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Interview with Niki Baras, Translators and Interpreters Australia - A Division of Professionals Australia

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Abstract²

Niki Baras represents the Translator and Interpreter Division of Professionals Australia, an amalgamated organization representing professionals from various fields with a mission to ensure their work is recognised and rewarded appropriately. This interview looks at the social status, respect and sustainability issues of community interpreters in Australia from an industrial point of view. After a brief overview of how the Translator and Interpreter Division came about under the organization, Niki explains the historical contexts in which the National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters in Australia was founded in 1977. After more than 40 years of development, community interpreting in Australia has become unsustainable due to poor working conditions, low social status, and the prevalence of unqualified interpreters. Niki believes in the earlier model under which government took charge of organizing and running its own public service interpreting services. She also urges community interpreters to stand up for themselves. At the end, she focuses on the code of ethics as one of the features that makes community interpreting a profession.

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Keywords: community interpreting, Professionals Australia, social status, sustainability, working conditions, profession.

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Dr. 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 bilingual 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*.

Oktay: Niki, could you tell us about your professional background and the institution you work for?

Niki: I work as an interpreter, translator and organizer. I have done so for most of the last thirty years, and even when I haven't, I've been working in the industry, running agencies and project management in translation. My job with Professionals Australia³ started four years ago. When I was hired, I was a workplace representative as a

³ Professionals Australia is an amalgamated organization with more than 25,000 members in Australia, representing professionals from various fields such as architecture, engineering, IT, pharmacy, professional management, science, translation and interpreting etc. One of its missions is to ensure that these professionals' work is recognised and rewarded appropriately. For more information, see: <http://www.professionalsaustralia.org.au/about/history-professionals-australia/>.



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volunteer, and I was then hired to be the organizer because of my industry experience. I actually come from the industry.

Miranda: What about the Translating & Interpreting Division under Professional Australia, the union in layman's term?

Niki: I'm attached to the Victorian branch, and I oversee everything and work with support from the other lead organizers and the actual CEO of this union. Overall, the CEO of the organization is in charge of the campaign, but I also work with the campaigns team and I work with the lawyers when I need to. I actually engage with everybody and any organization to meet the different needs, because organizing is fundamentally about recruiting and membership growth. It's so complex in our [T & I] industry.

Oktay: And there are different divisions under Professionals Australia, right?

Niki: We come under Translators and Interpreters Australia.⁴ Our group is under the Managers and Professionals division. So, we also have managers and a lot of our members predominantly work for government directly or indirectly. Our engineers, for example, usually are found in government departments or in local councils, so they're salaried engineers. They're not high-flying, but they're very well paid. Many of their professional issues are not related to money, but rather to work conditions and status. We also flow into the private sector. Often in the private sector, you'll find they belong to the associations rather than the unions. There are a lot of parallels. So the organization's used to dealing with government, because most of the members are ultimately employees of the government, and translators and interpreters in community T&I are seen fundamentally as employees of the government farther down the food chain.

Miranda: Is the T&I Division the smallest one in the overall organization?

Niki: Probably, the more specific one. We're a professional association and a union. The unions are not what they used to be. The union movement doesn't have the same power [as before]. They're finding out now that they can't work the way they've always worked. We've got Liberal governments trying to shut unions down, so the unions are having to find new ways of operating. So we even do things with the dentists. They're community dentists who work in the community health centres. They are often like interpreters. They are often migrants and they're often women. They're members of the Dental Association, so we have an agreement with the Dental Association where we're kind of subcontracted to provide the industrial union support to their members. So, we're subcontracting a union to provide industrial services. These are just new ways in which unions are working today. We also have the pharmacists whom we represent fully, and they're the community pharmacists. They work in pharmacies, often in the chain stores like Chemist Warehouse and all those places. They're severely underpaid. If you have a look there, a lot of them are also migrants.

Oktay: Niki, I'm interested in hearing about the working conditions and social status of the profession of community interpreting in Australia.

Niki: I'm happy to talk to you about that, as it's a primary problem. Social status is probably the overarching issue, because it's all tied in. I'll give you a synopsis of the historical context. We formed NAATI⁵ in 1977 when

⁴Translators and Interpreters Australia is a division of Professionals Australia, established in 2014. For more information, see: <http://tia.professionalsaustralia.org.au/TIA/Home/TIA/Default.aspx?hkey=4e51dace-88d9-442b-8fc6-5721f1ecd180>.

⁵ The National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters Ltd (NAATI) is a company that is jointly owned by the state and territorial governments of Australia. It was established on September 14, 1977 with a mission to set and maintain high national standards in translation and interpreting. There are currently 19,900 accredited interpreters and 24,600 accredited translators in Australia. For more information, see: <https://www.naati.com.au/news-events/news-events-container/updates/naati-and-ausit-a-shared-history/>.



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most interpreting was being done ad hoc, and interpreting needed to become a profession. There needed to be some sort of formalizing. A lot of the early migrants were taxi drivers. A lot of them were from Egypt and were multilingual. They used to go to the hospitals to pick up patients. Because they drove taxis, they had some English, even broken English. They were also called into emergency departments to interpret, because they were all migrants. It was in that context that NAATI was founded. We had to do something about this situation, so we founded NAATI and the services started. We started producing trained graduates. It all evolved.

The pay wasn't too bad when I started in the 1980s. Then in 1986-87, the industry was privatized, and that was the end of it. It all became about price and cost cutting. The fees have been declining and it's been a race to the bottom ever since. As a result, we've seen significant attrition. Good people leave. Trained people leave. They cannot earn a living. But immigration continues, and demand goes up. Demand is exceeding supply at a rapid pace, so we have now gone backwards [in terms of employment conditions] and I think we're back to where we were about 30 years ago after all the work we did.

Eventually, we've seen, for a variety of reasons, a complete diminishing of a status that never really developed. We never really made it to professional respect, but many of us who are known as the pre-2007 cohort who took courses and completed degrees felt that we had a little bit of a moment in the sun, but really not quite enough and then it's been gradually diminishing. Professionals Australia came into being because a group of people who were frustrated went looking for a body to represent them. And under the rules this was the body that could take them and form a group. We've only been around for five years. In 2014, we ran a survey of the industry, not just members. We surveyed close to a thousand people and the number-one issues were, even above remuneration, lack of respect for the profession and no status. I think that's still the case, and that's still probably one of the principle barriers to the work we're trying to do.

Oktay: What do you think are the main components of gaining professional respect?

Niki: Well, I think one of the reasons we don't have respect is that not all interpreters have a compulsory degree. There is a difference between interpreters and translators, so, from this point, I'll focus a lot more on interpreters, because that's where most of our work [at Translators and Interpreters Australia] is concentrated at the moment. Translators are a slightly different case, but community interpreters don't all have training. Some of us simply took a test through NAATI. Some of us aren't even fully bilingual. There's no consistency in our skills and abilities or our qualifications. You will get credentialed people, and the credential is one thing, but it's not the thing. That's where I think the confusion comes into play, in that the government agencies and institutions that use our services might know about NAATI and credentialing, and they think that's all there is. But it's not. It's one thing, and it's the one thing that unites us and that gives us some leverage with government. That's it. The government owns NAATI. It is a government mechanism for the protection of the consumer, not the protection of the interpreter. If the interpreters want to get smart, they have to come together. While the government says, "You must have a NAATI accreditation", the union says:

- The government currently only wants the credential and nothing else, but you're not even enforcing your own policy. You're breaching your own policy as well as people's privacy. You're allowing non-credentialed people to do the work, because you don't want to pay a professional-level fee.
- Interpreters should have some university training *and* get a credential. A credential is one thing, but it's not the only thing. The credential, which we say, is the minimum you should have.
- The government is not investing in organizing the work in such a way that interpreters can earn a living.

There are many 'interpreters' in the field who are untrained, unqualified, lack credentials and even lack a regard for the role as a professional one. Language services providers have in recent years been reckless in their recruitment of untested bilinguals to perform the interpreting role. This is what the consumer sees. So, a lack of respect for our profession probably comes - this is my hypothesis - from the way people present on the job. We're all aware that interpreting practice and presentation are not consistent, including the way people dress, the way they turn up to work, and the way they behave. In addition to low professionalism attributable to lack of skills, training, and poor presentation, the lack of respect can also be related to the fact that many of us are "migrant" workers and women, who are often the usual targets for exploitation. So, I think we don't get the respect.



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Another angle is that we've never stood up for ourselves, and when we do, it's within our own communities. Language group associations are a positive way in which interpreters can unite – especially when these groups show leadership and interest in industrial activity and how it can benefit their group. In the absence of regular workplaces, these associations or groups provide a forum where Professionals Australia can reach out to interpreters. In my view, the students are the future. I think a lot of energy has gone into my own peers and colleagues [on union movement], but I think we're on our way out, and I think we need to now really invest in newer groups. The students are coming through now, if they're serious about this job.

Oktay: Professionals Australia published a document entitled "Language Services: A National Policy"⁶, in which it says that the workforce in the translation and interpreting industry is aging, and only 7.6% of practitioners are younger than 30 years of age. The survey also shows that 60% of the interpreting workforce earns less than AU\$20,000, and only about 7% earn above AU\$60,000 per year.

Niki: Interpreters are averaging three jobs a day, which takes them up to a base salary of about AU\$42,000 a year, which is still below an average wage. That's why you're only working part-time [in real terms]. You're away from home for eight hours a day, but you're working three separate assignments. In between, you're driving, and you're not getting paid for that time. Many interpreters are refusing to travel, because it's just not viable. The Victorian government commissioned a review. The review found everything we were saying was correct:

- an unsustainable industry;
- aging interpreters; and
- a decrease in income over the years.

Something has to be done. Last year, the Victorian state government announced a 21.8 million dollar boost to language services on top of the 40million dollar existing budget. But we don't just need more money. What you do is you reorganize how you spend the existing budget. One solution could be to have the government take all the services back, the way they used to be before the late 1980s, and to run the services out of a central office. In return, though, interpreters would have to give something back, because the Victorian government is well aware that the quality of interpreting is below par and that they would have to invest in professional development as well. The Minister for Multicultural Affairs, who also sits on the board of NAATI, is leading this initiative. NAATI is improving the credentialing system, which is what the Victorian Government wants to see. As far as the union is concerned, all of these initiatives are very timely and useful. We support NAATI and credentialing as a means to a sustainable end.

Oktay: Niki, another issue is that interpreters are often migrants, asylum-seekers or refugees, who interpret for other migrants, asylum-seekers and refugees. These interpreters often have expertise or a degree in another area such as medicine or law. They have qualifications which aren't recognized by the Australian government when they arrive in Australia. They become taxi drivers or interpreters. Over time, they become qualified interpreters, but they also tend to move back to their original professions, as they are better paid there. Does it lead us to the sustainability problem, too?

Niki: Right. That's a really good point. That's another barrier because the profession, as it stands, is not attractive enough for that group of people to stay in it. However, most interpreters – regardless of the reason they've gone into the job, actually like the job, and many have altruistic reasons for doing it. On the other hand, if they can get their original professional credentials recognized or if they can re-train in a better paying field, they will move into another profession. I know a gentleman who interprets Dinka. He is a smart man and articulate in English. But because he can't get enough work, he can't survive. There's only a small group who need interpreting in Dinka, and the Dinka interpreters' highest credential is [NAATI] Paraprofessional [Interpreter], for which the pay is even

⁶ Professionals Australia (n.d.). *Language Services: A National Policy*. Accessed from: http://tia.professionalsaustralia.org.au/TIA/Publications%20reports/A_National_Policy.aspx



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lower. But there's a whole bunch of other Dinka interpreters with no credentials, so the work is just spread out amongst a whole lot of people rather than the work being channelled [to the few qualified ones]. This is what the qualified Dinka interpreters complain about. They say that if the work were consolidated and a smaller group of people did all the work, then they could all possibly earn a living. What you've got now is all the workers dispersed, and you've got a whole range of people qualified and unqualified doing the work. It's impossible to earn a living wage over time, and there's no career path or progress, so people inevitably seek other work. Interpreting often becomes an interim job, even though they may like the job. Often interpreters themselves don't actually see it as a profession either and don't see the need to even study. There's attrition.

Miranda: I'll just give you an example. Credentialed Mandarin interpreters are in over-supply. Graduates from our master's program are very enthusiastic in their first year of practice, but then attrition sets in. I know one high-performing graduate, who did all the specialist subjects such as investigative interviewing. Two years into practice, she's seeking to change professions.

Niki: Anyone who is bright and has a lot of the qualities doesn't want to stay in this profession because it's so limiting, and we know from anecdotal evidence that if it were more attractive, people would want to stay, because we know that intellectually it can be stimulating. Unless the government invests in it, it's not sustainable. It's government work and the government has a responsibility. Government needs to take responsibility for that work. Despite its modern multicultural profile, this country is so behind in acknowledging the importance of bilingualism and multilingualism.

Miranda: I think that's a very good point. The media often only feature ethnic organizations in the light of celebrating multiculturalism. But these organizations must make more fuss about the issues and risks of multilingualism.

Niki: What matters to government is risk and votes. That's the reality. By having an unsustainable language services industry, they put the communities at risk. But the communities need advocates to speak up for them. We've done a report on it, with all those case studies and a whole lot of anecdotal material and the things that could have gone wrong by not having an interpreter or not having a properly qualified interpreter. We wrote to the government and said that was the cost and the risk for you. I think there needs to be more engagement with the community for them to speak up. It's about the communities or their representatives engaging with us, and their representatives should get them up and activate them. A large part of the work of a community interpreter is understanding the context and the environments where we work, but unfortunately a lot of people don't have that, and part of the training is exposing them to the need to learn that. A profession is also defined by its allegiance to a code of ethics, and I think dealing in the environments we deal in, we need to have a code of ethics. So, I guess that's one of the features that makes us a profession.

You also have to guard against juggling between supply and demand. A lot of people can work part-time as a hobby. We call people "hobbyists" who are happy to do a little bit of this work on the side to earn some pocket money. Sometimes they don't even charge. That altruism can be really detrimental to those who really want to earn a living and provide a professional service. Those well-meaning people can often do more harm than good. So, it's how you meet the demand and create a professional supply with integrity and ethics. Those are the challenges.

Oktay: Thank you for your time, Niki.

