

# Interpreting in Malaysia: An Overview

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**Abstract:** This article seeks to describe the current scenario of interpreting in Malaysia in three main interpreting settings: court interpreting, parliamentary interpreting and conference interpreting. It consists of an overview of the nature of the work carried out by interpreters, together with their aptitude and qualifications. It also highlights important aspects of the profession such as the establishment of the Malaysian National Institute of Translation (*Institut Terjemahan Negara Malaysia*) and the training centres. The author proposes ways to improve the situation which would contribute to the professionalisation of interpreting in Malaysia.

**Key words:** interpreting in Malaysia, court interpreting, parliamentary interpreting, conference interpreting, training centres, interpreter training

**Resumen:** Este artículo trata de la situación actual de la interpretación en Malasia en tres entornos principales: interpretación jurídica, interpretación parlamentaria e interpretación de conferencia. Ofrece una visión general acerca de las características del trabajo y de la aptitud de los intérpretes, así como de su formación académica. También subraya aspectos importantes de la profesión, por ejemplo el establecimiento del *Malaysian National Institute of Translation* (Instituto Nacional de Traducción de Malasia) y los centros de formación. La autora propone sugerencias para mejorar la situación en este campo laboral, lo cual puede contribuir particularmente a la profesionalización de la interpretación en Malasia.

**Palabras clave:** interpretación en Malasia, interpretación judicial, interpretación parlamentaria, interpretación de conferencia, centros de formación, formación de los intérpretes

## Introduction

In the West, interpreting has become an established profession with the establishment of professional associations and codes of ethics, well-structured undergraduate and postgraduate training programmes at reputable higher learning institutions as well as the creation of Interpreting Studies that contribute a great deal of research and publications in the field. In the East, interpreting activities are more actively researched in countries such as China and Japan, for example in articles and books written by Lung & Li (2005), Dawrant & Jiang (2001), Hara (2004), and Komatsu (2003). However, in smaller countries such as Malaysia, interpreting is not a well known profession. Studies about interpreting in Malaysia have been carried out only in the field of court interpreting in Malaysia by Ibrahim (2003) for her doctoral research project and by Teo (1984) for his graduating thesis. This is mainly due to the fact that court interpreting has existed since the days of the British colonisation and it was established much earlier in the Malaysian judicial system compared with conference interpreting. Ibrahim (2002) conducted a Master's degree research on speech rates in consecutive interpretation and another pre-doctoral study on Parliamentary Interpre-

ting in Malaysia in 2005. Wong, F.K wrote a book about conference interpreting entitled *Satu Kemahiran dalam Persidangan* (Conference Skills) which was published in 1989. This is the one and only book in Malaysia that deals with some basic knowledge of conference interpreting.

This article offers an overview of the current state of interpreting in the country. We briefly explore how interpreting activities began, the need for interpreting in this multiracial nation, and the most common interpreting settings, which are court interpreting, parliamentary interpreting and conference interpreting. We will also take a look at the establishment of the Malaysian National Institute of Translation which was established by the Malaysian government to generate and enhance the translation industry in the country; finally, we will also look at the training centres and their training programmes. We hope that this article will help to understand the current scenario of the interpreting field in Malaysia.

## Historical background

It was mentioned in the written records of the Chinese travelers in the early centuries A.D. that Malay or Kou-you,

was the lingua franca of the ports of the archipelago and was also used to disseminate Buddhism and Hinduism. In the history of the Malay empires, for example the Srivijaya empire (7th – 13th century A.D.), the Malacca empire (14th – 16th century A.D.), and other subsequent empires and sultanates, it was stated that the Malay language not only had reached a level of governance of the region, but it also acted as a conveyor of high literature and philosophy (de Swaan, 2003: 367). The country's interpreting activities began in the 15th century with the rise of the Sultanate of Malacca as a major trading entrepôt in the Malayan shores (Wong, 1991: 191; Cheah, 2001: 14).

Due to the inflow of foreign merchants from the Middle East, India and China for trading or other purposes, interpreting was a necessity. The mode of interpreting adopted was similar to today's liaison or escort interpreting (Wong, 1991: 191). After the weakening of the Malaccan empire due to the European conquest, first by the Portuguese in 1511 then the Dutch in 1641, followed by the British in 1824, interpreting continued to play its role. However, under the British colonisation, English became an important language as all administrative matters were handled in English. This was due to the fact that the administration was staffed by officers who did not have any knowledge of Malay. Besides their system of administration, the British also introduced their legal system in Malaysia (known as Malaya at the time) with the use of court interpreters. The country's first court was established in 1807 in Penang (Wong, 1990: 109; Ibrahim, 1995: 1).

Apart from European occupation, the need for interpreting was also due to the multi-ethnicity of Malaysian society. In the middle of the 19th century, labourers from southern China and South of India were brought in to work in the mines, mills, docks as well as rubber and palm oil plantations. These immigrant workers later formed part of the Malaysian society together with the Malays but at the same time maintained their languages and the cultures of their homelands (Cheah, 2001: 112-113). The Malay language was established as the official language as stated in Article 152 of the Malaysian Constitution. It was decided that the national language must be used in all official correspondence in the central government, state government and other government agencies. Being the second important language, English continued to play an essential role especially in the field of science and technology as well as in trade and the industrial sector (Han, 2004a: 50), as clearly described by Haji Omar (1994, 74):

English is definitely a high status language, due to its continuous existence in the various domains as previously mentioned, viz. legal and judiciary, business, banking, diplomacy etc., as well as the emphasis of its significance in the internationalism to which the country is directing itself.

Furthermore, the Chinese and Indian languages (immigrant languages) continue to coexist with these two languages, as mentioned by Wong (1990: 108):

The national official language is Malay language which is spoken in its pure or corrupt form by almost the entire population [...]. Besides these two languages [Malay and English], Chinese, which could be Mandarin or any of the dialects like Hakka, Cantonese, Hokkien, Teochew, Kheng Chew, etc. as well as languages of Indian origin such as Tamil, Telegu, Malayalam and Punjabi are also spoken though less extensively and mainly by members of those ethnic communities.

These linguistic and cultural variety makes interpreting an imperative tool, for instance in business and communication as well as in the administration of the country. Before an in-depth discussion of interpreting in Malaysia, a brief overview of the administration system in the country is necessary.

The Malaysian Parliament's website offers an overview: Malaysia is a federation of thirteen states, founded in 1963, which has adopted a system Parliamentary Democracy with a Constitutional Monarchy. The government consists of three components: legislative, executive and judicial. His Royal Highness (*Yang di Pertuan Agung*) is the paramount ruler. The legislative branch or Parliament of Malaysia is divided into three parts: His Royal Highness, the Senate (*Dewan Negara*) and the House of Representatives (*Dewan Rakyat*). There are 70 members in the Senate while the House of Representative has 219 elected members. Han (2004b: 95) further describes that the executive power is vested in the Cabinet of Ministers, which is led by the Prime Minister. Members of the Cabinet are selected from both Houses of Parliament. The judicial system consists of superior and subordinate courts. The superior courts or High Courts comprise the High Court of Malaya, the High Court of Sabah and Sarawak and the Court of Appeal. The subordinate or Lower Courts are the Magistrate Courts and the Session Courts. The legal system is based on English Common Law.

## Interpreting settings

We will now look at the most prominent interpreting settings found in Malaysia: court interpreting, parliamentary interpreting and conference interpreting.

### Court Interpreting

According to Wong (1991: 191), court interpreting has always been one of the most important services in Malaysia. This is due to the heterogeneity of the Malaysian society. In the 1990s the languages of the Malaysian court

ts were Malay or English, to ensure successful communication among all the parties involved. Nevertheless, not all Malaysians speak or understand Malay and/or English, especially with the distinctiveness of the language of the courts. Thus, interpreters come into the picture to help close the linguistic and cultural gap between the Bench, the litigants who prefer to speak in their own mother tongue or dialects, and the Counsel.

The importance of court interpreters is stressed in the Criminal Procedure Code, stating that a defendant is entitled to the service of an interpreter in the open court:

Whenever any evidence is given in a language not understood by the accused and he is present in person it shall be interpreted to him in open court in a language which he understands (CPC.6.270 [1]) (Wong, 1990: 109).

There are two types of court interpreters: official interpreters and ad hoc interpreters. Official interpreters receive their job confirmations the first time they take upon their duties, while ad hoc interpreters have to depend on the magistrate's feedback stating that they are competent for the post. There are special interpreters that are called in when the needs for their service arise, for example in the case of foreigners who do not speak English. The official interpreters belong to one of three categories: student interpreters, certified interpreters or senior interpreters. The grading depends on experience, qualifications and performance. As mentioned earlier, there are two types of courts in Malaysia, the Lower Courts and the High Courts. Each court is equipped with a team of interpreters. Their working languages are English, Malay, Tamil, Punjabi and Chinese. Interpreters of the less common Chinese dialects are called in when their services are required. The more experienced interpreters are placed in the High Courts while the less experienced are in the Lower Courts (Wong, 1990: 114).

The minimum qualification to become a court interpreter is the Malaysian Certificate of Education with credits in Malay, English or Chinese languages (this qualification is the equivalent to the *Bachillerato* in Spain or the British GCE-O level). No prior knowledge or training in interpreting or translation is required.

Court interpreters perform various duties, depending on the court that they are attached to. In the High Courts, they are required to interpret and take the duty of a Commissioner for Oaths. However in the Lower Courts, for example a District court, interpreters do more than just interpret. They are involved in administrative and clerical work, for example collection of fines, issuing receipts and banking in the days' collection. Court interpreters are also required to do translations of the court proceedings

(Wong, 1990: 110-114). Their usual working hours are from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday to Friday.

There are two categories of remuneration for court interpreters according to their academic qualifications. Those who have the Malaysian Certificate of Education are given a starting salary of RM 658.72 (USD173) and are placed under the L17:P1T1 grade of the public service remuneration scale. On the other hand those with the Malaysian High School Certificate (a British GCE-A level equivalent) are given a starting salary of RM978.16 (USD257) under L17:P1T9 grade (Jadual Gaji Matriks bagi Perkhidmatan Perundangan dan Kehakiman, 2006).

### *Parliamentary Interpreting*

Due to the multi-ethnicity of Malaysia, members of the Senate and the House of Representatives include individuals from different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. The official language of the Parliament of Malaysia is the Malay language, with simultaneous interpreting into English. This service is available for the members and visitors of the Parliament. Interpreting into Malay is done when there are foreign visitors who deliver their speeches in English. Simultaneous interpreting is performed in both Houses.

The interpreting task is managed by a team of 3 in-house parliamentary interpreters which is placed under the Simultaneous Interpretation Section of the Parliament's House and Legislative Division. They report to the Head Assistant Secretary of the Hall Management Section. The job title used by The Malaysian Public Service Commission for parliamentary interpreters is simultaneous interpreters.

Unlike court interpreters, a parliamentary interpreter must have at least a Bachelor's Degree from a local higher institution of learning that is recognised by the government or other similar recognised qualifications. Like court interpreters, they must have a credit in Malay language (including a pass in the Oral Test) as part of their Malaysian Certificate of Education. In the 2006 job advertisement for parliamentary interpreters (simultaneous interpreters) it was also mentioned that the candidates should have an ability to speak, read and write as well as translate simultaneously from Malay into Arabic, English, or French or other relevant languages and vice versa. However, the study conducted by Ibrahim (2005) finds that the interpreters' working language combination is only Malay and English and none of the interpreters in the Parliament of Malaysia are formally trained interpreters.

Simultaneous interpreters of the Parliament are required to render good quality simultaneous interpretations during meetings of the Senate and the House of Representati-

ves as well as the Annual Budget sessions. They also act as escorts for official visits to the Parliament while providing simultaneous and liaison interpreting services to foreign delegates. Besides interpreting, they also translate Order Papers for the House of Representatives other than internal documents and speeches. They are also in charge of the Translation Rooms of the Senate and the House of Representatives. They are given certain tasks for the Opening Ceremony of the Parliament for example preparing the itinerary books and the invitation cards and on the day itself they take the role as ushers. Their normal working hours are from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. from Monday to Friday. However, they are required to work extra hours when the needs arise (Fail Meja Jurubahasa Serentak N.3., 2002).

The starting salary of the simultaneous interpreter is RM1627.11 (USD428), corresponding to the N41: P1T3 grade of the public service remuneration scale, for graduates with Bachelor's Degree with Honours. For those who are graduates with Bachelor's Degree, the starting salary is RM 1469.81 (approximately USD387) under the N41:P1T1 grade (Jadual Gaji Matriks bagi Perkhidmatan Pentadbiran dan Sokongan, 2006). In her study, Ibrahim (2005: 100) found that there is a strong connection between qualifications and salary in this job. An interpreter with years of experience but lower qualifications receives a lower salary compared to another interpreter with higher qualifications but with less experience.

### Conference Interpreting

Conference interpreting is a relatively new field in Malaysia. The first conference held in Malaysia that involved interpreting activities was a Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in 1989 and the First G15 Summit Conference in 1990. In the First G15 Summit Conference 1990 in Kuala Lumpur, 18 professional interpreters from 7 different countries, Venezuela, Argentina, Britain, France, United States, Columbia and Egypt were brought in to work in four languages: English, French, Spanish and Arabic (Wong, 1991: 193). The introduction and establishment of conference interpreting is very much related to the industry of Meetings, Incentives, Conferences and Exhibitions (MICE) in Malaysia. International conference delegates come from all over the world and the need for conference interpreting services becomes inevitable.

To date, there are six international convention centres which are located in and around Kuala Lumpur. The Putrajaya International Convention Centre (PICC) and the Kuala Lumpur City Centre (KLCC) are the two latest ultramodern convention centres. Other convention centres are Putra World Trade Centre (PWTC), Malaysia Interna-

tional Exhibition and Convention Centre (MIECC), Genting International Convention Centre (GICC) and the Sunway Pyramid Convention Centre (SPCC). The International Management Convention Section under the umbrella of the Prime Minister's Office provides portable simultaneous interpreting systems and equipment as well as portable interpreting booths to conference organisers.

According to recent unpublished statistics obtained from the Malaysian National Institute of Translation, there are 39 practising simultaneous interpreters in the country, 67% are non-Malaysians and 33% are Malaysians. All of them are freelance interpreters. The nationality and working language combinations of these interpreters are kept confidential.

It is stated in the same report that all of the conference interpreters are university graduates from various fields. Only a few of them received training in Translation and Interpreting, with more experience in translation than in interpreting. They are given interpreting assignments basically due to the fact that they are either native speakers of a certain foreign language, or they are Malaysians that have resided in a certain foreign country and have acquired good command of the foreign language.

In terms of rates or charges for the interpreting services, most translation and interpreting agencies prefer to keep this information confidential. The Japanese Graduates' Association of Malaysia, known as JAGAM provides fee guidelines for services provided by them, as shown in Table 1.

Interpretation Services	
	RM / Day
Joint Venture negotiation	800 (USD 210)
Technical	500 (USD 132)
General, daily conversation	300 (USD 79)

Table 1: Guidelines for the Interpretation Fees by JAGAM (2006)

### The Malaysian National Institute of Translation (ITNM)

Interpreting in Malaysia is mainly organised by an official organisation: the Malaysian National Institute of Translation (*Institut Terjemahan Negara Malaysia Berhad — ITNM*).

According to its website, ITNM was established on 14<sup>th</sup> September 1993, with the aim to provide the infrastructure for the translation industry in Malaysia. Being a public limited company, the Malaysian Government, under the Ministry of Finance (Incorporated) owns its share capital. However, the Ministry of Education supervises its administration.

The Malaysian Cabinet has identified the roles and functions of ITNM, which are to:

- i. Plan, implement, manage and coordinate all matters regarding translation, interpretation and information exchange in various languages at national and international levels.
- ii. Assist the development and distribution of translation projects and other projects that are related to translation, interpretation and information exchange to the translators, interpreters and relevant parties.
- iii. Act as a professional development centre, promoting science, technology and the art of translation, interpretation and information exchange.
- iv. Function as a human resource development centre for translators, editors, interpreters and other translation-interpretation-related careers in developing and improving their skills and expertise.
- v. Serve as a translation and service centre, providing commercial and social services using computers or computer-aided/machine translation of books, documents, information, computer software and reading materials from various languages into Malay language.
- vi. Provide a multilingual interpretation service that caters for interpreting services commercially and socially for local and international clients.
- vii. Function as a career centre, promoting the growth of the Translation and Interpretation industry by organising relevant activities in order to attract and inform the public of the industry.
- viii. Carry out the task of a reference centre that establishes standards, and provides quality assurance and recognition services that are related to the Translation and Interpretation field in the country.

ITNM offers a range of translation and interpretation related services such as translation services of books and commercial documents, interpreting services for conferences, seminars and overseas visits, translation of audio visual materials such as videos, cassettes, films and websites, supporting services which include editing, translation and language courses, voice-over, typesetting and printing.

## Interpreter Training

### *Universiti Sains Malaysia*

From the academic perspective, *Universiti Sains Malaysia* in Penang is the only university that offers a Bachelor of Arts in Translation and Interpretation (BATI). The programme was established in 1992/1993 at the Centre of Languages and Translation but was later transferred to the School of Humanities due to structural changes.

The 3-year degree programme consists of six semesters. It offers introductory interpreting courses: Sight Interpretation in the fourth semester, Consecutive Interpretation of Technical and Non-technical Texts in the fifth semester,

Simultaneous Interpretation of Technical and Non-technical Texts in the final semester. Students from other degree programmes can take up Translation as a minor but unlike the students of BATI, they are not required to take interpreting courses. This could be viewed as an advantage for the BATI students as they are the only group that receive some form of exposure and basic training in interpretation in the country (BATI 2004/2005 Student Guide).

### *The Malaysian National Institute of Translation (ITNM)*

From a professional training perspective, ITNM offers an interpreting course to the general public. The 30-hour course is available upon request.

### *The Judicial and Legal Training Institute (ILKAP)*

According to Wong (1991: 193), court interpreters in the earlier days did not receive any formal training, they learned the trade of the job by observing their seniors at work. This was possible because interpreting in the Malaysian courts was done consecutively sentence by sentence or even to the extent of word by word. The interpreters however attended language classes with the aim to enrich their vocabulary or terminology. New recruits in those times came under the tutelage of the senior interpreters or the Chinese Affairs Secretary. However, training was made available to interpreters in the 1980s when interpretation courses were offered by the Translation and Interpretation Division of the Language Centre (now known as Faculty of Language) of *Universiti Malaya*. The courses offered were Diploma in Conference Interpretation and Professional Certificate in Court Interpretation. However, the courses were discontinued due to lack of student enrolments and structural changes in the university. The responsibility and the task to train court interpreters were then transferred to the Judicial and Legal Training Institute or ILKAP. As mentioned in the Judicial and Legal Training Institute's website, it was established on 23<sup>rd</sup> June 1993, based on the recommendation of a Special Committee and approved by the Cabinet. ILKAP offers interpreter training courses in its language programme which includes court procedure and rules, interpreting techniques, translation techniques and the translation of documents. Besides these courses, ILKAP offers language courses such as Malay, English and Chinese, as well as courses on the fundamental principles of drafting legal documents.

## Conclusion

Interpreting in Malaysia could be seen from two perspectives: not only administration and judicial aspects, but also

the economic aspect. It plays an important role in the judiciary and in the administration of the country, where court interpreting and parliamentary interpreting are practised. On the other hand, conference interpreting plays a role in the economy of the country, and the demand for it grows with the increase of international conferences being held in the country through MICE sectors of Tourism Malaysia. The infrastructure for training is also available but not optimised due to the lack of connection between training and the job market. The public is not aware of the importance of recruiting trained interpreters which makes admission into the profession very easy. Zubaidah (2004) describes this situation:

Unfortunately language service providers here (in Malaysia) operate in a chaotic and unregulated market, in which anyone who claims to be an interpreter/translator can set up as one. Unlike the medical and legal fields, where entry, continued membership and behaviour of members are governed, language service providers lack such regulation. There is a gnawing concern that translators and interpreters can, and may, distort meaning, whether deliberately or inadvertently. Thus the crucial requirement is for a code of ethics. But this cannot happen unless and until the machinery for professional training is put in place. The Malaysian interpreter virtually receives no training.

Admission into the profession should be more stringent, allowing only candidates with some interpreting background. This could be achieved by establishing connections between the employers (such as the Parliament and the Malaysian Courts) and the training centres (for instance the Malaysian National Institute of Translation Berhad as well as the *Universiti Sains Malaysi*, this being the sole university offering Bachelor of Arts in Translation and Interpreting in Malaysia). This collaboration would further aid the continuing education of the interpreters as on-the-job training is especially necessary because most of them are self-taught interpreters. With training, quality services could be assured, thus providing better remuneration which would attract more people to join the field as trained professionals. Such collaboration would also render a beneficial connection between professional interpreters, the academic community, and researchers in terms of creating a platform for knowledge exchange that would benefit the parties involved. This would lead to the formation of a conference interpreters association and a professional code of ethics which are deemed necessary in a profession. Professional associations act as vehicles to link up practitioners of the field and the public (users and employers), educating the public on what interpreting and interpreters are all about, and guarding the clients' rights via the implementation of a professional code of ethics while at the same protecting the interest of the interpreters.

The synergy of all relevant players in the field (interpreters, employers, universities, training centres, a professional association) would act as a catalyst in overcoming the problems of an unregulated market which would greatly contribute to the professionalisation of interpreting in Malaysia.

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