

Northern European Studies – and then what?

A video series on career prospects by j o l n e s

Transcript Episode 6: Interpreter and Translator

Nadja Schmidt, Alumna Universität zu Köln

I am Nadja Schmidt and I did my bachelor's degree at the University of Cologne, in Finnish and Romance languages and literature, and then did a master's degree at the Technical University in Cologne, in conference interpreting. I now work as a self-employed conference interpreter and translator.

WHY DID YOU CHOOSE TO STUDY FINNISH STUDIES?

Actually, I originally wanted to do my Bachelor's degree directly in translation. You cannot do a Bachelor's degree in interpreting. That is only a Master's programme, but of course, you can study translation and then get a foretaste of interpreting. Then I actually decided that I wanted to study languages intensively again in my Bachelor's degree and learn a completely new language. Of course, when you are interpreting, you also work very intensively with the language or languages you are studying, but of course on a different level. You refine more and go into more detail, and then I saw in Cologne that there was this special combination with Finnish and Finnish Studies, and the more I found out about Finnish and Finland, the more fascinating I found it.

WHAT WORK TASKS DETERMINE YOUR DAY-TO-DAY ROUTINE?

I would say there are three major areas that determine my daily work. One is, of course, when I actually have an interpreting assignment. That, too, can take a thousand different forms. Depending on the needs of the respective clients. However, I would say that one of the classics is, for example, an international conference. Before COVID-19, it looked like this: you were on location at the conference and if, for example, simultaneous interpreting was required, you usually had an interpreting booth on site from which you worked. You always work in teams. There are always at least two of us, sometimes three, depending on the event, and we have colleagues on site, simply because otherwise it would become too exhausting over the course of the event if we did it all on our own. Then the event starts and you start interpreting. You always do intervals of fifteen to thirty minutes, depending on your preference, and then you hand over to your colleague. Then you do not necessarily have a break, but of course, you continue to follow what is happening. You always have to be there somehow, at least with one ear, because you have to take over again and continue interpreting. Of course, you are also there to help your colleague, to write down a number, a name, or a word if you are stuck or something. Therefore, there is always a bit of an interaction between interpreting, helping and listening.

Then, of course, preparation is also part of it. That is the second very important element. As a rule, I am never unprepared for an assignment; I know beforehand what it is about. I may also receive materials, PowerPoint presentations or speeches beforehand. Then, of course, I also become familiar with the topic, including terminology. If it is a specialist conference, I assume that terminology will be used that I might not otherwise be familiar with.

The third is what every other self-employed person knows - all the bookkeeping behind it, all the office stuff, all the paperwork, writing invoices, writing offers, doing taxes, customer acquisition, and customer service. That also takes up a large part. You cannot neglect that either, and of course it all has to be done. There is also a lot of deskwork behind it.

WHAT WERE THE BIGGEST CHALLENGES OF STARTING A CAREER?

Of course, it is also a bit of a result of my individual situation that I am now working self-employed. However, I would say that this entry into self-employment was definitely the biggest challenge, because of course, and I think every self-employed person knows this, it simply takes a while until you have established yourself in such a way that you can also live financially from self-employed. In addition, that you have established yourself on the market and built up a customer base and are sitting so well in the saddle, I would say, in this whole self-employment. In other words, it is simply a path you have to take at the beginning, and it takes a certain amount of time. I think you just have to hang in there and keep going. Of course, you also have to diversify a bit at the beginning. Of course, I do not just focus on interpreting, I also translate, I also do other language services, such as transcripts or voice-overs or subtitling. Simply to find my way around the market a bit. There are indeed some positions, for example at ministries or at international institutions. There are also some larger companies that employ interpreters on a regular basis. However, I would say that the vast majority work self-employed on the market.

A GOOD LOCATION FOR INTERPRETERS?

For me, it was more of a personal decision. After being in Cologne for many years, I really wanted a bit of a change of scenery and wanted to move closer to my family. Frankfurt is a great location. The trade fair is here, the airport is here, there are lots of banks and financial institutions here. Of course, that is also an advantage. Nevertheless, I also have colleagues who do not live in the big city at all, but somewhere in the countryside and then always drive to the respective assignments. That also depends on the language combination. If you have a more rare language combination, for example, if you work with German-Swedish or German-Finnish. Then of course, there are not so many jobs in Germany. In that case, you might be called to a location further away, because otherwise there is not as much choice. The bigger the city, the more opportunities, but the more interpreters there are. The smaller the city, the less may be going on, but the less competition there is, which is a matter of taste, I think.

WHAT COMPETENCES FROM YOUR UNIVERSITY STUDIES HELP YOU IN YOUR JOB TODAY?

I have just mentioned that all the knowledge that is conveyed helps immensely. Of course, we also talked a lot about history, politics and culture. I once interpreted a speech in which a brief reference was made to the Finnish independence in a side sentence, because it happened at the time, during the Independence Day. Of course, that can make you flounder when a subordinate clause is dropped and you have no idea how to interpret it or what to do with it. In the same way, as I said, I have to deal with a lot of terminology, i.e. I have to learn a lot of vocabulary, but I also have to be very selective. If you have a conference and you have five hundred new words, then of course you cannot learn them all. In other words, you have to have some expertise in choosing. What is important now? What do I write down on a piece of paper and have at hand? Of course, it is the same when you have just started at university and have to learn Finnish and five hundred new words. This prepared me very well for it.

WHAT TIPS DO YOU HAVE FOR YOUNG INTERPRETERS?

My number one tip would be to just stick with it and pursue it no matter what, because I actually had a phase during my Bachelor's degree where I was told by many people that I should not do it, because it is clear that it often leads to self-employment. Many people said, do not do it, you will be chasing your jobs forever. You will never be financially independent and really be able to do it. It is perfectly possible to be successful as an interpreter, be financially independent, and not rush from assignment to assignment. That is, if you really enjoy it and if you really want to do it, then I think the most important thing is simply to pursue it, because then I think it will work out. Moreover, as a more practical tip, the most important thing I would recommend is that if you want to work as an interpreter in Germany, you should also take on a few major languages other than the Nordic languages. because unfortunately, if you want to work as a German-Swedish interpreter in Germany, for example, the number of jobs is simply not so high that you can perhaps only live from this one language combination.

WHAT ADVANTAGES DOES FINNISH STUDIES HAVE AS A RARE SUBJECT?

Of course, I thought the supervision was very very good. Whenever you wrote a term paper, a Bachelor's thesis or a presentation or something like that. You could always get a helping hand. All the lecturers and professors were always there to help you. At the same time, of course, this was also true at the level of fellow students. I was also new to Cologne for my studies. I did not know anyone in Cologne when I moved there. I have to say that all the friends I made during my studies and that I still have now are all from Scandinavian and Finnish Studies. Simply because it was made so much easier to make contacts, because, especially in the language courses, you just end up spending years with the same people and virtually suffer the same hardships when it comes to learning Finnish. Of course, that brought you closer together. It is just a much closer bond, I found, in such a rare subject. What I would also say is that I had the feeling that you could dive much deeper into topics and research areas. Of course, you have fewer lecturers and professors. That means, of course, there is less choice,

but I did not think that was bad at all because it gave me the opportunity to delve deeper into individual areas.

Credits

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Interviewed by:	Anja Ute Blode, Anne-Katrin Heinen
Cinematography and Editing:	Anja Ute Blode, Anne-Katrin Heinen
Transcript by:	Anja Ute Blode, Anne-Katrin Heinen
j o l n e s – Design:	Heide Matz
Produced by:	University of Cologne, Department for Scandinavian and Finnish Studies