

Need for court interpreting training



NSW Senior Practitioner Bob Desiatnik attended Assoc. Prof. Sandra Hale's presentation

AUSIT is fortunate to have as a member Assoc. Prof. Sandra Hale, an internationally recognised scholar with an outstanding record of achievement in the fields of teaching and interdisciplinary research, as well as in hands-on translation and interpretation. On 24 April close to 50 members (a great turnout for a long weekend) were treated to a feast of information on the need for specialised court interpreting training. The session reflected the full measure of Sandra's accomplishments and experience, her passion as an advocate for such training, and her pioneering research in this area.

Sandra's presentation, which was well tailored to members' needs and interests and supported by meticulously prepared PowerPoint slides, ranged over such areas as:

- why specialised skills are needed in a court setting;
- what language abilities individuals must possess before the development of those skills can be contemplated;
- aspects of 'discoursal competence' and the various strategic speech modes used by lawyers to achieve particular effects (e.g. 'You see, Mrs Smith, I put it to you that you didn't, as you say, forget that you'd placed the items in your bag, that in fact you put them there to conceal them and to steal them, didn't you?' — try decoding then interpreting the messages being directed to the judge and/or jury as well as the witness!);
- the impact of testimony presented through interpreters and the ways in which interpreters can influence that impact (for better or for worse);
- the challenges of cross-linguistic and cross-cultural 'disconnects' between source and target languages, and the strategies that can be used to bridge them;
- the usefulness of formal training (as perceived by interpreters and legal practitioners);

- the consequences of inadequate interpretation (up to and including mistrials or successful appeals);
- issues related to the status, or lack thereof, of court interpreters, and to their working conditions and remuneration; and
- the need to sensitise the judiciary and the legal profession generally to the role and importance of interpreters in the delivery of social justice to all comers, regardless of their linguistic/cultural backgrounds.

The presentation included numerous textual examples illustrating the difficulties faced in the court setting and how they have been handled — or mishandled — by individual interpreters. There were also a few 'dummy runs' for participants to try in their own LOTEs.

Sandra's polished, flowing (and at times wickedly humorous) presentation aroused excited interest among those attending. The questions and comments came thick

and fast; many of those present would have been happy to stay on well beyond the scheduled end of the session. It was gratifying to see many new faces, and one could scarcely imagine a more vivid demonstration for new members of the value of AUSIT membership.

I'm sure many of those attending were left pondering one of the great dilemmas to emerge from Sandra's thought-provoking address: improved status and subsequent increased remuneration for court interpreters will only come about as a result of providing improved, more uniformly professional interpreting services to the courts. But those improved services must, to a great extent, be the result of greatly expanded, specialised pre-service training, the high cost of which must be met by individuals already earning — oh yes — adequate remuneration. Hmmm.

I could not help but be reminded of the closing remarks of Barry Jones' 2004 Jill Blewett Memorial Lecture:

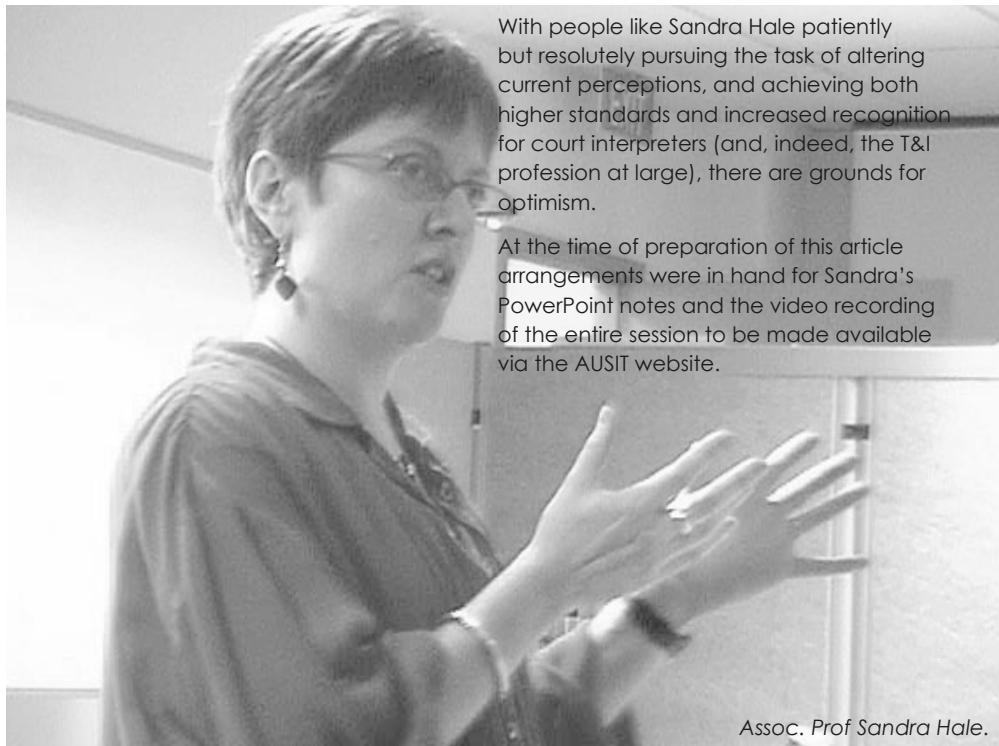
I understand that as our world becomes increasingly fractured and complex, with the development of expertise and technical vocabularies that require translation and/or interpretation even within the same language family, let alone another one, the challenge for professionals will become even greater — and the rewards even less adequate.

[Emphasis added.]

Whether it was intended to be understood as a gloomy prediction or merely as an expression of concern about what might lie ahead, I'm sure Dr Jones would be delighted to be proven wrong on the last point.

With people like Sandra Hale patiently but resolutely pursuing the task of altering current perceptions, and achieving both higher standards and increased recognition for court interpreters (and, indeed, the T&I profession at large), there are grounds for optimism.

At the time of preparation of this article arrangements were in hand for Sandra's PowerPoint notes and the video recording of the entire session to be made available via the AUSIT website.



Assoc. Prof Sandra Hale.