Why so few men? : Gender imbalance in conference interpreting

Research into the causes and consequences of a preponderance of women in the profession of conference interpretation and what men think about it.

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In February 2013, Barack Obama said: “One of the things that I really strongly believe in is that we need to have more girls interested in math, science, and engineering. We’ve got half the population that is way underrepresented in those fields and that means that we’ve got a whole bunch of talent … that is not being encouraged…” Science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields have had a consistent paucity of women – the deficit of women in these fields has led to innumerable studies and initiatives looking to remedy the gender imbalance. The Executive Office of the President of the United States of America states that achieving gender balance within these fields “is not just the right thing to do, but the smart thing to do”. Gender imbalance, which can skew towards either gender, is a phenomenon which affects conference interpreting as there is a preponderance of women within the profession.

However, while STEM fields strive to remedy gender imbalance because it is seen as ‘the right thing to do’, there seems to be a lack of similar research or the development of initiatives in the profession of conference interpreting. The gender imbalance became apparent to me as a student trainee, attending conferences and during work experience opportunities while completing the post-graduate studies in the field. The awareness of a gender imbalance in conference interpreting led me to explore this topic for my thesis. I wanted to understand the gender imbalance, and upon further, early investigation, there appeared to be a shortage of research into the topic, both in academic and non-academic circles. It also emerged that this was not always the trend in conference interpreting; in the beginning the gender imbalance was swayed towards men.

The study

The intent of this study was to explore this area and attempt to bridge the gaps in existing research and knowledge.

This article aims to set out and to briefly explore the findings of the two principle research questions that I explored in my masters thesis, which forms the basis of this article. The questions were as follows:

- What motivates men to become conference interpreters?
- According to the opinions of male conference interpreters, what has caused the gender imbalance in conference interpreting?
The study’s findings were gathered through the use of a mixed methods approach. Male conference interpreters were the population used and the sample was reached using snowball sampling. An online, self-completion survey was completed by 259 participants and three supplementary interviews were conducted with experienced male conference interpreters. All respondents to the survey and participants in the interviews were guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality; therefore they will be referred to using letters and numbers for this article, as they were in the thesis.

Results

The study found that male conference interpreters were motivated by the remuneration provided, the flexibility allowed, the excitement granted and meaningfulness found within conference interpreting. Fifty-two per cent of participants stated that the remuneration provided by the profession was a motivational factor. Further, the flexibility allowed in conference interpreting also acted as a motivation, with many of the participants choosing conference interpreting for the freelance aspect of the career. Additionally, participants stated that their decisions to become a conference interpreter were not predetermined; had conference interpreting not been such a flexible career option, they would not have been able to pursue it.

A theme that emerged through the qualitative data collection was that male conference interpreters became motivated to change career paths and choose conference interpreting due to the tedium of previous professional work. According to Kafry (1980, para. 1), tedium is ‘the experience of physical, emotional and mental exhaustion’. Respondent G outlined “[I] was getting bored with my career as a translator, and went from translation to interpretation (a natural transition)”. Respondent S explained that he was in search of a divergent career option: “[I] just wanted to try something different from what I was doing at that time”. Likewise, respondent V wished to develop on “previous professional work”. According to Kafry (1980, para. 1), tedium can also be triggered by ‘the need for meaningfulness and achievement’. Therefore, the excitement granted and meaningfulness found within conference interpreting were motivators for many participants.

In response to the second research question, many respondents explained that within the profession of conference interpreting, gender is not an issue as long as the interpreter has a talent for it. However, a majority of the research participants considered that the gender imbalance in the profession is due to the heightened female ability to both interpret and to be invisible. One participant opined that “Women are generally better [at] multitasking, so more women have “a gift” or [the] skills required to listen and to speak at the same time”.

The participants also considered that the flexibility of the profession motivates women to enter the profession and deters men from doing so. There was consensus among male conference interpreters that men, in general, seem to gravitate towards more stable positions within the profession. For example, there is a greater imbalance among freelance conference interpreters than among staff interpreters. One participant explained his theory, “I don’t know whether you could say that perhaps more men are more career orientated. They want something that they can start straight away. They can start at the junior post, they can work their way up, they can be aiming at promotions, they can be doing all of these kinds of things and interpreting is kind of flat. It’s quite linear, obviously, lest you join an institution, there is no promotion at all.”

Literature in the area of gender imbalance indicates that women are often clustered into service occupations. Bradley and Healy (2008) explain that women are seen as ‘naturally’ equipped for these jobs. Some participants indicated that women’s sense of service could explain the gender imbalance within the profession. Some participants applied this logic to conference interpreting. Participant 34 opined that: “One of the reasons […] why more women are in our profession […] is
that interpretation involves an element of service – this is a talent women are definitely better at than men. Women serve their children, their parents, etc.” He continued to express that “few men are willing to do that [serve]”.

Participants indicated that the gender imbalance in conference interpreting is rooted in gender imbalances in education and subject choice of school-goers. One of the interview participants explains that “boys feel […] [language learning] is a world that they are excluded from.” He hypothesized as to why boys do not choose to study languages: “When you’re at school, when you’re insecure in yourself, […] when you’re affording your identity, then you do tend to herd gravitate and if less boys do languages and less boys do well in languages, then unless you’re very confident in yourself and very secure […] then you don’t pursue it [language learning] with the same passion. So, it has been going on for years.” He concluded, “it is perhaps a shame at a lower level, at an educational level that not enough boys feel able or are prepared to or […] [are] interested in pursuing languages”.

Further considerations

This research study has compiled a valuable aggregate of male conference interpreters’ experience, and more specifically, has documented their perspectives on the cause of the gender imbalance within the profession.

It is noted that further to the findings to the two principal research questions, some participants suggested that the gender imbalance within conference interpreting varies from region to region, an observation that was included in the study’s findings. The final significance of the project can be found in the additional findings that arose in conducting this exploratory study. Male conference interpreter participants indicated that, although women are thought to have better aptitude for conference interpreting, male participants perceive that they have a privileged position in the profession. Parsons (2001, p. 322) states that ‘privilege is an advantage or favour people enjoy from their similarity to the norms operating in a particular situation”, explaining that being male is the operative norm in the society at large. Therefore, it is the norm in the workplace. One participant confirmed this finding by commenting that, in the private market, he felt that he had an advantage over women: “I’m afraid it is much easier to have a “successful” career as a male in this profession than it is for women. I hate to say so, but both recruiters and clients seem to prefer men... The negative consequence being that some bad male interpreters will get a lot of work when good female colleagues have a hard time being recruited”. These findings could have consequences in the field and if men enjoy an “unfair advantage”, it is crucial for conference interpreting as a profession that further investigation of gender issues takes place.

References


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