

**Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres
Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS)**

**National Indigenous Studies conference 2011
Young and Old: Connecting Generations**

Inaugural National Indigenous Interpreters Meeting

**How do we make sure that interpreters are going to be there
when we need them?**

**Presenter
Peter Mathie**

This paper has been produced to support my presentation at the 2011 Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) National Indigenous Studies conference Young and Old: Connecting Generations.

I would like to acknowledge and offer my respect to the Ngunnawal people and their elders past and present.

I would also like to offer my thanks to the Kimberley Interpreting Service (KIS) for asking me to work with them and also for their wisdom and extraordinary commitment to the work they do.

My participation in the conference is a result of a request from Deanne Lightfoot, who is the manager of KIS that I come along and talk about how to develop an interpreting service that meets the needs of community. So, I'd also like to thank Sarah Cutfield and the team at AIATSIS for being okay with that. Thank you all.

It is important when thinking about how to provide a service in an area like the Kimberley or anywhere else for that matter that you think very carefully about your objective. What is it that we are seeking to achieve? In this case, as I understand it, our central objective is to secure and demonstrate that understanding is achieved in communication between people.

There may be a range of ways that this might be achieved when we're talking about transactions between Aboriginal people who in the normal course of daily life speak languages other than Standard English and those of us who only know Standard English. We will look to an example where trained interpreters are not used later but it is very clear to me that the engagement of a trained interpreter will always be the most reliable strategy one can employ to ensure that understanding has been achieved between speakers of different languages.

It is also very clear to me that there are compelling reasons to employ a community controlled corporate structure for an organisation being established to provide interpreter services. In saying this I understand that the model used in the Northern Territory is one where the interpreting service is part of a government agency. I understand that this works very well and KIS has enjoyed tremendous support from AIS. Here, I am really focused upon KIS or the prospect of further services being developed in WA. Where interpreting services appear to be well established and accepted in the NT this is not the case in WA.

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It is a very complicated business, and as I see it, the organisation requires a very significant knowledge of cultural protocols in order that interpreters will be supported to do their job effectively. I also think there is a requirement for a social license to operate in this area as a cultural broker/advisor/teacher/mentor and guardian. Yes, guardian, it is important to know how to share and when not to share. There is much more to providing an Indigenous interpreting service than what an interpreter does in the confines of an engagement. As in the case of KIS it is most likely that a range of training and other services will be offered and ensuring that the whole service is governed by people chosen from the local community in a way determined by that community is the best way I know to achieve the right kind of overall governance we need.

There is a great deal of planning that will sit behind the establishment of a successful interpreting service if it is to survive to provide interesting, meaningful jobs for young aboriginal people as they develop their careers and for those who will look to it to ensure understanding in transactions with people who are only familiar with standard English as a communication form.

So I assume, that the appropriate choice of corporate structure will be one that is driven by Aboriginal people who have, or are prepared to develop, a strong understanding and commitment to the important work carried out by interpreters in our community.

As I think about the important elements that we need to address I see three main areas to tackle. These are:

- Demand from language speakers
- Demand from service providers, and
- Service capacity

Demand from language speakers



There is plenty of evidence of pressure being experienced by people to struggle on in dealing with Standard English speakers without interpreter assistance. This might take the form of feeling inadequate or unintelligent, it might take the form of a reluctance to tell someone that I don't understand them or it might be a reluctance to cause inconvenience.

Whatever the case, it is important that people understand their rights to interpreting services. So, it is also important that a successful interpreting service will have adequate resources to advise people about their role, as well as what is not their role and how to access the service.

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Demand from service providers



Probably the most challenging job I see Deanne Lightfoot and the KIS team going out to do every day is explaining the need for interpreter services to government agencies, service providers, the courts, visiting politicians and others. It is a fight. Both the Australian and the West Australian governments have clear policies about the engagement of interpreters and the responsibility for the engagement of interpreters to assist them in their work.

Clearly, some elements of government policy are seen more in terms of possibility than direction. Copies of these policy documents are available on-line. At a recent review of the WA policy by the Office of Multicultural Interests KIS advised that a major drawback of the policy is its construction as something one might do rather than a direction to do something.

Clearly, in the State of Western Australia there is little understanding in the institutions of government that they are neither being understood or understanding what they are being told in their dealings with many Aboriginal people.

A quick glance at the KIS booking records will show that very recent visits to the Kimberley by political leaders and departmental heads have progressed under the "policy as suggestion only" option and interpreters have not been engaged.

We say that when people visit communities with an interpreter they are showing an intention to understand what **they** are being told. If we go to Indonesia we don't get an interpreter to "help" the people we are visiting. We get one for us! So why should the engagement of an interpreter be seen differently when English speakers visit a Walmajarri community?

The courts are another area where much is left to be done. Although we hear a lot about therapeutic jurisprudence and other strategies that might deal with the extraordinary over representation of Aboriginal people in our justice system taking steps to ensure understanding through the engagement of interpreters has not gained traction over recent times.

In health the story is much the same although it is likely that English speaking clinicians will be assisted by an Aboriginal Health Worker. We do not have many health workers who are also trained interpreters.

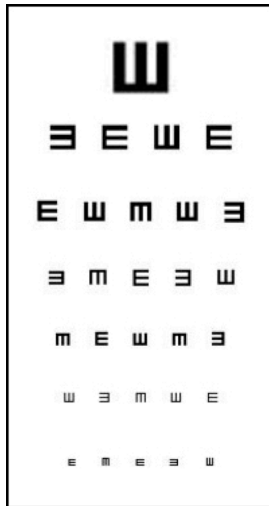
I spoke with Margie O'Neil, a friend, and someone whose work is highly regarded. She is an optometrist and runs an eye health program across the length and breadth of WA's north.

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She uses this eye chart with almost every Aboriginal person she sees over the age of 50 and otherwise whenever someone can't identify the first letter on the standard chart. Margie has created a program that has seen dramatic improvements in attendance at follow up appointments because she takes the time and uses a range of tools to ensure that she is being understood. We are sure her success would be even greater with access to trained interpreters.

It is incredible to me that someone who is given the assistance of this chart one day can be expected to feel at home with an incomprehensible form of language used in a courtroom the day after.

Our interpreter service needs the resources to address the urgent need for governments to be aware of and implement their own policies.

This means a few things for our plan. It means we need to ensure we have a member of staff to go and visit offices to introduce the service and explain to people why they should be using it. This will be an on-going responsibility outside our capital cities because the staff turnover in agencies there is swift.

It also means that we offer training. Currently KIS offers cultural awareness and working with interpreters training. We are seeking funds to further develop this training to ensure that we are addressing myths and changing peoples' behavior.

With the increase in mining and other activity we are also seeing an increase in the number of people putting themselves out there as cultural awareness trainers, some are private non-Indigenous folk who think they know their stuff and others are universities, if these training programs are giving people confidence that they can adequately engage with people who speak another language we have a problem.

Our interpreter service needs to greatly increase its capacity in delivering this training and it must be the course that people choose. So, we need the funds to review and rewrite training courses and we need to train the people who will deliver them.

Service Capacity

So, we now have government and service providers engaging interpreters and we need to supply them. Right now KIS can ensure interpreters for most requests but when the number of requests matches the real need we need to expand the team. In the short term this will need to be a consideration people allow for in planning visits, can we access interpreter services? In the longer term we need to train more interpreters. This means funds for training and I think a system of continuous practice development through mentoring,

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professional supervision and similar options now taken for granted in other professions must be developed.

We also need to understand our interpreters don't all have mobile phones or instant access to vehicles. The service needs to be equipped to support interpreters so this means having a team of support officers who assist in this way.

So lets check where we are now.

Currently KIS receives recurrent funds from the State through the Department for Indigenous Affairs (DIA) and what seems like a short term project grant from The Commonwealth Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA) that is tagged to the COAG priority communities. There is no current appropriation for Indigenous interpreter services so there is no accountability mechanism inside government to track support for these services.

This is something that must be addressed if we are to see KIS flourish or additional services developed to service the needs of our services.

The current funding received by KIS secures two staff to provide all of the support roles I have just talked about and to pay the cost of interpreter training where KIS is responsible for ensuring training is provided through TAFE, arranging training rooms, accommodation, transport and general logistics and support while also keeping the service going.

We cannot expect Deanne and Mathew to continue to carry this responsibility between them. They need more staff and they need increased capacity to buy assistance when needed. It is not likely that interpreter fees can be increased to meet this cost so urgent funding is required.

Recommendations

It is vital that:

- Our governments and other service providers understand that it is they who need assistance from interpreters to do their jobs properly.
- That our governments establish a budget appropriation for Indigenous interpreting services that requires investment to be made and monitored.
- That this allocation is directly managed by government and granted to appropriately constituted Indigenous Interpreting Services.
- That the funding is sufficient to train and support interpreters in a way that is at least equivalent to the current arrangements in the Northern Territory

Thank you

References

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The West Australian Language Services Policy

http://www.omi.wa.gov.au/omi_language.cfm?section=what

Peter Mathie operates a management consultancy from Perth in Western Australia. The majority of his work is focused upon assisting community organisations plan services and secure funds to deliver them in their local community.

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