

INTERVIEW WITH IBRAHİM AYZIT
Victoria Language Services Coordinator, Department of Human
Services, Australia*

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Abstract

Ibrahim Ayzit works as the Victoria Language Services Coordinator for the Department of Human Services in Australia. He begins by focusing on the master programs of the department and then provides some facts and figures about Australia as a diverse country. He sheds light on the context and the challenges of community interpreting in the State of Victoria and how they sort them out in order to help the community become socially inclusive. He also stresses out the importance of government policies in retaining qualified community interpreters and in funding the community interpreting services for members of the community who are linguistically and culturally diverse. All in all, he offers an insight into the professional community interpreting services in Australia.

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INTERVIEW WITH IBRAHİM AYZİT
**Victoria Language Services Coordinator, Department of Human
Services, Australia**

Dr. Oktay Eser

Oktay Eser is an associate professor at the Department of Translation and Interpreting, Amasya University, Turkey. His graduate studies in Translation and Interpreting were undertaken at Istanbul University, Turkey. He also holds an MA degree in Business Administration at Istanbul Kültür University. A translator in Turkish and English languages, he is a member of Translation Association, Turkey and International Federation of Translators. His research interests include translator education, professional ethics, and translation and interpreting services. He has published research papers and books in translation studies. His recent books are entitled **Çeviribilimde Edinç Araştırmaları** (Competence Studies in Translation) and **Translation and Interpreting as Sustainable Services**.

Dr. Miranda Lai

Miranda Lai is a lecturer and trainer in interpreting and translating studies at RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia. She has taught translating and interpreting skills in both higher education and vocational training contexts. Her research interests include interpreting and translating pedagogy, investigative interviewing in multilingual settings, and ethics for translators and interpreters. She has developed and delivered training for interpreters in Australia and overseas. Miranda is the co-author of the books entitled **Police Investigative Interviews and Interpreting: Context, Challenges and Strategies**, and **Ethics for Police Translators and Interpreters**.

Interview

Oktaç: Could you tell me about your professional background and the institution you work for?

Ibrahim: I have been in the industry for many years, and am having different hats. First of all, I studied interpreting and translation at Deakin University with Adolfo Gentile and Uldis Ozolins. In addition, I have been working for the Department of Human Services (DHS)¹ for 22 years. Currently, there are three master programs: Centrelink, Medicare and Child Support. Prior to Centrelink, it was called the Department of Social Security. Prior to working for the Department of Human Services, I was a teacher and taught at secondary schools such as Acacia College Language Division of Taylor's College. The Language Services Unit was established in the late 80s as part of the Department of Social Security. It was a unit specialized in interpreting and translation. The Department of Human Services provides services for up to 15 million people in Australia. They receive some sort of benefit from the Department of Human Services. What is benefit? It's not always money you receive into your bank account. For example, Healthcare Card (concession card). If you travel on public transport, it is the concession fee. You pay your electricity bill or gas bill at a reduced amount during winter if you have a healthcare card. Having said that, many years ago, people who spoke languages other than English (LOTE) were referred to as non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB). But this was later changed as Diverse Cultural and Linguistic backgrounds (DCALB). For the last few years, some customers/recipients have been referred to as Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD). We deal with culturally and linguistically diverse customers, recipients or claimants. Most of them don't have the English competency during the interview or application stage. Therefore, the Department set up the Language Services Unit in the late 80s. Currently, the Language Services

¹ The *Human Services Legislation Amendment Act 2011* integrated Medicare Australia and Centrelink into the Department of Human Services on 1 July 2011. They offer a range of health, social and welfare payments and services through the following programs: 1) Medicare. It looks after the health of Australians through a variety of programs, 2) Centrelink. It delivers payments and services and provides services at times of major change for people such as families, students, and job seekers and so on. It also includes people from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds, 3) Child Support. It gives separated parents the financial and emotional support needed for their children's well-being. At 30 June 2017, 25.2 per cent of employees were from a CALD background, up from 23.9 per cent at 30 June 2016. For more, refer to <https://www.humanservices.gov.au/>

Unit provides interpreting services in more than 220 languages and dialects. The Department of Human Services has over 3,000 interpreters registered nationally, over 800 of whom are registered with the Department of Human Services in the State of Victoria². We have ad-hoc interpreting, which is on-site interpreting e.g. Moreland office, Broadmeadows office. The offices are called Customer Service Centres. For on-site interpreting, we book interpreters in advance. They come to the offices and interpret for the customer (recipient or the claimant) and the officer. Also, we have a very sophisticated telephone interpreting system. It's called Interactive Voice Recognition or On-Demand Telephone Interpreting. This system is also on-site or on-demand, which means right now or on the spot. We have codes for languages, and the system dials interpreters automatically all around Australia when we put the code in. Let's say, I'm the interpreter and the system rings me because I am logged in. I'm active on the system. If I accept the call, then this call is connected to the site. I was very fortunate as this system was first trialled at the Moreland Office in 2005; I was part of that trial. It's like building a house. First, you have the base, and then you have the walls. It had ups and downs, but now our system is very efficient and it has come along really well. This is applicable to all the DHS offices all around Australia and in Tasmania. If we need an interpreter and if we can't get interpreters physically to come to the offices, then we use the telephone interpreting system. I need to explain this. Our telephone or on-site interpreting and translation service is specifically for the DHS customers, recipients and the claimants. We don't provide this interpreting and translation service for external purposes. Given that we have a lot of people including migrants and refugees who receive some sort of benefit, it is a very efficient service.

Oktay: What are your main responsibilities at the Department of Human Services?

Ibrahim: I am the Language Service Coordinator for DHS Victoria. The head office is in Sydney. All the national managers are based in Sydney. Each state has a language service coordinator. I manage language services in the state of Victoria for the Department of Human Services. I train DHS

² In accordance with the information in the Multicultural Servicing Strategy 2016–19 by the Department of Human Services, they have a pool of 2,978 interpreters in 230 languages. For more, refer to <https://www.humanservices.gov.au/organisations/about-us/publications-and-resources/multicultural-servicing-strategy-2016-19>

staff on working with interpreters. I procure interpreters on a contractual basis for our panel in more than 220 languages and dialects. There are established languages such as Arabic, Italian, Greek and Turkish as well as emerging languages like Chin Hakka from Myanmar, formerly Burma. We have been getting a lot of refugees from different parts of the world, from Africa, from the Far East Asia such as Rohingya people. We have been getting refugees from Africa like Sudan. They speak Dinka, Nuer and Juba Arabic. These are all emerging languages. We don't have many interpreters. I am also on internal committees and external committees. There are two major committees. One is a Regional Advisory Committee set up by NAATI (National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters). Each department has a representative on that committee. Educational institutions such as Monash University and RMIT and interpreting and translation agencies have representatives, too. Also, I am on the State Government External Advisory Committee. We advise the state government on interpreting and emerging languages. For example, in the last three or four years or maybe five years we've been getting a lot of refugees from the Middle East, parts of Iraq and Syria. We need a lot of Arabic interpreters. We are lucky in the State of Victoria as we have a lot of NAATI-accredited Arabic interpreters. There are a lot of emerging languages. So, what I do in the State of Victoria is to find out where these refugees are settling in and whether we have enough interpreters. I visit more than 42 DHS offices in and around Melbourne. I work very closely and liaise with the specialist officers called Multicultural Service Officers (MSOs). I and in some cases, the MSOs identify the potential applicants whether they have qualifications and we register them with the Department of Human Services language services on a contractual basis. Also, I provide reports on the usage of telephone interpreting state-wide and we have sessional interpreters called in-house interpreters in some sites. For example, there are a lot of migrants and refugees who live in Dandenong. We have interpreters Monday to Friday every day in that office. We have Persian and Dari. We have Tamil. We have Sudanese languages such as Dinka, Nuer and Sudanese Arabic. We have Cantonese, Mandarin and Vietnamese. In the Broadmeadows office, we have Arabic and Turkish. What I do is to identify how many customers we have in that language. If we have in-house interpreters, then we provide better service for the community members and for the department as well, but in

some offices like the Moreland office, we used to have Turkish interpreters Monday to Friday, too. We also had Italian and Greek. But because a lot of Turkish migrants moved out of this area, we ended up stopping in-house interpreters. So, we have on-site - booked as ad-hoc - or sometimes telephone interpreters. A lot of Italian and Greek customers or recipients receive age pension after the age of 65 and then we see them once a year or once in every two years just for the review. The demand decreased and we stopped having in-house interpreters here.

Oktay: We can say that you adapt to the changing needs of the society.

Ibrahim: The customer data is updated on a quarterly basis. As the coordinator, I know which office has how many customers and what languages they speak and if they need language assistance through the data. For example, in the Moreland office, I can just make up how many customers need language assistance via the data. How many of the 15,000 customers speak Arabic or Turkish? - Let's say 560, or 320 respectively. And then we see how many of them require interpreter or language assistance. Not all Arabic speakers require interpreting or language assistance. Maybe 200 of Arabic speakers and 250 Turkish speakers need interpreting or language assistance. If the figures are greater, we end up getting in-house interpreters. If not, then we say we can keep it as it is and we utilize telephone interpreting services. The work is pretty intense as it is a whole big state. We are up-to-date with the information in the industry and the contacts as well.

Oktay: If you could enlarge on the context of the profession of community interpreting in the State of Victoria.

Ibrahim: Firstly, Australia is a multi-cultural country. That's why we have multi-culturalism alive in Australia. Apart from the Indigenous people, the original people of Australia, the rest are all migrants and refugees in one way or another. The migrants brought tens of languages and dialects to Australia. We set up community interpreting units / agencies to provide efficient services to our recipients or customers in languages other than English. Courts in Australia use qualified interpreters only in established languages to deal with the plaintiffs and the defendants or the witnesses. We have human resources in Australia. We deal with over 200 languages and dialects other than Aboriginal languages or indigenous languages.

Given that Australia is a small world because all the continents are almost represented here and then when new Australians – migrants and refugees - bring new dialects and languages to Australia, it raises a lot of challenges, as well. I have known this industry for the last three decades and I have always seen challenges. All departments, educational institutions, and then governments - state governments and local governments - are very sensitive and sympathetic in general. Working in partnership has tackled a lot of issues over the years and I think standards increased immensely in a lot of established languages and some emerging languages, but Australia is a new country. By new country, I mean 200 years old plus. Australia still attracts a lot of migrants and refugees.

Oktay: Can we say that community interpreting is prestigious in Australia?

Ibrahim: Yes, it is rewarding financially. Representing the Department of Human Services, I can say that the Department of Human Services is paying one of the highest fees for interpreters comparing to a lot of agencies and I'm not comparing one agency to another. We increase fees every year as of the 1st of July as per CPI (Consumer Price Index). DHS Language Services and TIS National (Translation and Interpreting Service)³ pay the highest. The on-site jobs for interpreters are 90 minutes. That's the contract. Having said that, it is an hour-and-a-half contract and that interpreting can be done within 10 minutes. Regardless of that, it is the specified duration and the payment is over \$79 for one job. It's very clearly defined that if an interpreter is booked for one recipient or claimant, his or her contract is to provide professional language assistance for the recipient and the DHS officer. We have not only on-site interpreting, but telephone interpreting, as well. The Department of Human Services invested a lot in the technology and the system recognizes NAATI professional interpreters. It contacts NAATI professional interpreters first, not NAATI paraprofessional interpreters. According to NAATI records, there are 25-30,000 NAATI professional, paraprofessional, and recognized interpreters throughout Australia. However, less than 20% of them are practicing or something

³ The Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS National) is an interpreting service provided by the Department of Home Affairs for people who do not speak English and for agencies and businesses that need to communicate with their non-English speaking clients. TIS National allocated more than one million immediate telephone interpreter requests and more than 150,000 face-to-face interpreter requests in 2017.

For more, refer to <https://www.tisnational.gov.au/en/About-TIS-National>

like that. You need to upgrade your qualification. Let's say Arabic. In the last few years, we received refugees coming from the Middle East like Iraq and Syria. Predominantly, refugees brought Arabic to Australia. Some sections speaker Kurdish: Kurmanji and Sorani or parts of Baghdad Kurdish Feyli. What happened in the industry is that we had several Arabic NAATI professional interpreters in the state of Victoria that I know, but in the last four or five years I know that they joined the industry at the level of NAATI professional. I know a lot of practitioners in this industry because most of them are registered with us, the Department of Human Services Language Services. Particularly Arabic has been very rewarding in the industry. Some emerging languages such as Chin language and dialects are also very promising. In Victoria I think I've got one accredited or two, and two to three recognized Rohingya interpreters.

Miranda: It's like a reflection of Australia's migration intake. Whatever language is relevant to your migrant intake, then indeed the demand will become extraordinary. And then to answer your question, those languages tend to be the more rewarding. but then once the peak comes down, the situation becomes different.

Oktay: Is there a concern about retaining the qualified community interpreters on the job in Australia?

Ibrahim: Well, don't go too far!. There isn't much incentive in that. This is one of the biggest challenges that this industry and partners such as agencies are facing to retain those qualified or professionals in the industry. If there is no financial incentive there, at the end of the day those professionals need to look after themselves and families. Therefore, it is a huge challenge for us to retain them. I'm very optimistic and hopeful for the future and I say there will be a lot of changes and I think technology will play an important part in that. And how? For example, let's say we have 3 to 4 qualified interpreters and telephone interpreting there, which is good. But there will be a really serious video conferencing. That way financial gain will be greater. It will increase and then we may retain those qualified interpreters in the industry. I think technology will assist us.

Miranda: For the T&I industry to thrive, not only organizations like DHS, private agencies, AUSIT and Professionals Australia, but you probably also need to have government policies to somehow compliment whatever

is developing. What are your views on government policies and the purchasing of services?

Ibrahim: We have local governments and state governments. They are very important partners of this industry because without them and the funding injection it is very difficult for the industry in certain sections to actually stand on their feet. So, funding is vital here. I know that Victorian government over the years have been very effective and influential and also providing funding.

Oktay: Where does the funding come from?

Ibrahim: We have federal, state governments, and local governments. The state government is funded by certain ways. They get funding from the federal government. There are different jurisdictions. If you ask me about the Department of Human Services, it is federal funding. The Department of Human Services provides language services to culturally and linguistically diverse customers, recipients, or claimants to assist them and then the funding comes from the federal government. There are agencies or educational institutions, and the funding comes from the state government.

Miranda: In very general terms, I think, say for hospitals and schools, because at schools you get interpreters going in to interpret for parents. Interpreting funding in hospitals and schools will mostly come from the state governments because these organizations are funded by the state governments. In any state, you've got state courts such as magistrate, supreme, or county court. Then again the funding will come from your state government. If you go to a family court which belongs to the federal system, then the funding for interpreting comes from the federal government. It depends on the organization.

Oktay: Thank you for your time.