ascertain the standard of interpreting services. The impetus to embark on such an investigation arose after Members of Parliament (MPs) complained about the interpreting services. In seeking to determine why MPs made such claims, one has to explore the interpreting services rendered by Parliament's Interpreting Unit.

Consequently, an investigation is undertaken into whether the simultaneous interpreters employed by the Parliament of South Africa possess the amalgam of skills and qualifications necessary for them to render interpreting services of a high standard. The methodology involves questionnaires distributed to MPs and to interpreters, interviews conducted with senior language practitioners (SLPs), and an analysis of recruitment interviews with interpreters. These methodological aspects of the study are employed in an attempt to chart the quality of the interpreting services.

**Keywords:** conference interpreting, recruitment, training, quality, parliament



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.

*Harold M. Lesch* is associate professor in the Afrikaans and Dutch Department at Stellenbosch University and is teaching interpreting studies on the postgraduate level. He holds a D.Litt qualification in Translation. He has experience as a freelance interpreter at the National Parliament of SA and the legislature of the province.

*Thomas Ntuli* is a Masters student in the same department and is a practicing interpreter.

## 1 Introduction

According to Bayley (2004), the activity of a parliament is largely a linguistic activity: it produces talk and it produces texts. Broadly speaking, the objectives that this discourse aims to satisfy are similar all over the world: to legislate or contest legislation, to represent diverse interests, to scrutinise the activity of government, to influence opinion, and to recruit and promote political actors. However, the different discourses of different national parliaments are subject to variation at all linguistic levels on the basis of history, cultural specificity and political culture in particular.

The vision of the National Parliament of South Africa (POSA)<sup>1</sup> is to build an effective people's parliament that is responsive to the needs of the people and that is driven by the ideal of realising a better quality of life for all people (Strategic plan for Parliament 2014 to 2019). From a linguistic (i.e. language) perspective, this means, among other things, that members should be able to communicate across cultures in the language of their choice with the people of the country, even if they are the secondary target market in the political debate. Consequently, interpreting services play a vital role in the communicative discourse at the POSA. These services are used during Parliamentary Plenaries. Plenaries refer to formal sessions of either the National Assembly (NA) or the National Council of Provinces (NCOP) during which issues are debated and formal decisions are made through consensus or voting.

The POSA uses simultaneous interpreting and sign language interpreting to render interpreting services. However, it is important to note that during events which take place outside the precinct of the Parliamentary buildings, consecutive interpreting is sometimes used when technical problems occur. According to Tommola and Hyona (1990, 180), simultaneous interpreting and consecutive interpreting are both highly complex discursive activities during which language perception, comprehension, translation and production operations are carried out virtually in parallel and within tight time constraints. The contention is that the task is likely to create a heavy cognitive processing load. Gile (1995, 79) concurs that it is important to note that interpreting is not an easy task, that not everyone can make a good interpreter, and that interpreting requires special cognitive skills. This entails that an interpreter training programme should have these cognitive skills as its outcome and include relevant practical exercises that should be mastered to hone these skills. Within the South African context, aspirant interpreters may consider completing a bachelor's degree with languages as major subjects to enable them to enrol at one of the South African universities that offers postgraduate qualifications in general and/or legal interpreting. The Department of Justice also provides training for its court interpreters. Experienced simultaneous interpreters can also apply for South African Translators' Institute (SATI) accreditation. Unfortunately, the training of most of the interpreters does not meet this level of qualification.

---

<sup>1</sup> List of abbreviations that specifically apply to this paper:

HR: Human Resources

MP: Member of Parliament

NA: National Assembly

NCOP: National Council of Provinces

POSA: Parliament of South Africa

PLP: Parliamentary Language Policy

SASL: South African Sign Language

SATI: South African Translators' Institute

SLP: Senior Language Practitioner

UNISA: University of South Africa

The article is set out as follows: the objectives are stated in section 2; the background to the study with reference to the POSA is provided in section 3.1 and the relevant literature is reviewed in section 3.2; the research methodology follows in section 4; the empirical data is presented in section 5; and the findings are discussed in section 6, followed by the conclusion in section 7.

## **2 Objectives of the study**

This study's objectives are as follows:

- i) To investigate the interpreting services as rendered in the POSA, and to ascertain the standard of the interpreting services; and
- ii) To scrutinise the aspects surrounding the recruitment, appointment of interpreters and training that are vital for delivering adequate services.

On the basis of our findings regarding recruitment and training we will make recommendations.

It is against these objectives that we should state that what we call the “professionalisation process” in interpreting has been an ongoing process around the globe for decades. In multi-lingual communities, high-quality interpreting is essential for end users and for authorities in a wide range of institutional settings. Consequently, this case study of the POSA is a typical example of the professionalisation process of interpreting.

## **3 Background**

### **3.1 Context: Parliament and interpreting services in South Africa**

The main objective of the POSA language policy is to set out the procedures with regard to the use of the official languages of South Africa in parliament and states the following:

Members of Parliament have the right to use any of the 11 official languages, as well as South African Sign Language (SASL), in the two houses, namely the National Assembly (NA) and the National Council of Provinces (NCOP); and in Committee meetings. The speeches will be interpreted simultaneously into all official languages. Interpreting services will be made available in the galleries for visitors, members of other Houses visiting and the media. The policy was applicable on adoption in 2003. Within up to five years [from that time], the capacity to implement the policy in full should be completely developed.

This policy prompted the establishment of a full-fledged language service section in 2004. The language service section embarked on a drive to recruit language practitioners for all South African official languages, including sign language. Within the South African parliamentary context, a language practitioner is defined as a person who is equipped with more than one language-related skill, which may include translation, interpreting, editing, proofreading and

transcription. The drive to recruit the aforementioned language practitioners saw the creation of 44 language practitioner posts. Apart from the National Language Policy Framework, POSA developed its own language policy in order to provide language services in the form of reporting (also referred to as transcription), translation and interpreting for MPs and the general public. Thus, four language practitioners per language were employed. The first group of language practitioners appointed by POSA in 2004 included experienced consecutive/court interpreters from the Department of Justice and Constitutional Development.

The majority of these interpreting candidates arrived at POSA without the relevant skills, experience or formal qualifications, simply because South Africa does not have a formal history of interpreting in the country. Some language practitioners at the POSA are regarded by management as specialists only in terms of their mother tongue and English. This practice is in contrast with Chernov's (2004, 6) description of the special facilities required for simultaneous interpretation. Chernov states:

Simultaneous interpreting is a *complex type of bilingual verbal communicative activity*, performed *concurrently* with audio perception of an *oral discourse offered once only*, under conditions imposing *limits on available processing time* and *strict limits on the amount of information* which can be processed, its *object and product* to be observed in the *semantic (meaning and sense) structure* of the verbal communication processed.

Adequate language skills are but some of the facets in the make-up of a good interpreter, but these do not guarantee quality service delivery if not underpinned by theoretical and practical interpreting skills.

This study was prompted by complaints, continually received from MPs, that the quality of simultaneous interpreting in the POSA is not up to standard. We seek a holistic understanding of the interpreting contexts prompting such complaints. For example, one parliamentary complaints memorandum from the parliamentary oversight authority describes "poor interpreting which is sometimes unintelligible to the extent that some of the members decide not to follow the debate [rather] than to listen to the interpreters" (Keswa 2010). The study is furthermore driven by the concern that if the complaints are not attended to, it is likely to lead to the use of only English in the Parliament of South Africa. An English-only parliament will be in contradiction to the multilingual language policy of the country as stated above.

Various programmes in interpreter training are offered in South Africa, of which the programme of the University of the Free State is the oldest. Interpreters for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission were trained at this institution. Stellenbosch University, which is within close proximity of the POSA, also has a well-established interpreter training and research programme. The question is how serious training for interpreters of POSA are perceived by the superiors to enhance the interpreting service as only 35 % (see table 7) of the respondents of the time of the study had relevant experience before joining parliament. According to SATI, the key characteristics of a successful interpreter include the following:

- a very high degree of linguistic proficiency;
- a broad general knowledge, including knowledge about current affairs and a variety of technical subjects;
- insight into the cultural and political background of the speaker and the audience;
- a quick mind, analytical skills and a good short-term memory;

- the ability to stay calm under stressful conditions;
- note-taking skills; and
- knowledge of the subject matter and the particular industry (SATI 2018).

The training and the perception of the parliamentary interpreter should be in accordance with these SATI requirements. The question is how parliamentary interpreters compare also in terms of non-language variables including education, training, work conditions, etc.

### 3.2 Theoretical background

There is general agreement that quality may mean very different things to different people (Kalina 2005, 771). Even if there is a certain consensus on quality, specifically recognising its importance, this consensus lacks substance (Kahane 2000). Interpreting quality is acknowledged as an essentially relative and multidimensional concept which can be approached from a variety of perspectives. There are various references to its elusiveness, as it is hard to grasp and difficult to define (Shlesinger et al. 1997, 122).

It seems that what is regarded as quality interpreting depends on whether the setting is conducive to delivering the service. Researchers attempt to distinguish between features that are under the control of the interpreter, and external factors such as time constraints, paralinguistic features of the source text, situation and working conditions, affecting the quality of interpreting (Kalina 2012, 137).

Pienaar (2006) and Cenková (1998, 164–5) state that certain factors can influence the quality of the interpreting service, especially aspects that relate to the original speaker: the delivery speed of the original speech; whether the original speaker is a mother-tongue speaker of a specific language; the fluency and clarity of the speech; and the use of English (a world language) with a heavy accent of an African language (his mother tongue) which might cause the interpreter to find certain words unrecognisable. For the interpreter to deliver a faithful rendition of the speech, these are aspects that the speaker should consider as it could determine the quality of the interpreted speech. However, the quality is influenced not only by the original speaker, but also by aspects relating to the apparatus, the availability of relevant documentation beforehand, the visibility of the interpreter and a realistic perception of quality as it is influenced by user-expectations (Pienaar 2006).

With regard to POSA, the majority of its interpreters do not belong to the South African Translators' Institute (SATI), which is the major accrediting professional body; this situation could be perceived as damaging to a quality interpreting service. As elsewhere, there appears to be what Straniero (2003:135) describes as a “gap between ideal (academic) quality and situated (real-world) quality.” The complaint regarding unintelligibility of the interpreting services in parliament, as mentioned earlier, points in the direction of poor real-world quality.

## 4 Research methodology

The empirical component of our study is based on survey and observation data. The necessary ethical clearance was acquired and permission was provided by the POSA to do the fieldwork in the Parliament of South Africa<sup>2</sup>.

The research was conducted during 2012 in the Parliament of South Africa by:

- Distributing 40 questionnaires<sup>3</sup> to both Houses of Parliament: 20 questionnaires to the NA and another 20 to the NCOP, of which 12 completed questionnaires from the NA and 10 completed questionnaires from the NCOP were received;
- Distributing 40 questionnaires<sup>4</sup> to interpreters in the Interpreting Unit, four questionnaires per language group, of which 31 completed questionnaires were received from the interpreters;
- Observing the criteria and procedures followed by Parliament's Language Services Section during the recruitment interviews of beginner language practitioners;<sup>5</sup>
- Reviewing current advertisements for simultaneous interpreters in the POSA;
- Reviewing the testing method used by the POSA during the interview phase of the recruitment of simultaneous interpreters; and
- Conducting structured interviews with two control (i.e. senior) language practitioners. The interviews were structured around the nature of the complaints of the standard of the interpreting service and how it can be improved.

## 5 Empirical data

### 5.1 Documentary evidence

As a first step in understanding the recruitment process, we can review a typical advertisement for language practitioners as placed in the major newspapers. One would expect that the advertisement(s) (see below) should be clear and specific to attract the most suitable candidates. Put differently, if the appointee's core function is interpreting, the advertisement should clearly state that fact. Interpreters are professionals in their own right, as pointed out by Lesch (2010, 40). Therefore, they should not be treated as generalists by compelling them to perform all three core functions, that is, to interpret, to translate and to report.

In other words, when there is a vacant position for an interpreter, the advertisement should be specific in stating that the vacant position is for an interpreter.<sup>6</sup> The advertisement of 2017 should state specific job requirements unique to an interpreter position as opposed to the suc-

---

<sup>2</sup> Please see addendum A.

<sup>3</sup> Please see addendum B.

<sup>4</sup> Please see addendum C.

<sup>5</sup> The recruitment colleagues were aware that their practices were under study but the candidates were unaware. The influence of the one researcher who was present during these meetings was minimal as he is a practising parliamentary interpreter and is known to the colleagues. Of course, as stated elsewhere in the article, the necessary ethical clearance was granted for the empirical study.

<sup>6</sup> In the recent past, this practice has changed so that a distinction could be drawn between interpreter and translator positions.

successful candidate being responsible for providing Hansard reporting, interpreting and translation services to POSA as stated in the advertisements displayed below. This is important because in reality the position does not correspond to the advertisement. For example, the translator performs translation as a core function and either interpreting or reporting as a second key result area – not all three core functions.

**LANGUAGE PRACTITIONERS (4 POSTS)**

**XITSONGA – TRANSLATION UNIT**

**(REF: LC/3024/2017)**

**TSHIVENDA – INTERPRETING UNIT**

**(REF: LC/2545/2017)**

**ISIXHOSA – INTERPRETING UNIT**

**(REF: LC/2537/2017)**

**SIGN LANGUAGE – INTERPRETING UNIT**

**(REF: LC/2770/2017)**

**Remuneration package: R447 298 p.a.**

The successful candidate will be responsible for providing error-free Hansard/and non-Hansard translations/and Interpreting Services to the Houses and Committees of Parliament.

**Key Performance Areas Include:** •Checking •Reporting •Interpreting •Proofreading  
•Terminology development •Mentoring.

**Minimum Requirements:** •Applicants must be in possession of a Grade 12 or NQF Level 4, a Degree or Diploma in Languages and 3 years' relevant experience.

**Skills Requirements:** •Proficiency in English and the language applied for  
•Sound communication skills (oral and written) •Computer literacy (MS Word, Internet and Email) •Willingness to work long hours •Ability to work independently and under pressure in executing the responsibilities of the post.

## 5.2 The interviewing panel for new appointees and screening test

Our observations of the interviewing process and documentation pertaining to the interview we were privileged to revealed several important factors that might influence interpreting quality.

The interview panel was comprised of the Section Manager, three SLPs, one from each unit, i.e. the Interpreting, Translation and Reporting Units, an HR representative and a union representative. More importantly, observation has shown that these SLPs are selected randomly and some of them do not focus only on language.

During the questioning of the candidates, we detected that no question relating to interpreting was asked by the panel to the candidates even though one of the two positions to be filled was for an interpreter – the other position was for a translator. The main emphasis of the panel was on translation.

During the research, we attended two interviews for isiZulu language practitioners. We observed the following during these encounters: Before the start of the interviews, the panel coordinator distributed question papers for the interviews, an English version of the interpreting test and an English version of the translation test. This means the candidate is tested orally in English, which counts as 50 % of the total interview. The interpreting test from the candidates' first language into English counts as 25 % and the translation test from candidate's first language into English also counts as 25 %. The oral interview comprises the following categories:

- i) The **profile** of the candidate is allocated 20 %. In this category, the candidate has to present themselves before the interview panel regarding skills, experience and relevant qualifications in language, translation and interpreting in an attempt to convince the panel that they are superior to other candidates and that they are the most suitable candidate for the position.
- ii) **Interpersonal skills** are allocated 10 %. This category seeks to determine the depth of the candidate's interpersonal skills by asking the candidate to explain what they would do if they and three colleagues were given a translation task of a lengthy document and they have a tight deadline. The scenario has it that the team divides the document into four equal parts but that the candidate notices that one of his colleagues is not pulling his weight. The colleague is always on the phone for personal reasons and they are often absent from their workstation for lengthy periods. It is clear to the candidate that their colleague is not likely to produce quality work or meet the deadline.
- iii) **Ability to learn:** This category is allocated 10 %. In this category, the panel wanted to know from the candidates about a situation in which the candidates had to learn something difficult. This category is divided into four questions: (a) Why was it difficult to learn? (b) Why did the candidate have to learn it? (c) How long did it take? and (d) What was the end result?
- iv) **Teamwork:** This category contains the last oral question(s) asked by the panel to candidates and is allocated 10 %. It seeks to discover the participation of the candidate in a recent team effort. The category is divided into three parts: (a) the role played by the candidate; (b) the outcome of the effort; and (c) why that outcome came about.
- v) **Interpreting test:** The interpreting test is allocated 25 %. It takes place immediately after the oral interview. It is explained to the candidate that a small recording device will be used on which the candidate's first language has been recorded. While listening via the headphones, the candidate is required to interpret simultaneously into English. Before the candidate starts interpreting, the panel coordinator explains to the candidate that they (the candidate) should put the headphones over their ears and that the candidate will hear a recorded speech in their mother tongue which they should interpret into English. The panel coordinator also explains to the candidate that if they miss a word, they should not dwell on it. When the candidate starts interpreting, the panel members consult the English version distributed by the panel coordinator to each of the panel members. The panel also listens in order to check whether the candidate is accurately conveying the words written in the English text (which is the target text in this case). Remarks such as "you are trainable" or "you can do this" were used to assess the candidate.
- vi) **Translation test:** The translation test is also allocated 25 % and takes place just before or after the interview. The translation text is about half a page and candidates should translate it from the indigenous language into English. Candidates have access to the relevant dictionaries.

A factor that perhaps works against the development or promotion of multilingualism, especially regarding African languages, was the emphasis placed by the panel on English. The panel emphasises English as the main language to the detriment of other languages, as if interpreters were only going to interpret into English and not into their mother tongues.

The reality of interpreting in the POSA is that, in most cases, the language of the floor in both the NA and NCOP is English, and interpreters will then interpret into their respective mother tongues, which is any of the other ten South African indigenous languages. Only when the speaker from the floor uses Afrikaans or one of the African languages will an interpreter become a pivot, which means they will interpret into English. It is therefore commonly understood that most languages used for interpreting during sittings of both Houses of Parliament are the mother tongues of individual interpreters. However, during the interpreting test, the panel does not test whether the candidate is competent in their mother tongue; instead, the panel only focuses on English. There is reason to suspect, though, that candidates from indigenous African languages might not be fully competent in their mother tongue, as their education has been primarily through the medium of English, since content subjects are not taught via the indigenous languages in South Africa.

Another aspect which was observed as not being taken seriously by this panel is the interpreting testing method they used. Candidates are tested for their interpreting skills right in front of the panel by means of a small recording device and earpieces. This could be very intimidating for candidates. It is also not aligned with practice.

The interpreting testing method used to test the first group of interpreters in 2004 was, in our opinion, the best method to test for potential interpreters, as it was performed in a mock setting. In that situation, the candidate sat in the booth and a practising interpreter would formally and professionally explain everything to the candidate about what was going to happen. The candidate would be alone in the booth and another practising interpreter would read a speech from the floor in the House. The practising interpreter would, for instance, read the speech in English and the candidate would interpret into isiNdebele, and when the practising interpreter read another speech in isiNdebele, the candidate would interpret into English. As opposed to this recruiting method, suitable interpreters are tested at present in front of a panel by means of a small recording device and earpieces, and candidates are only requested to interpret into English and not the opposite. We strongly suggest that this current method be reviewed and that the panel revert to the other method in order to appoint the best-suited candidates to interpreting positions.

### 5.3 Research findings and analysis

#### 5.3.1 Questionnaires for Members of Parliament

The table below describes the frequency of listening to interpretation by MPs during the sitting of the Houses.

**Table 1:** Frequency of listenership by MPs to the interpreting during the sitting of the Houses

Frequency	Respondents	Percentage (%)
Sometimes	18	82
Always	4	18
Not at all	-	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 1 above shows the percentage of MPs from the sample who listen to the interpretation during the sitting of the Houses. As 12 languages, including sign language, are being used, it is almost inevitable that at least in some instances a member will make use of the interpreting service.

**Table 2:** Rating of interpreting services by MPs

Rate	Respondents	Percentage (%)
Poor	6	27
Fair	10	45
Good	6	27
Excellent	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 2 above describes the rating of interpreting services by the sample of MPs of POSA. From the total number of respondents, 27 % of the sample of MPs rated the quality of interpreting services in the POSA as “poor”, while 45 % of the respondents rated the quality of interpreting as “fair” and 27 % of the respondents rated the quality of interpreting services as “good”. The above information implies that the quality of interpreting services in the POSA is perceived on average as neither good nor poor, as one can see that the highest number of the respondents rated the quality as “fair”. This is in contrast to the constant complaints (see 3.1)

regarding the poor interpreting quality but also points to the relative and multifaceted (see 3.2) nature of interpreting quality.

**Table 3:** Major problems with the interpreting services indicated by Members of Parliament<sup>7</sup>

<b>Major problems</b>	<b>Respondents</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
Inaccuracy	13	59
Insufficient training	6	27
No major problems	2	9
Non-provision of speeches	1	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>100</b>

Members of parliament were asked to describe the one major problematic factor they encounter with the interpreting services. Table 3 above describes the major problems, as deduced from respondents' answers that influence the quality of the interpreting in parliament. As shown in the table, MPs consider inaccuracies in translation and insufficient training of interpreters to be the most significant problems.

**Table 4:** Input by Members of Parliament on the improvement of quality of interpreting services

<b>Recommendations</b>	<b>Respondents</b>	<b>Percentage (%)</b>
Prior provision of speeches	4	18
Intensive training	7	32
Improve accuracy	4	18
Intensive screening of interpreter's profile	2	9
Improving the sound quality	5	23
<b>Total</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>100</b>

It is interesting to note that there is a correlation between the accuracy and training as the two highest variables in tables 3 and 4. 23 % of the respondents have concerns about sound as a

<sup>7</sup> Respondents were deliberately limited to naming one factor (for both tables 3 and 4) to pinpoint the problem effectively, for categorizing purposes, and to further assist with interventions to address the problems acutely for improved interpreting services.

contributor to poor quality. However, quality of sound is irrelevant to this study, as it is not the domain of the interpreters, but that of the Sound and Vision Unit.

### 5.3.2 Questionnaires for interpreters

**Table 5:** Number of years that the interpreters who took part in the survey had been employed by the Parliament of South Africa

Years	Number of respondents
0-1	3 (10%)
1-5	12 (39%)
5-10	16 (51%)
10-15	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>31</b>

According to table 5, it is clear that at the time of the study no respondent had been employed by the POSA as an interpreter for 10-15 years. Taking into account the fact that the implementation of the first phase of the Parliamentary Language Policy (PLP) occurred in 2004, it is evident that interpreters employed in the Parliamentary Language Services Section at the time of the study had between 0 and 10 years of work experience as simultaneous interpreters in the POSA.

**Table 6:** Highest relevant qualification

Qualifications	Number of respondents
Diploma	6 (19 %)
Undergraduate degree	7 (23 %)
Honours/BTech	12 (39 %)
Master's degree	4 (13 %)
No relevant qualifications	2 (6 %)
<b>Total</b>	<b>31</b>

The relevant qualification refers in this regard to some sort of interpreter training whereby the students got some form of interpreting experience. The content of the language degrees of some of the candidates are not necessarily directly related to interpreting, although interpreting programmes are available in SA. The diploma and the undergraduate degree generally sensitise students, to a greater or lesser degree, to interpreting practice, whereas the Bachelor of Arts degrees with honours or BTech qualifications are more vocational in nature, and the master's degree focuses on research in interpreting. The total percentage of respondents holding an interpreting vocational qualification is 39 %, while 13 % of respondents held research-based qualifications in interpreting, such as honours or BTech degrees and master's degrees.

**Table 7:** Training of interpreters in the Parliament of South Africa

Skills	Yes	No
Had interpreting experience (including some from of training) before joining Parliament	11 (35 %)	20 (65 %)
Not yet trained, know when you will receive training	19 (61 %)	1 (4 %)

**Table 8:** Perceptions about training

Skills	Yes	No
Duration of training reasonable to boost work output ( <i>the 11 interpreters that were trained before joining Parliament – see table 7</i> )	2 (6 %)	9 (29 %)
Considers training before assuming duty ideal	28 (90 %)	3 (10 %)
Training delivers better quality of interpreting services output	30 (97 %)	1 (3 %)

Table 7 describes the number of the respondents who joined the Parliamentary Language Services Section with interpreting skills relating to certain settings (e.g. church, medical and legal settings) and those who had no skills when joining the Parliamentary Language Services Section, whereas table 8 describes the perceptions of training. It is alarming that such a large number of interpreters (65 %) had no interpreting experience and that 61 % of the respondents know when they are going to be trained, while 4 % of the respondents do not know when they are going to receive any interpreting training. These statistics feed negatively into the professional competence and self-confidence of the interpreters and ultimately the interpreting services in general. The statistics of table 7 are in contradiction to the interpreters' perceptions regarding the value of training (table 8): 97 % believe that training leads to higher quality interpreting.

**Table 9:** Working conditions of interpreters in the Parliament of South Africa

<b>Working conditions</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
Working conditions conducive to better-quality service delivery	7 (23 %)	24 (77 %)
Interpreter treated as a professional	5 (16 %)	26 (84 %)
Communication between interpreter and manager conducive to better service delivery	6 (19 %)	25 (81 %)
Manager intervenes immediately to resolve conflict for better service delivery	4 (13 %)	27 (87 %)
Salary matches interpreters' profession	5 (16 %)	26 (84 %)

On average, the figures show that poor working conditions prevail for the interpreters. The great majority answered “no” to all questions regarding quality working conditions. As POSA is one of the key institutions for employing interpreters in the country, it should indeed in our opinion play a greater role in the professionalisation process of interpreting in general in the country and on the continent.

**Table 10:** Interpreting experience of the respondents before joining the Parliament of South Africa

<b>Years</b>	<b>Number of respondents</b>
No experience	21 (67 %)
1-5	3 (10 %)
5-10	1 (3 %)
10-15	3 (10 %)
15-20	3 (10 %)
<b>Total</b>	<b>31</b>

The interpreters who joined Parliament with interpreting experience are those who were recruited from the Department of Justice and Constitutional Development. It is important to note this because at the time there was not any other institution with trained and experienced interpreters. These interpreters joined Parliament with consecutive (court) interpreting experience. Some of

them have already left POSA for the provincial legislatures and the University of South Africa (UNISA), respectively, because they say POSA's working conditions are not as favourable as those of the provincial legislatures and UNISA. At the time of conducting the study, another two interpreters who were originally recruited from the Department of Justice and Constitutional Development have resigned from the Parliamentary Language Services Section to join the Gauteng legislature, because they have been offered better salary packages compared to that of the POSA. This causes the POSA to always operate with new staff that quite often have neither experience nor training in interpreting. This reality has a negative impact on the quality of the interpreting services and it is among the causes that give rise to the complaints (see 3.1), as the interpreter is more than the sum total of his language abilities: he or she should also master specific interpreting skills. See Gile's (1995, 159) remark that interpreting performance problems do not only occur in fast, information-dense speeches, but also in clear, slow speech segments in which no particular obstacle can be detected. This is a reflection of the interpreting skills that are not yet mastered.

**Table 11:** First languages and other languages respondents interpret into

First languages	Number of respondents per language	Languages they most commonly interpret into	
		First	Second
Setswana	3	3	
Afrikaans	4	4	
IsiZulu	2	2	
IsiXhosa	3	3	
IsiNdebele	3	3	
Siswati	4	3	1
Tshivenda	2	2	
Xitsonga	3	2	1
Sepedi	4	4	
Sesotho	3	2	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>28 (90 %)</b>	<b>3 (9.6 %)</b>

This table shows the relation between the percentage of the number of the respondents who interpret into their first language and the number of respondents who usually interpret into their second language – the second language in all probability is always English.

According to the above-mentioned information provided by interpreter respondents, it is clear that the majority of interpreters in the POSA interpret both from their respective mother tongues into English as well as from English into their mother tongue – the latter is more frequent. Lesch (2010, 54–56) provides various reasons why English plays such a dominant role as medium of communication in this setting and why interpreting usually takes place from English. These include the fact that English reaches a broader target audience, the perceived neutrality of English, varying interpreting quality, the audio feed broadcast on national television that

normally carries the floor (original) language, status connotations to the language, the subject matter and speeches that are, frankly, often plagiarised.

## 6 Discussion of key findings

Real-world quality should begin with the client's (i.e. the target text listener's) needs and end with the client's perception – also in the case of POSA. Both professional interpreters and clients, i.e. MPs, should therefore take an interest in quality assurance policies and guidelines. This implies that interpreters should be capacitated to deliver quality interpreting services to their clients. Furthermore, clients should be in a position to accept and appreciate the quality of interpreting rendered by interpreters. However, the question remains of how interpreters could capacitate themselves when they are being denied training opportunities, as the findings reveal that 65 % of the sample of interpreters in POSA had not received any training in interpreting, yet they are expected to deliver a quality interpreting service (see table 7.)

According to Gile (1995, 3), formal training is important to assist individuals who want to become professional interpreters to enhance their performance to realise their potential fully. It is clear that appropriate training coupled with professionalism would have resulted in better-quality interpreting services. The findings of the study showed that 65 % (table 7) of the sample of interpreters had joined POSA without any interpreting experience, as most of them were recruited from the Department of Education where their primary duty was language teaching. The same 65 % of interpreters had not received formal training in interpreting as of the 2012 study. 90 % (table 8) of the responding interpreters consider training as ideal before assuming interpreting duties in POSA, because they find themselves in a foreign environment and a foreign field of specialisation.

Investigation during the study has found that there is also reluctance to partake in formal training courses, as the interpreters are of the opinion that peer-to-peer training and Senior Language Practitioners' on-the-job mentoring and coaching are effective in producing better-quality interpreting as long as the interpreter has the temperament for interpreting. The following two extracts about training from the interviews are relevant in this regard even though contradictory to a certain extent:

Interviewee X:

It does not matter how much training one gets and how much practice one gets, one will not improve, because one needs to have the attitude and temperament of not saying interpreting is difficult then one will make a good interpreter. [sic]

Whereas interviewee Y states:

No formal training is offered in Parliament, and interpreters have to understand why certain things are done. [This remark refers to the interpreting methodology that the interpreters do not possess.]

The only interpreters who benefit from formal training are those registered with institutions of higher learning.

The perception of the interpreters is also relevant, as 97 % (table 8) believe that training will empower them to deliver a better interpreting output quality.

It is this study's contention that this attitude, and the subsequent approach, lies at the heart of the problems with interpreting quality. As a result, research-based training should form the basis of interpreter training even though there is much value in peer-to-peer training or a master-apprentice model (Pöschhacker 2010, 3–4). Research regarding the training of interpreters is also helpful to understand the cognitive processes and skills of the interpreting practice. Gile (1995, 3) also echoed that formal training is important to assist individuals who want to become professional interpreters to improve their performance to their full potential. One can thus expect that the quality of interpreting will improve if the interpreters in POSA receive the relevant formal vocational training.

32 % (table 4) of the sample of MPs listed intensive training of interpreters in POSA as an important change that would enable interpreters to deliver high-quality interpreting services. Some MPs even recommend that interpreters should be sent for training before commencing interpreting duties in POSA. According to Lesch (2010, 57), recruiters for parliamentary interpreters do not necessarily doubt the language abilities of an individual, but they agree that functional abilities to interpret should be nurtured and enhanced. In other words, language mastery alone does not necessarily make a good interpreter if the interpreter does not inherently possess the interpreting skills.

Quality assurance has consequently become an issue with regard to the profession's reputation as well as a basis for assuring good working conditions and adequate remuneration. This study also reveals that the working conditions in the National Parliament are not conducive to enable interpreters to deliver quality interpreting services, as 77 % of the sample of interpreters said that working conditions in Parliament are not conducive to the delivery of high-quality interpreting services. 84 % of the total responding interpreters said that they are not treated as professionals by POSA management, while 81 % of the responding interpreters said that there is no good communication strategy in place to facilitate communication between them and their manager.

The provision of MPs' speeches beforehand is also crucial for the purpose of preinterpreting preparation in order to deliver quality interpreting services. Lesch (2010, 52) says, "Members should be aware of aspects such as making speeches available to the interpreters prior to the delivery of their speeches". 18 % (table 4) of the total respondents in this study mentioned the provision of speeches to interpreters beforehand as another aspect which will enable interpreters to improve the quality of interpreting services.

59 % (table 3) of the total sample of MPs in this study indicated that they experience inaccuracies and consider them the most significant problem in interpreting quality. One can speculate that if the speaker from the floor speaks one of the indigenous African languages, the speech may not always be accurately interpreted into English (Lesch 2010, 50). People generally feel more comfortable expressing themselves in their mother tongue. However, in the case of parliament one may deduce that MPs do not have the confidence in the interpreting service, as they feel that the message they want to convey may be distorted when it reaches the listener. They therefore prefer to use English when delivering their speeches. Only a few MPs use their native languages to deliver their speeches and first liaise with interpreters who speak their languages and provide the interpreters with speeches to prepare. It is against this backdrop that we strongly recommend that interpreters should be provided with speeches beforehand.

## **7 Conclusion**

This study set out to revisit interpreting services within a developing context. This was done by way of a case study. The case study focussed on the interpreting services offered in the POSA as a typical example of the professionalization process of interpreting. The aims were to investigate the interpreting service as rendered in the POSA and ascertain the standard of the services, subsequently scrutinising the aspects surrounding the recruitment and the appointment of interpreters that are vital for ultimately delivering adequate services. This was done by using a mixed method approach. What becomes clear from this study is that it is more than the interpreter's mere language competencies that are involved in delivering an interpreting service of note but that a more holistic approach is required and that the functional abilities of the interpreter should be developed. Relevant training is identified as the main intervention to assist in this regard. The interpreter should be a language professional in his own right who strives to deliver a quality service. This should already be evident during the recruitment process. As performance in any professional environment is measured according to clearly defined objectives and needs, which demand a specific type of competence, the interpreting environment should be no exception. Highly competent interpreters are needed to meet the ever-changing requirements of the professional environment – also for POSA.

## Bibliography

- Bayley, P. (Ed.) 2004. *Cross-cultural perspectives on parliamentary discourse. Discourse approaches to politics, society and culture*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Cenková, I. 1998. Quality of interpreting – A binding or liberating factor? In A. Beylard-Ozeroff, J. Kralova and B. Moser-Mercer (eds.) *Translators' Strategies and Creativity: Selected Papers from the 9<sup>th</sup> International Conference on Translation and Interpreting*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins. 163–170.
- Chernov, G.V. 2004. *Inference and anticipation in simultaneous interpreting: a probability-prediction model*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Gile, D. 1995. *Basic Concepts and Models for Interpreter and Translator Training*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Kahane, E. 2000. Thoughts on the quality of interpretation. *Communicate 4*. Available: <http://www.aiic.net/ViewPage.cfm/page197.htm> [6 July 2010].
- Kalina, S. 2005. Quality assurance for interpreting processes. *Meta: Translators' Journal* 50(2): 768–84.
- Kalina, S. 2012. Quality in Interpreting. In Y. Gambier and L. van Doorslaer (eds.) *Handbook of Translation Studies Volume 3*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Keswa, N.P. 2010. Memorandum: Concerns and Complaint raised by the Parliamentary Oversight Authority (POA).
- Lesch, H. 2010. A descriptive overview of the interpreting service in Parliament. *Acta Academica*, 41(1): 144–163.
- Pienaar, M. 2006. Simultane tolkdienste aan Suid-Afrikaanse provinsiale wetgewers: 'n paar gevaartekens. Unpublished paper delivered at 5th Language International Conference. July 2002, Johannesburg.
- Parliament of South Africa. Strategic plan for Parliament 2014 to 2019
- Pöschhacker, F. 2010. The role of research in interpreter education. *The international Journal for Translation & Interpreting*, 2(1): 1–10.
- Shlesinger, M. 1997. Quality in simultaneous interpreting. In Gambier, Y., Gile, D. and Taylor, C. (eds.). *Conference interpreting: current trends in research*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins. 123–131.
- Straniero, S.F. 2003. Norms and quality in media interpreting: the case of formula one press conferences. *The Interpreters' Newsletter* 12: 135–174.

Tommola, J. and Hyönä, J. 1990. *Mental load in listening and speech shadowing Translation*. In J. Tommola (ed.) *Foreign Language Comprehension and Production*. pp. 179–188. [Online] Available: [www.openstarts.units.it/dspace/bitstream/10077/2472/1/03.pdf](http://www.openstarts.units.it/dspace/bitstream/10077/2472/1/03.pdf) [19 July 2011].

SATI. 2019. Interpreting. [Online]. [http://translators.org.za/sati\\_cms/index.php?frontend\\_action=display\\_text\\_content&content\\_id=1519](http://translators.org.za/sati_cms/index.php?frontend_action=display_text_content&content_id=1519) [25 February 2019].

## Addendum A



**PARLIAMENT**  
OF THE REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

LEGISLATION AND OVERSIGHT DIVISION  
PO Box 15 Cape Town 8000 Republic of South Africa  
Tel: 27(21) 403 2375 Fax: 27 (21) 403 3623

**MEMORANDUM**  
[For Approval]



**TO:** Mr Z A Dingani  
Secretary to Parliament

**FROM:** Mrs N P Keswa  
Manager: Legislation and Oversight Division

**DATE:** 8 November 2010

**SUBJECT:** REQUEST FOR PERMISSION TO OBSERVE IN THE INTERVIEWS OF  
LANGUAGE PRACTITIONERS FOR EMPIRICAL RESEARCH  
PURPOSES

### 1. DECISION REQUIRED

The Secretary to Parliament is requested to approve Mr T Ntuli's request to observe in the interviews of Language Practitioners for empirical research purposes.

### 2. BACKGROUND

The Acting Secretary to Parliament approved Mr Ntuli's request to conduct an academic research on "The quality of simultaneous interpreting in the Parliament of the Republic of South Africa". In order for Mr Ntuli to complete his thesis as per his proposal he has to observe during the interviews of the entry level Language Practitioners.

### 3. MOTIVATION

Observing the above-mentioned interviews Mr Ntuli will be in a position to complete his thesis successfully. Understanding that Parliament of the Republic of South Africa is a highly regarded institution that encourages excellence and where simultaneous interpreting is well supported, Mr Ntuli believes that it will be beneficial to the academic environment for future researchers as well as to the institution to provide high quality interpreting services to primary and secondary clients of this Institution.

Through this research the institution will be able to gain insight into many of the challenges faced by simultaneous interpreters during the process of interpretation and thereby contribute positively to the academic environment as well as directly to the current interpreting work environment.



PARLIAMENT  
OF THE REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

4. **RECOMMENDATION**

The Secretary to Parliament is requested to grant Mr Ntuli the permission to observe in the interviews of Language Practitioners that are conducted at Parliament for empirical research purposes.

<b>Recommended:</b>  <b>N P KESWA (MRS)</b> <b>LOD MANAGER</b> Date: <u>09/11/2010</u>
<b>Approved</b>     <b>MR ZIA DINGANI</b> <b>SECRETARY TO PARLIAMENT</b> Date: <u>12/11/2010</u>

## Addendum B

### National Parliament of South Africa Academic Research

#### Section A: Questionnaire for Members of Parliament

This questionnaire seeks to determine the level of quality of interpreting in Parliament from the primary client’s perspective.

1. How often do you listen to the interpretation during the sitting of the House?

Sometimes	
Always	
Not at all	

2. Which language/s do you usually listen to?

English	
Afrikaans	
IsiZulu	
IsiNdebele	
IsiXhosa	
Siswati	
Sesotho	
Sepedi	
Setswana	
Tshivenda	
Xitsonga	

3. How can you rate interpreting services rendered during the sitting of Parliament Houses?

Poor	
Fair	
Good	
Excellent	

4. In your opinion, what is the major problem (if any) with the interpreting service in Parliament?

.....  
 .....  
 .....  
 .....

.....  
 .....

5. Do you consider interpreting service in Parliament as important for effective functioning of Parliament?

.....  
 .....  
 .....  
 .....

6. When you address the House, do you take into account that your speech is being interpreted?

YES	NO
-----	----

7. Are you confident that your message will be accurately conveyed to the intended listeners?

YES	NO
-----	----

8. We would briefly like to hear your inputs on the improvement of quality of interpreting services rendered in Parliament, if any?

.....  
 .....  
 .....  
 .....  
 .....

Thank you for your valuable contribution to this research, your inputs will contribute to the improvement of interpreting services in Parliament.

Addendum C

**QUESTIONNAIRE FOR SIMULTANEOUS INTERPRETING RESEARCH**

SECTION A Please mark with an x in an appropriate box. Mark one box only.

1. How long have you been employed by Parliament of RSA?

Between 0-1 year	
1-5 years	
5-10 years	
10-15 years	
15-20 years	

2. What is your age?

20-25 years	
25-30 years	
30-35 years	
35-40 years	
40-45 years	
45-50 years	
50-55 years and more	

3. What is your highest relevant qualification?

Certificate	
Diploma	
Undergraduate Degree	
Honours/ BTech	
Masters Degree	
PhD	

4. What is your gender?

Male	
Female	

SECTION B  
 This section seeks to determine immediate training of interpreters. Please answer questions by marking every question with an x

1. When you join Parliament did you already have interpreting skills?	Yes	No
2. After joining Parliament were you immediately trained in Interpreting?	Yes	No
3. Was the duration of training reasonable to boost your work output?	Yes	No
4. If you are not trained yet do you know when are you going to be trained?	Yes	No
5. Would you consider training before assuming interpreting duties to be ideal?	Yes	No
6. Does training assist to deliver better quality of interpreting services?	Yes	No

SECTION C

This section seeks to determine working conditions of simultaneous interpreters in Parliament. Please answer questions by marking every question with an x

1. Are your working conditions in Parliament conducive for you to deliver better quality of interpreting?	Yes	No
2. As a professional interpreter in this field are you treated as such by your managers?	Yes	No
3. Is the communication between you and your managers conducive for better interpreting service delivery?	Yes	No
4. In case of conflict in your Unit, do your managers intervene immediately to amicably resolve the conflict for better interpreting services?	Yes	No
5. Does your salary match what you worth for?	Yes	No

**SECTION D**

**This section seeks to determine experience and language skills of interpreters**

1.	When joining national Parliament, did you have interpreting experience?	Yes	No
----	---	-----	----

2. If yes how many years experience did you have?  
Please tick the appropriate box

Less than 1 year	
1 - 5 years	
6 - 10 years	
11 - 15 years	
16 years and above	

3. What is your first language?  
Please tick the appropriate box

English	
Afrikaans	
IsiZulu	
IsiXhosa	
IsiNdebele	
Siswati	
Tshivenda	
Xitsonga	
Sepedi	
Sesotho	
Setswana	

4.	In most cases which language are you interpreting into?	First	Second
----	---	-------	--------

Your participation in this research is much appreciated! Thank you!