

Of interest to all involved in public service interpreting in the UK

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Disgruntled interpreters are leaving police: 'Things are going wrong on all sides'

Payment arrears, low rates and privacy concerns: since British translation agency Thebigword won a tender, police interpreters have seen lots going wrong. Some have already left, others are considering it. 'If this is how it is going to be, I'm done.'

Atif, an interpreter, has worked for the police for 36 years. He translates audio clips intercepted by the police and acts as an interpreter in police interviews. In his language area, Arabic, this often involves serious crimes, such as religiously inspired terrorism and drug trafficking.

In police investigations, Atif and other interpreters are given access to information that criminals would love to get hold of. Sometimes they spend months listening in on everything suspects discuss in their living rooms or on the phone. It is sensitive work. The interpreters are therefore careful and prefer to keep their identity secret. Even their closest relatives do not always know they do this work.

Atif loves his profession. The work is challenging and meaningful. You get a kick out of managing to translate veiled language correctly in a split second: be it legal terminology, religious references or street slang. He has been involved in the "biggest criminal cases in the Netherlands", he says. His police clients appreciate and value him; he delivers what they require.

But now Atif has been waiting for his pay for almost six months. He is still owed a total of around 21 thousand euros for assignments done for the police, including an investigation that kept him occupied full time for a month and a half. The oldest invoices, in possession of *de Volkskrant*, date from April. 'I had to take out a loan from a friend to pay a 118-euro fine from the Tax Office,' Atif says. 'I was fined because I could not pay my provisionally assessed income tax because I had not received my pay from Thebigword.'

Thebigword is a British translation agency that won a tender with the police last year. Since April, all interpreting services in the commissioning area - which includes the capital region of Amsterdam, a focal point for police investigations - have been run through the agency.

'Multiple complaints filed'

The place is in chaos, says Atif. 'I get no response to the invoices I send,' he tells us. 'When I call the phone number Thebigword sent me, I get through to a financial department based abroad - like a call centre. They will ask for an order number from the app. That app is supposed to link us to orders, but it doesn't work at all. It is going wrong on all sides.'

The police and Thebigword are reluctant to respond to questions from *de Volkskrant*, but acknowledge the problems. A 'totally new way of working still needs everyone to get accustomed to it,' a police spokesman said. 'Not everything goes smoothly all the time.' At Thebigword, board member Pim Boesveld states that 'the new working procedure demands the parties involved getting used to it'.

Atif feels the support from detectives and other police officers he works with. 'They are also at a loss. They have already filed several complaints on my behalf.' He has been pushed close to his limit: 'If this is how it is going to be, I'm done. I want to quit.'

Two other interpreters working for Thebigword who spoke to *de Volkskrant* have also had to wait two-and-a-half and three-and-a-half months respectively for their pay, amounting to nearly 3,000 euros. The exasperation over non-payment comes on top of the disappointment over a low hourly rate, which interpreters are not permitted to negotiate, even though this had been promised to them by the Ministry of Justice and Security in the run-up to the tender.

The three interpreters who started working for Thebigword all did so for a standard hourly rate of 47.50 euros. In emails to another interpreter, seen by *de Volkskrant*, Thebigword says it cannot pay more because it wants to prevent "unfair competition" between interpreters. Several interpreters were told the same thing in personal interviews with a Thebigword recruiter.

Low rates

This is the world turned upside down, interpreter Atif thinks. According to him, this is forcing interpreters to compete with each other, while Thebigword strips them of competition's 'only advantage': the freedom to charge higher rates.

'The freelance interpreters are free to negotiate their rates,' claims Thebigword board member Boesveld. But, he says: "On the other hand, Thebigword is free to accept or reject the rates offered by the interpreters".

Because of the low rate and concerns about safe handling of their personal data, 12 other interpreters with whom *de Volkskrant* spoke for this article refused to work with Thebigword from the outset. This was in line with a recommendation by the main professional association for legal interpreters and translators, the Order of Registered Interpreters and Translators (ORT&V).

Daoud, Arabic interpreter and one of the refusers, wonders: 'What would happen if colleagues who are not being paid, and are poorly paid anyway, were to be approached by criminals? Or if employees of Thebigword, who have access to interpreters' data, were to be approached? I wouldn't like to say.'

Those fears are not unfounded. [Last year, an interpreter was convicted for withholding information](#) in a major drugs investigation. He had deliberately not noted down names of suspects and suspicious activities (such as 'hemp') that he heard on audio recordings. It turned out the interpreter knew the main suspect. He was sentenced to 200 hours of community service and removed from the register.

Quality of interpreters had deteriorated

By tendering interpreting assignments to commercial intermediary agencies such as Thebigword, former Minister for Justice and Security, Ferdinand Grapperhaus, had hoped that market forces would solve the shortage of good interpreters. It was determined that interpreters would no longer be bound to a fixed hourly rate, but would instead be allowed to negotiate their own fee. For good

interpreters, intermediaries would be happy to shell out more money, was the thought, and thus a new group of talented interpreters could be reached. Interpreters hoped they could finally command a higher rate. The old hourly rate (€43.89) had not been increased to account for inflation since the 1980s.

In reality, it was unmanageable. [De Volkskrant reported last year about chaos in the courts as a result of the change in the law](#) - which has come to be gradually introduced in all parts of the legal system since last summer. Lawyers noticed that it was suddenly more difficult to get an interpreter, and that the quality of interpreters had deteriorated sharply. In fact, at the same time as the tender, the register of sworn interpreters and translators had been opened up to lower-qualified interpreters. Interpreters without any training suddenly found themselves in courts. In one case, an interpreter accidentally pleaded guilty to heroin trafficking offences on behalf of a defendant, whereas the defendant claimed to be innocent.

It was also found that highly qualified interpreters who charged a rate higher than the old hourly rate hardly got any assignments now. [Justice minister Dilan Yeşilgöz showed some sensitivity to this criticism by raising the minimum rate](#) to 55 euros an hour from next year, although the professional body for interpreters and translators, ORT&V, still thinks this is too low.

'Experienced interpreters have quit'

When it was announced that Thebigword had won the tender for police work, worrying reports emerged from the UK. There, Thebigword has several public contracts for the provision of interpreting services. [The UK inspectorate conducted a major investigation](#) into interpreting and translation services at the Home Office in 2019. The quality of interpretation services was rated as highly variable, sometimes downright poor. Thebigword refused to hand over information about the qualifications of the interpreters provided to the investigators because of "commercial sensitivity".

Dutch police interpreters who have not registered with Thebigword are regularly called by the company, asking if they would still work for them, pretty please. The interpreters spoken to by *de Volkskrant* suspect that many experienced interpreters have quit and Thebigword is not able to attract enough new interpreters. As for paying a higher rate - Thebigword won't do it.

Experienced interpreters who have registered with the company are not getting assignments. They suspect their rates are too high. A different interpreter, who will work for less than 50 euros an hour, was already the fourth interpreter to be engaged for a case. The police considered the first three interpreters they were sent by Thebigword insufficiently competent and took them off the case.

Dutch-English interpreter Margo Bink signed up with Thebigword and during the recruitment process negotiated a rate of 80 euros as a starting point for price negotiations. She was sent a welcome pack and downloaded the app as instructed. Then, she did not receive the email to set a password. When she complained to Thebigword, she was told it was a "technical error" that needed to be fixed. After pressing them again, a customer service representative said her account had been de-activated due to 'uncompetitive rates'. After 34 years of working as a police interpreter, she moved to the private sector for good.

For their safety, the names of the interpreters whose first names only were used in this article are fictitious. Their real names are known to the editors.

Response from Thebigword

In spite of our repeated requests going back to February of this year, Thebigword has been unavailable for an interview or to answer questions put in writing by *de Volkskrant*. Eventually, *de Volkskrant* received a short statement from director Pim Boesveld: 'Thebigword believes that it is fully compliant with the competition policy in force in the EU and the Netherlands.' He also said: 'We will be happy to respond to you in the future. However, before we do so, we want to further investigate the points and questions.'

Police response

'As of April 1st, we have been contracting on-site interpreting services from two intermediaries, including Thebigword. The selection of these parties came about after a mandatory European tender process. We have now been on this road for just under six months and we recognise that a totally new way of working will take some getting used to for everyone. Not everything always runs smoothly. You run into problems that need to be solved. We discuss every complaint we receive with the intermediaries, so with Thebigword. Our impression is that the complaints are being dealt with, but we are keeping our finger on the pulse.'

Police interpreters are unseen links in police investigations, often with the same cultural origins as the suspects in cases they work on. This sometimes leads to internal struggles. Who are they and what do they do? We spoke to an Arabic interpreter and a Polish interpreter.

Daoud, Arabic interpreter: "You're listening to someone's life all day long. You can really start to fathom the depths of someone like that"

Daoud, with black curly hair and Armani glasses, has been around for a long time. 'I was there when the Netherlands was first introduced to Muslim extremism at the beginning of this century,' he tells us from his flat, somewhere in the north of the Netherlands. His wife has just made some tea. In the corner of the room, his little boy is playing football.

'You might spend seven months working on a person, day in, day out,' Daoud says, 'You're listening to their life all day long. You can really start to fathom the depths of someone like that - literally predict what he will do in a certain situation.'

In his work, Daoud, a Muslim himself, is often confronted with extremist interpretations of his religion. 'That requires specialist knowledge,' says Daoud, 'I often recognise statements that refer to holy scriptures. So, we don't just translate the language, but also the culture and ideology. A tricky thing to navigate, because at the same time, as an interpreter you have to leave as little room for interpretation as possible.'

On one occasion, Daoud had to listen to wiretaps of his colleague. The other interpreter was suspected of fraudulently arranging residence permits. He was eventually prosecuted. Daoud did not feel put upon: 'A judge passed judgment on it. So why should I have any difficulty with it?'

Countless hours, he says, he spent eavesdropping and translating conversations of members of the Hofstad Group in the early 2000s. He grins. 'Jason Walters, Nouredine el F., Samir A.'

'Nouredine (ex-member of the Hofstad group, ed.) was actually quite a nice, cheerful guy. A guy with very extreme ideas, of course, but you could have a conversation with him.'

Daoud also had to deal with a family member once, suddenly, during a case. 'That was in the drugs world.' His cousin came up in an investigation, and so Daoud withdrew from the case.

Ewa, Polish interpreter: "'I know where you live," he said. I hadn't done anything - I was just his interpreter'

It was a young Polish man, just a kid really, but he had a disaffected look in his eyes. It happened quite a while ago, Ewa tells us at her home in North Brabant. During the police interview at the time, she was the young man's interpreter.

Of course, she was aware of what he had done. 'He had only been in the Netherlands for a short time then, no more than a few months,' Ewa says. 'He was working at a chicken abattoir near here. One day, on a whim, he slit his shift manager's throat with a Stanley knife. He was having a psychotic episode'.

During the police interview, he suddenly turned his gaze on Ewa: 'I know where you live,' he said. Ewa: 'He started talking about my children. It turned out he lived just a kilometre away from me. I hadn't done anything - I was just his interpreter. It was pure intimidation.'

It illustrates, says Ewa, why she and her colleagues value their privacy so much. Unfortunately, that is not always possible. She points outside. 'There are about fifteen hundred Poles living around here. Migrant workers.'

The work sometimes hits her hard. 'When you start this work as a young interpreter, you don't think about all the things that come your way,' says Ewa. She means things like photographs in police reports, and other gruesome details that might come up in police investigations.

Ewa wants nothing to do with Thebigword. 'I find it insane that a foreign company is going to provide wiretap translation work over here. And they're never going to pay me more than 47.50 euros. I get too much shit for that.'