THE MULTIPLE ROLES OF INTERPRETERS IN ASYLUM HEARINGS IN ITALY[1]

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Abstract: Italy has recently been one of the main entry points for asylum seekers and refugees into Europe (UNHCR 2023). Credibility assessment of claims in asylum procedures heavily hinges on the applicants' ability to (re)construct their refugee identity in written declarations and oral testimonies, which are in turn shaped and reshaped within the interaction in the further course of the procedure, not only but also by interpreters. Over the past 30 years, a growing number of publications testifies to the importance of asylum interpreters' roles and ethics and show that asylum interpreters rarely fulfil the expectations of normative role prescriptions. This paper aims to gain a better understanding of some critical aspects of interpreting in the asylum context in Italy, an understudied area of interpreting so far, mainly for difficult access to data. It is based on a combination of participant observation, semi-structured interviews to some of the participants in the hearings and documentation about our dataset, which was collected at a Prefecture in central Italy in 2023. After an overview of the normative aspects of the right to asylum in the world and, more specifically, in Italy, we discuss the main issues concerning the complex profile and role of asylum interpreters and provide a description of the Italian international protection system. We then contextualise the dataset and the linguistic-ethnographic methods adopted to unravel the complex interactional dynamics under investigation. Based on our data analysis, we conclude that, in order to provide quality services, more specialised interpreter training is needed – not only in terms of language, legal knowledge and terminology, intercultural and communication skills, but also in terms of interviewing techniques and interactional mechanisms, as well as awareness of roles and respective boundaries in the asylum hearing.

"Demander d'asile, c'est avant tout demander
une place dans un monde mondialisé"
(Issartel et Derivois 2012: 271)

1. Introduction

Since 2015, Europe has faced a substantial increase in the number of asylum seekers in need of international protection (UNHCR 2016). In recent years, Italy has been one of the main entry points into Europe for asylum seekers and refugees (UNHCR 2023). According to the Italian Ministry of Interior, between 1st January 2023 and 31st July 2023 72,460 applications for refugee status were filed in Italy and 33.880 applications were examined in the same period (Ministero dell'Interno 2023). Despite the high number of asylum applications and the fact that "language plays a critical role" in the refugee status determination process (Maryns and Jacobs 2021: 146), interpreting in this setting in Italy is still understudied, mainly for difficulty in access to data. Credibility assessment of claims in asylum procedures heavily hinges on the applicants' ability to (re)construct their refugee identity in written declarations and oral testimonies, which are in turn shaped and reshaped within the interaction in the further course of the procedure, not only but also by interpreters (Jacquemet 2009; Pöchhacker and Kolb 2009; Blommaert 2001; Maryns 2006; Smith-Khan 2017, Sorgoni 2019).

This article aims to gain a better understanding of some critical aspects of interpreting in the asylum context in Italy. Section 2 gives an overview of the normative aspects of the right to asylum in the world and, more specifically, in Italy, whilst Section 3 discusses some of the main issues concerning the complex profile and role of asylum interpreters highlighted in literature. In Section 4, we provide a description of the Italian international protection system, and in Section 5, we then contextualise the dataset and the linguistic-ethnographic methods adopted to unravel the complex interactional dynamics under investigation. In Section 6, we focus on data analysis and discuss interactional challenges based on examples, and in Section 7, we provide some concluding remarks.

2. Right to asylum

The first mention of a universal human right to asylum is enshrined in article 14 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) which states that "Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution". In 1950 the European Convention on Human Rights (and the following additional protocols) made the notion of refugee less restrictive and uncertain. It further extended the right to protection by introducing some limitations to the right of States to prevent border-crossing, thus reducing their control on access to and stay on their national territory and the right to deportation of foreign nationals. A refugee *status* was mentioned for the first time in the introduction

of the Refugee Convention signed in Geneva (1951), which under A(2) defines a refugee as a third country national or a stateless person who has

> … well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.

In 1967 the UN adopted the Protocol to the Geneva Convention, recognizing that there was a need to change the Refugee Convention heavily linked to the post World War II experience, to account for the growing number of refugees all over the world.

The European Union in 1990 issued the Dublin Convention, now replaced by Dublin Regulation (EU) No. 604/2013, which establishes criteria and mechanisms for determining the member State responsible for examining an asylum application lodged in one of the member States by a third-country national. This legal instrument had at least two consequences: asylum seekers had no longer the possibility to choose where to lodge their application, and their application for refugee status had to be dealt with by the authorities of the first EU country they entered. Recent geopolitical conditions (terrorism and civil wars in Sub Saharan Africa and Libya, conflicts in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, and the war in Ukraine) have increasingly made EU member States the countries of first arrival – Italy being one of these.

Directive 2004/83/EC established international protection at EU level which included both the refugee status and the subsidiary protection status for third country nationals or stateless persons who have "well-founded fear of persecution or real risk of suffering serious harm" (Art. 4.4). The notion of 'serious harm' includes death penalty or execution; torture or inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment; serious and individual threat to a civilian's life or person by reason of *indiscriminate violence in situations of international or internal armed conflict* (Art. 15) (authors' emphasis).

Directive 2005/85/EC on the same issue aimed at

> … [introducing] in the short term, common standards for fair and efficient asylum procedures in the Member States, and in the longer term, Community rules leading to a common asylum procedure in the European Community. (Art. 3)

Joint efforts were made to create a European asylum system with a shared understanding of international and subsidiary protection, common rules about the application procedure for refugee status, mutual help among member States and shared criteria to determine which State is responsible for examining an application. These led to the adoption of Directive 2011/95/EU, the setting up of a joint IT system for fingerprints (EURODAC)[2] and the creation of an EU

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[2] https://edps.europa.eu/data-protection/european-it-systems/eurodac_en

dedicated agency for asylum (EASO, currently EUAA - European Union Agency for Asylum).[3]

2.1. Refugee Status Determination in Italy

Until 1990 Italy applied a geographical reservation to the Geneva Convention and only accepted refugees from Eastern European countries. Following the removal of this limitation, a National Commission for the Right to Asylum (*Commissione Nazionale per il Diritto di Asilo*) was established at the Ministry of the Interior, and asylum proceedings in Italy fell within the administrative justice system. During the civil wars in former Yugoslavia the Italian government introduced a humanitarian stay permit for displaced people from that country, an approach which was maintained during the Arab Spring. In order to handle the increased flow of asylum seekers, so-called Territorial Commissions for Recognition of International Protection (hereinafter TCs) (*Commissioni Territoriali per il riconoscimento della protezione internazionale*) were entrusted with hearings and the granting of refugee status (Law 189/2002). The Italian asylum policy in that period was characterised by *ad hoc* provisions responding to humanitarian emergencies caused by conflicts in neighbouring or geographically close countries.

In 2007 and 2008 Italy transposed Directives 2004/83/EC and 2005/85/EC. This was a turning point because besides the refugee status, subsidiary protection had to be granted to people at risk of torture and generalised violence due to national or international conflicts. A humanitarian stay permit was introduced for people who did not qualify for refugee status but could not go back to their country for serious reasons.

Later on, some restrictions to this approach were introduced: Decree Law 113/2018 replaced humanitarian stay permits with other temporary stay permits having a shorter duration; the Minister of Foreign Affairs issued a list of presumed 'safe countries', whose nationals are not entitled to apply for asylum in Italy (at least in principle).

To lodge an application for refugee status, applicants must go to the local police headquarters (*Questura)* or police station (*Commissariato*) where they fill in a form and are asked to provide details about themselves, their family, and their journey, and then are summoned to undergo an asylum hearing. The aim of asylum hearings is refugee status determination (hereinafter RSD), which is the process by which governments or UNHCR determine whether a person seeking protection is considered a refugee under international, regional, or national law (Arcella 2022: 87).

The hearing, on which the decision to grant or deny the protection depends, consists in collecting the applicant's account and evidence (medical, psychiatric, travel documents, marital status, birth certificates of children, etc.) and assessing it with other relevant information to test the credibility and consistency of the

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[3] https://euaa.europa.eu/

applicant's account.[4] Applicants are also requested to provide a brief account of why they left their country and cannot go back.

Asylum hearings and the assessment of international protection applications are entrusted to officers (civil servants) working for the TCs based at Italian Prefectures[5] (Italian Ministry of the Interior circular letter 2019: 17). TCs' activities are coordinated by the National Commission for the Right to Asylum in Rome, which is also responsible for the revocation and termination of international protection status. The TCs are chaired by an officer of the Prefecture and are composed of two administrative officers of the Ministry of the Interior – hired through a competitive examination and with specialisation in the field of asylum and international law – and one expert on international protection and human rights appointed by the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees). Applicants who do not speak Italian have the right to express themselves in their own language or another language they speak or are reasonably supposed to speak and be assisted by an interpreter paid by the State – since the hearing must always be conducted in Italian –[6] and a lawyer at their own expense.[7]

Negative decisions can be appealed only before civil courts having a specialised section on immigration and free movement of EU citizens established by Law no. 46/2017. The court is composed of three judges, and the appellant is entitled to legal aid.[8]

2.1.1. Structure and content of a hearing

EU law enforcement agencies, immigration centre authorities, and national courts use interviewing protocols based on modules and techniques developed by the European Asylum Support Office (EASO until 2014 now EUAA) which are compared and discussed in a study by Krainz and Bergaus (2017). The synopsis of the various phases of an asylum interview in Italy, and the corresponding types of 'productive' questions are shown in Table 1.

The asylum hearing is conducted by an officer in charge of the case belonging to the local TC, who also produces the written report and is assisted by an interpreter. The final decision, based on the officer's report and account, is made jointly by the four members of the Commission (see 2.1.).

At first sight this procedure seems straightforward, but its interdisciplinary content – civil (marital status and family), criminal (identity), and administrative

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[4] Credibility is not mentioned in the Convention, but the words credibility/credible appear 37 times in the UNHCR (2019) *Handbook on Procedures* (see also UNHCR 2013).

[5] Prefettura/prefecture is the local Agent of the State Administration with general powers and functions of government representation at provincial level.

[6] Article 25, Directive 2013/32/EU transposed by Legislative Decree 25/2008, article 10.4. This article states that "at all stages of the procedure related to the submission and examination of the application, the applicant is guaranteed, if necessary, the assistance of an interpreter in his/her language or another language he/she understands", and lists the accepted vehicular languages, namely English, French, Spanish and Arabic.

[7] Article 16 Legislative Decree 25/2008.

[8] Article16 Legislative Decree 25/2008.

(border control) – makes it very complex (Noll 2015), which also affects the interpreter's job.

Multilingualism and cultural differences add a further layer of complexity in asylum procedures, since "the applicant and decision maker will, in virtually every case, come from mutually incomprehensible cultural and linguistic repertoires of meaning" (Craig and Gramling 2017), and there is always the risk that transmission of information may be distorted by linguistic and cultural barriers (Gyulai *et al.* 2013: 61).

Table 1. Phases of an asylum interview in Italy.

Before the interview	● The interview starts with the interviewer and the interpreter picking up the applicant from the waiting room, saying hello and inviting them to the interview room. ● The interpreter is often asked to translate the 'informativa', a leaflet explaining the asylum proceedings, how the commission is composed, how a decision is taken, etc.
PHASE 1	● Closed questions on Country of Origin (COI) Information, background, family, studies, religion, occupation, etc.
PHASE 2A	● Open questions about the journey from the country of origin to the arrival in Italy, with attention to places of transit if they are relevant. ● Free narrative: Applicants speak at length, according to their abilities.
PHASE 2B	● Open questions on any fears applicants have about returning to their home country and the risks that would take. ● Free narrative continues (see above).
PHASE 3	● Probing, clarifying and reflective questions on the journey: probing questions on specific facts for cross examination. ● The interviewer must explore selected topics from the free narrative in order to fill memory gaps and clarify all inconsistencies.
PHASE 4	● Open questions aimed to introduce corrections, additions, etc. ● The main topics are Applicant's stay in Italy, (mental) health state, vulnerability if/when returning to their home country, etc.
After the interview	● The oral account of events is remolded and preserved in the *verbali* (i.e. interview transcripts), which are in turn the basis for the Italian authorities' decisions. Interpreters are called upon to sight translate *verbali* before those are signed by the primary parties

The presence of at least interviewer, applicant and interpreter in asylum hearings implies co-constructive interactions (Wadensjö 1998; Pöchhacker and Kolb 2009; Jacobs and Maryns 2023) where every participant may play a (decisive) role in terms of the report and final decision about the refugee status. Moreover, as highlighted by Tužinská: "Although the statements in the report are products of an interactive process, they are presented purely as products of one person, namely the interviewee" (2019: 90). The fact that in Italy the report is an evidentiary basis for the decision about the refugee status decision – which is mainly based on interpreter's renditions of the applicant's talk – also places a lot of responsibility on the interpreter.

3. Interpreter-mediated RSD hearings

This section discusses some of the main issues concerning the complex profile and role of asylum interpreters highlighted in literature.[9] Research on asylum interpreting (Pöllabauer 2023) has adopted a diversity of perspectives, from legal to linguistic to socio-cultural and sociological, and drawn on methodological and theoretical approaches from a number of disciplines, including linguistic ethnography, interactional sociolinguistics, conversational analysis, and critical discourse theory. This section outlines some strands of themes that emerge from literature, bearing in mind that the borders between different categories may be blurred and more than one theme may be mentioned by the same scholars/authors/researchers.

3.1. Multiplicity of roles and mismatch between interpreter's codes of conduct and reality

Codes of ethics (besides norms passed down in teaching) are key in imparting specific role expectations, also in public service interpreting (PSI). 'Fidelity', which was for a long time a dominant virtue for translators, has been questioned by both scholars and practitioners. Interpreters often feel they need to do more than 'just translate', but aim to act more like helpers, or aids to achieve a deeper understanding between their clients (see, among others, Barsky 1994; Blommaert 2010; Pöllabauer 2004; Maryns 2006; Tipton 2008). This may lead them to altering the register of the language; simplifying the wording; reformulating information to take cultural differences into account; and/or adding information for the benefit of either party.

Over the past 30 years, a growing number of publications testifies to the importance of interpreters' roles and ethics in connection to language mediation provided by (mostly untrained) bilinguals in asylum hearings (Kälin 1986; Barsky 1993; 1994; Inghilleri 2005; Maryns 2006; Tipton and Furmanek 2016).

Wadensjö's (1998) groundbreaking monograph describes interpreters as language and communication experts who are active parties in triadic encounters, coordinating talk to facilitate communication and understanding. This view has since been recurrently confirmed in PSI research. Interpreters' agency may include interpreters serving as helpers or advocates of the less powerful party; as institutional allies (co-interviewers, co-interrogators, co-therapists, even facilitators of abuse); as communication facilitators, who are responsible for interactional management; and as agents of change, cultural brokers, or intercultural agents, who contribute to the empowerment of the less powerful party (see, for example, Hale 2008; Ozolins 2014).

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[9] For reasons of space the vast literature on interpreting for refugees during humanitarian crises, in conflict zones or in settings other than RSD will not be reviewed here, although there are common aspects and similarities with interpreting in RSD hearings.

In this respect, Barsky's study (1994) supports a pronouncedly activist role of asylum interpreters that stretches beyond the role of cultural broker. To him interpreters as 'intercultural agents' should empower applicants by intervening on their behalf or even embellishing their claims. Interpreters themselves, however, do not always seem to agree with such an activist role: survey results (Fenton 2001) suggest that interpreters are sometimes hesitant to 'violate' the principle of impartiality adopting an overly activist role, and fear both pressure from asylum applicants and impact on their private lives.

Pöllabauer (2004) asserts that interpreters frequently take on interventionist roles, acting as co-interrogators or taking the side of the caseworkers. The primary explanation appears to be their sense of obligation to do so, despite their efforts to keep a friendly relationship with the applicants. As a result, they take on various, occasionally contradictory "habitus" (see Inghilleri 2003). Stated differently, interpreters often take on multiple tasks; in addition to translating, they may also offer guidance, try to act as cultural mediators, and/or represent applicants.

In summary, interpreters' roles can be traced on a continuum, from a more distanced and non-activist role to a more activist and interventionist role. As pointed out by Pöllabauer and Topolovec (2021: 215), even if prescriptive demands on the role of interpreters as *verbatim* translators are still furthered by authorities, research shows that the idea of a mechanistic 'conduit role', in which interpreters are viewed as machines that passively convey information from one language into another, cannot be upheld.

3.2. Controversies in asylum interpreting

Several studies have raised controversial issues about interpreting in asylum proceedings. Kälin (1986: 231) mentions the interpreter among the "obstacles to an undistorted interaction between asylum seeker and officer". Barsky (1993; 1994) identifies some risk factors in multilingual asylum proceedings: the credibility of asylum seekers' testimony mainly depends on an interpreter; both interpreters and asylum seekers are under heavy strain since any contradictions during the hearing can become grounds for rejecting the application or doubting the truthfulness of the applicant's narrative.

Another crucial issue is trust: asylum seekers may think that interpreters will side with the local authorities, collaborate with or give information to their (persecuting) government, while caseworkers/officers may fear that they will collude with the asylum seekers because they share the same national origin or the experience of fleeing their own country (Kälin 1986; Barsky 1993).

Where role boundaries are unclear, interpreters may also acquire additional power in an already imbalanced institutional interaction, thus jeopardising trust and active participation by all the parties involved. Analysing asylum hearings with children mediated by non-certified interpreters, Keselman *et al.* (2010) found that the caseworker let the interpreters act as both gatekeeper and extra interviewer.

Faithfulness is another case in point. In asylum hearings where applicants had to disclose sexual abuse, Baillot *et al.* (2012) found interpreters mitigating expressions of sexual violence, using euphemisms or modifying them to "transform them into the 'right English' to the benefit of listeners" (*ibid.*: 285). On the other hand, Craig and Gramling (2017), who critically analysed interpreter-mediated asylum hearings from a law perspective, argue in favour of a 'right to untranslatability'. Acknowledging that within the asylum adjudication system certain concepts are 'untranslatables' would mean that officers would need to make greater efforts to communicate with asylum applicants, instead of just trusting their ability to communicate, and be aware that 'distorsions' may come along with interpretation from a multilingual setting to the "monolingual adjudicative process of asylum" (*ibid.*: 96).

Gill *et al.* (2016) surveyed 240 hearings in the UK asylum appeal system and found, among other flaws in the interpreting practice, that in 6.7 per cent of cases the interpreters offered their opinion to the judge concerning information provided by the appellants and their credibility, which is considered a very serious trespassing of role boundaries in basically any professional code of conduct for interpreters.

From a socio-political and anthropological perspective, Gibb and Good (2014) discuss expectations of literary or *verbatim* interpreting as requested by OFPRA (*Office français de protection des réfugiés et apatrides*) in France, and by UKBA (UK Border Agency), both dealing with RSD procedures. They also look at how this can create a dilemma for interpreters who are asked to relay what exactly was said by the applicant but feel reluctant to reproduce grammar mistakes and a lower register than their own for fear of being judged bad interpreters. Another dilemma in interpreting in this setting is how to manage the educational gap between the judge/officer and the applicant, which makes literal translation of some questions containing technical terminology incomprehensible for an applicant and therefore needs adapting the language, despite the request to interpret *verbatim*. Then there are cultural differences, for instance in "dates in non-Western calendars, or kin terms when kinship is structured very differently, that are inherently impossible to translate exactly or *verbatim*" (*ibid.*: 395).

Another controversial practice that was investigated in RSD is written reporting. Wadensjö *et al.* (2023) have highlighted that there are two language conversions in asylum hearings: from the asylum seeker's language to the interviewer's language and from oral to written language. This may result in remarkable discrepancies between what was actually said by the applicant and what is contained in the report. This process of inter- and intra-language mediation is called *transpretation* by Harding and Ralarala (2017: 1159) since it also entails a change of register, from spontaneous talk to bureaucratic/legal jargon, which significantly changes the original narrative.

Compassion fatigue, also called *vicarious trauma* (see Figley 2002; Ledoux 2015), is frequent in individuals who experience emotional distress as a result of coming in close contact with victims of trauma and also affects asylum interpreters. *Vicarious trauma* has received attention in Translation and

Interpreting literature only recently and has been linked to ethically stressful situations and burnout. Määttä (2015) highlights that interpreters' active interventions – e.g., to correct an error in a transcript – may result in a conflict between the requirements of professional ethics, general ethical responsibility towards a fellow human being, and the interpreter's own sense of professionalism. Määttä concludes that "the consequences of the interpreter's decisions do not only affect the migrant but also the interpreter in the form of increased ethical stress, general work stress, and potential vicarious trauma" (*ibid.*: 32).

4. *Interpreter-mediated asylum hearings in Italy*

Studies on asylum interpreting in Italy are still very few, yet they show a picture which is similar to that in other countries: distortions and other (ethically) inappropriate behaviours are similarly documented. In particular, Italian asylum interpreters are shown to play a significant role that oscillates between advocacy and empowerment.

In the 1980s Italy underwent an epochal change: from a country originating migration, it became a destination for migrants. At the time the country was not ready to provide language services and guarantee language rights to all the migrants who arrived, especially to those speaking languages of lesser diffusion. Forty years down the line, asylum interpreting in Italy is still mainly performed by cultural mediators who are poorly paid, have a low social status, and often are not trained as interpreters (Rudvin and Pesare 2015; Veglio 2017). Among the main reasons are a lack of willingness to pay for high quality language services, a lack of interpreting training courses in the languages of migrants, both in academic and non-academic settings, and the lack of an accreditation system. Moreover, it is mainly the same linguists who work for the police or the national healthcare service as cultural mediators and in asylum hearings as interpreters, thus creating confusion between two professional profiles with different remits.

In her work about asylum hearings in Italy conducted with a combined anthropologic, pragmatic and sociolinguistic approach, Sorgoni (2013) highlights the influence of interpreters on RSD procedures and shows how some (unqualified) interpreter's initiatives may undermine the credibility of the applicant's information and narrative provided to the adjudicating authority.

4.1. Focus on recruitment

As stated in 4., Italian authorities still do not fully recognise the value of language mediation/interpreting, which consequently is not adequately remunerated (Casadei and Franceschetti 2009). There is still no national legislation stating minimum requirements in terms of language knowledge and skills for this professional profile and regional governments have so far set definitions and standards which consequently vary from region to region (Filmer 2019). Therefore, often "the [interpreter's] job is not performed by qualified

individuals, both due to limited set of skills and to anachronistic hourly rates, demeaning their profession" Veglio (2007: 24; authors' translation).

At present language services for RSD hearings are assigned by public tenders where price is the main criterion. This unfortunate mechanism does not reward quality, but only the possibly lowest cost of a service required by law. CIES (the cooperative which systematically wins these calls)[10] pledges to check interpreters' qualifications and train them for RSD. Yet, two of the interpreters working for them, who accepted to be interviewed in our study, told us that no educational requirements had been asked and only one of them had received a one-day training on RSD before starting to work in asylum hearings.

Mack (2005: 9-10) identified two types of asylum interpreters in the Italian context: the vast majority are *ad-hoc*, (often untrained) 'mediators', who tend to be refugees themselves and have a similar background to the applicants;[11] otherwise, the Prefectures hire (often trained) interpreters, usually born in Italy, who work only with most spoken languages and mainly have a host nation background with no significant links to the applicants' native countries.

4.2. Code of conduct and interpreting techniques

The cooperative providing interpreting services to the Prefecture where the data of this study were collected has a code of conduct[12] for interpreters which requires the interpreter to translate "conveying the same original concepts and messages, without additions or omissions, to the best of his or her professional abilities, respecting all linguistic and cultural aspects" (CIES 2017: 1, authors' translation). Alongside interactional skills and neutrality and impartiality, the text also discusses accuracy, stating that the interpreter is required to "faithfully translate the integrity of what the applicant says to the Commission officers, and vice versa" (*ibid.*:2, authors' translation). In the performance of his/her professional duties, the interpreter is furthermore required to:

- Adapt the language and register of the translation to that of his/her interlocutors.
- Speak clearly and comprehensibly.
- Prioritise meaning over style; avoid embellishing language, explaining or expressing personal opinions.
- Directly report what is expressed in the source language, expressing him/herself in the first person through direct speech.
- Do not omit any expression, even when it is considered superfluous or offensive. (*ibid.*: 2-3, authors' translation).

The cooperative organised a two-day seminar on interpreting and translation within the premises of the Prefecture in question. Aside from papers on legal and

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[10] CIES: See https://www.cies.it/mediazione-interculturale/mediatori-interculturali-e-interpreti-per-alcune-commissioni-territoriali/.
[11] See Filmer and Federici (2018) for a focus on the professional definition of 'intercultural mediators' in Italy and, more specifically, their role in Sicilian ports and reception centres.
[12] In Italy, there is no national register for public service interpreters.

ethical aspects of the profession, there were lectures on intercultural and interpersonal communication as well as interpreting techniques focusing on consecutive interpreting with note-taking and sight translation.

The above-mentioned Code (*ibid.*: 3, authors' translation) only states that

> if [the interpreter] takes notes in order to avoid forgetting elements, immediately after their use in interpretation-translation, s/he shall destroy them or, if requested, hand them over to the officer (These notes are covered by secrecy).

The interpreters we observed during the hearings, however, did not use any note-taking techniques, nor did they take any notes of, for instance, names of persons and places, and figures or dates.

5. *Real-life dataset and methodological issues*

Given that asylum hearings are a sensitive setting, there are still many issues in gaining full access to data about RSD proceedings, as highlighted by many scholars (see Maryns and Jacobs 2021: 147; Nikolaidou *et al.* 2019, Sorgoni 2013 and 2019). Our study is based on a combination of participant observation, semi-structured interviews to some of the participants and documentation pertaining to training organised for interpreters and officers, the calendar of hearings we were allowed to observe including the language of the applicant, and two written reports. Data was collected at a Prefecture in central Italy, between January and July 2023. Before starting our project, we had two meetings with the Vice-prefect to explain our research aims. Unfortunately, we could not get access to video recordings of asylum hearings, provided for by Legislative Decree no. 142 /2015, for lack of technical equipment at the time of our data collection, nor were we authorised to tape-record the hearings. On legal grounds it also proved impossible to have a copy of the report of the interviews, as only asylum seekers are entitled to receive a copy. Thanks to an association of lawyers who defend appeals against refugee status rejections, we received two reports out of nine hearings. We made up for these serious limitations in data collection taking field notes and live transcriptions and feel that this can constitute a valuable source of information given the currently insurmountable lack of recordings available for research in this context. Therefore, our dataset is unique in two main respects: it provides real-life material from a rarely explored setting and combines as many available sources of information as possible (also see Dahlvik 2018 for a similar approach).

Table 2. List of hearings.

Interview	Applicant (A)	A's gender	A's spoken languages	Total duration	Researcher (R)	Interpreter (I)	Officer (O)

0	A0	F	Nigerian Standard English (NSE), Nigerian Pidgin	The researcher was asked to leave after 10 minutes so as to make the applicant feel more at ease.	*R1: Female*	*I0:* Female	*O0: Male*
1	A1	M	Nigerian Standard English (NSE), Nigerian Pidgin	2h interview (Int) + 20' sight interpreting (SI)	*R2: Male*	I1: Female	*O1: Male*
2	A2	M	NSE, Nigerian Pidgin	40' Int + 40' SI	*R1*	I2: Male	*O2: Male*
3	A3	M	NSE, Nigerian Pidgin	1H 27' Int + 25' SI + 5' follow-up Qs	*R1*	I3: Female	*O3: Male*
4	A4	F	EDO, NSE, Nigerian Pidgin	1 h 13' Int + 16' SI + 41' follow-up Qs	*R1*	*I4: Female*	*O3*
5	A5	F	NSE, Nigerian Pidgin	1 h 50 ' Int (no SI)	*R2*	*I4*	*O4: Male*
6	A6	F	NSE, Nigerian Pidgin	2 h Int + 30 ' SI	*R2*	*I4*	*O4*
7	A7	M	NSE, Nigerian Pidgin	47 ' Int + 13' SI	*R2*	*I5: Female*	*O4*
8	A8	M	Igbo, NSE, Nigerian Pidgin	1h 15' Int + 22' SI	*R1*	*I5*	*O3*

To collect data for this study an authorisation from the National Asylum Commission in Rome was sought by the Prefecture and granted. A framework agreement was signed by the project leader (UNINT) and the Prefecture, containing the approval of the research work and all the conditions concerning personal data protection and the consent by all participants who were informed that the researchers were there only to study interpreter-mediated communication and that they would leave before the hearing started if they did not want them to observe the interaction, or at any time during the hearing

should they not want them to be present. We were allowed to listen to the sight translation of the report from Italian into the applicant's language and were given a copy to read at the end of the hearing. All the examples and excerpts in this paper, which were transcribed as the hearings unfolded, were checked against the officer's report in Italian for content purposes.

A synopsis of the nine asylum hearings observed is given in Table 2. They involved nine different Nigerian nationals and were conducted by four different officers with the help of five interpreters using the Italian-Nigerian Standard English (NSE) or Nigerian Pidgin English combination.

5.1. Setting and participants

The room layout for all hearings was as follows: the official and the asylum applicant were seated on opposite sides of a rectangular table, the interpreter sat between them, on the short side. The researcher was placed behind the asylum seeker. The officer sat in front of a computer monitor and typed the report as the hearing proceeded.

The four interpreters who were involved in the hearings worked (none for more than 5 years) for the cooperative who had won the tender for interpreting service provision at the Prefecture. We know from our interviews that two of them, both Italian-Nigerian English bilinguals, never received any training in interpreting. We have no information about the other three. The four officers involved in the hearings are full-time civil servants of the Prefecture, all selected by competitive examination. They are all (Law or Political Science) graduates and received an initial specialised training in international protection lasting between two and five weeks. They all receive continuing professional development training courses of one or two days on a regular basis on specific topics (for instance conducting a hearing with particularly vulnerable and/or LGBT+ applicants).
As mentioned in 5, the Prefecture gave us a calendar of hearings containing the languages applicants chose to use, namely Nigerian Standard English (NSE) and Nigerian Pidgin English (NPE).[13] Asylum seekers, however, had different degrees of competence in NSE, and our data analysis seems to suggest that at times interpreter and applicant spoke different varieties of NSE/NPE.

The structure of the hearings we observed is the same as the one presented in Table 1 (see 2.1.1). In the pre-interview, the researcher in the room introduced her/himself and the asylum seeker was asked to give or deny his/her consent to the researcher's observation of the hearing. It was clearly specified that the focus of the observation was only interpreter-mediated communication in the interaction. After each hearing we asked all the parties involved if they would agree to be interviewed. Four officers, two interpreters and two applicants accepted. A semi-structured interview script was prepared, based on our observation of the interpreter-mediated interactions. All the officers' interviews took place in one afternoon at the Prefecture and were audio-recorded; the

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[13] An example of NPE is the use of *deh* or *dey* for the verb 'to be'. The word originates from the similarly pronounced Igbo word *di* having the same meaning.

interviews with the two interpreters were conducted on the phone and recorded on another day; so far, only one applicant has been interviewed over the phone. For reasons of space, interviews will not be discussed in detail here, but only in passing.

5.2. Analytical approaches

The approach adopted in this investigation is qualitative, although a general indication of the frequency of certain features is provided. In examining how the hearings are co-constructed in sequences of talk and how the roles of interpreters emerge, we adopted an interaction- and discourse-centred approach. From a sociological perspective, we adopt Goffman's (1981) concepts of participatory framework, footing and face. Keselman *et al.*'s (2008) categories are used to analyse questions (invitations, directives, option-posing, suggestions), and Wadensjö's (1998) categories of interpreter renditions are applied to the micro-level. In particular, non-renditions (interpreter-initiated turns which do not reproduce any 'original' turn) will be highlighted, to show some of the processes involved in the interpretation of the hearings.

6. Data analysis

The combination of observation and note-taking is a complex process, thus only fragments of talk have been annotated in their entirety and will be used in our analysis.

6.1. "I want to know what she does…": Some reflections about the use of pronouns

The Code of conduct that interpreters who work for CIES (see 4.2) should abide by recommends using the first-person singular pronoun and direct speech. Supposedly, there are reasons behind this recommendation, although a prescriptive approach is generally not a good solution to complex problems. The main rationale in favour of the use of first-person pronouns is to put the interlocutors in direct contact, preventing them from addressing the interpreter when they want to talk to the other party or parties. Another reason is that using indirect speech and the third-person pronoun changes the footing (Goffman 1981): the interpreter is no longer speaking **for** that person but **about** that person (see also Diriker 2004). Using the third person in indirect speech may also generate confusion in translation when the applicant talks about another person, for example "He says that he (meaning another person) did…".

On the other hand, also primary participants do change personal pronouns when they speak and do address the interpreter at times because they want to mark a distance from or do not want to align with the other party. In that case, reproducing the speaker's intention could be an appropriate choice for the interpreter. But what drew our attention to the use of pronouns is the fact that, in the very first hearing, the researcher introduced herself to the applicant and explained why she would be present during the interview and the interpreter's rendition in the first person caused some confusion.[14] In Example 1, R1 is the researcher, I0 is the interpreter and A0 is the applicant.

This was a clear sign that either the interpreter had not explained how she would be using the first-person pronoun, or the applicant had not understood her

Example 1

R1: sono [nome del/la ricercatore/trice] e sono qui a/ per
     fare un lavoro di ricerca (.) mi interessa la
     comunicazione con l'interprete (.) non il contenuto
     dell'udienza (.) non sono qui per giudicare (.) solo per
     osservare
     *my name is [name of researcher] and I am here for/to perform a research work (.) I
     am interested in the communication with the interpreter (.) not in the content of the
     hearing (.) I am not here to judge (.) just to observe*

I0: *((Translates into Pidgin English using the first-person pronoun))*

A0: *((Addressing the interpreter))* I want to know what **she** does not you

explanation. The interpreter did not provide any clarification after the applicant's request, she simply repeated what she had said switching to the third person ("She is here to…"). Then she resumed using the first-person pronoun. With appropriate training, interpreters know how to introduce themselves and how to explain the 'rules of the interpreting game' to make their work more transparent to the parties involved in the interaction.

In many other cases, though, the interpreters we observed used third-person pronouns and reported speech, especially when interpreting the officer's turns. In Example 2 (hearing 5, phase 1), the officer is enquiring about the family of the applicant. The interpreter reports what the officer says with indirect speech and third-person pronouns, while she uses the first-person pronoun to translate the applicant's talk. It is impossible to know the (conscious or unconscious) reason behind this choice. One explanation could be not wanting to identify with the adjudicating officer, either as a form of respect towards the authority, or to mark the distance between the interpreter's self and the officer and closeness with the applicant, for whom she switches to the first-person pronoun. Pöllabauer (2004: 163) observed a change in pronouns by interpreters when they want to mark the authorship of a question or statement in asylum proceedings in Austria.

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[14] In all examples: (.) = unmeasured pauses; - = truncated word; /= truncated utterance; [= overlapping talk; ? = rising intonation.

Example 2

O4:   OK (.) ascolta (.)va bene (.) avevi anche/ avevi detto di avere
         sei fratelli er e sorelle minori (.) ma avevi perso due sorelle e
         due fratelli
         OK (.) listen (.) all right (.) you also had/ you said you had six brothers and younger sisters (.) but
         you lost two sisters and two brothers
I4:   OK (.) he says you have six brothers(.) er and also some sisters
         junior sisters (.) but you said you lost two brothers and two
         sisters
A5:   I lost two sisters and two bothers yes
O4:   eh
I4:   sì(.) ho perso due fratelli e due sorelle
         yes (.) I lost two brothers and two sisters
O4:   esatto
         correct

6.2. "Can you understand me?" Use of vehicular language

One of the characteristics of vehicular languages is that they are conventionally associated with specific geographical areas (countries or regions). The assumption is that all the people coming from the area associated with a vehicular language speak that language, though this is not always the case. Another relevant issue is the level of education: not all asylum seekers who use a vehicular language are able to deal with complex legal discourse, for instance. Also, not everybody has the same level of language proficiency, and thus applicants who declare to speak a vehicular language may not be able to provide an accurate and detailed account of their personal history in that language (Relinque and Martín-Ruel 2022: 207).

In the same hearing discussed in Example 1, the interpreter had to repeat three times the question addressed to the applicant: "Can you understand me when I speak?", before the applicant actually understood the question and answered positively. A case of difficulty in comprehension can also be seen in Example 3, which shows the sequence following the one in Example 2 (hearing 5, phase 1).

Besides the same pattern of pronoun use already discussed in 6.1, there is an instance of comprehension difficulty between the interpreter and the applicant. In this case it takes four turns with interpreter's non-renditions before the applicant's answer to the question on the whereabouts of her daughter is translated to the officer. The reversed order of the two units in the translation of the applicant's turn – first the given (mother), second the new (daughter) – makes the answer appear much less focused than it really was.

Example 3

O4:   esatto (.) poi che: non sei sposata ma hai una figlia nata nel
     duemila diciassette e che vive in Nigeria con tua mamma giusto?
     correct (.) then that: you are not married but: you have a daughter born in 2017 and: who: live
     in Nigeria with your mother right?

I4:   he says you're not married (.) but you have a daugh[ter

A5:   [yes

I4:   born in two thousand seventeen and he says you was living with
     yo[ur

A5:   [my mom yes

O4:   eh (.) e adesso dove sta 'sta figliola?
     eh (.) and now where is this little girl?

I4:   he says now where is she?

A5:   my little: sisters

I4:   sorry? *((addressed to applicant))*

A5:   my little: sisters

I4:   your little? *((addressed to applicant))*

A5:   my little: sisters

I4:   OK

A5:   they are taking care of her (.) before my mom did take care of
     her

I4:   er è mia madre che: se ne prendeva cura (.) ma ora sono le mie
     sorelle minori
     my mom used to take care of her (.) but now it is my younger sisters

O4:   ah… con le sorelle minori
     ah… with younger sisters ((officer types))

The same happens in Example 4 (hearing 2, phase 1), where the interpreter (mis)uses the word 'sibling' for 'famiglia/sorella/figlio'. The applicant does not understand, the interpreter offers a linguistic explanation, but the answer she obtains is missing a crucial element, which was not translated: the whereabouts of the applicant's son.

Example 4

O2:   senti (.) ma ora (.) la tua famiglia(.) la tua sorella(.) tuo
     figlio (.) dove vivono?
     look (.)but now (.) your family (.) your sister (.) your son (.) where do they live?

I2:   where are your siblings?

A2:   siblings?

I2:   your brothers and sisters

A2:   they are still there (.) I don't know where they are staying
     today (.)

6.3. Co-construction of meaning

Example 5 (interview 6, phase 2b) involves an asylum seeker who during her stay in Italy had met a Nigerian man called Mark, got pregnant and made a bold move to flee from prostitution up North with the father of her child. The word

"papa" in the applicant's turn is translated with "padre" (father), which is polysemic both in Italian and in English, designating both a male parent and priest. The applicant, who understands some Italian, picked up on this ambiguity and started a 'private' conversation with the interpreter which was only partially relayed (in a bilingual turn) to the officer who picked up on the ambiguity as well. The interpreter's final disambiguation ("il padre di mio figlio") – ratified by the officer who repeated exactly the same wording – came only after a last try of the applicant to make herself understood on her own in Italian ("il padre (.) il papa").

Example 5

A6: so (…) for God's sake I met the papa, which is Mark

I4: er abbiamo fatto il lavoro(.) io e la ragazza, fino a quando
       Dio non ha voluto che non incontrassi il padre er Mark
       er we did the work(.) the girl and I (.) until God granted me to meet the father er Mark

A6: il padre Mark?
       father Mark?

I4: you said the father?

A6: the father is named Mark not padre Mark

I4: no (.) il father? ((to O4)) OK (.) no il padre Mar (.) cioè il
       padre si chiama Mark
       no (.) the father? OK (.) no (.) Mark the father (.) that is the father is called Mark

O4: il padre er il padre in che senso padre?
       the father er the father what do you mean with the father?

A6: il padre (.) il papà
       the father (.) the dad

I4: il padre di mio figlio
       my son's father ((indicates applicant's son, who is sitting on her lap))

O4: OK (.) il padre di mio figlio
       OK (.) my son's father

This sequence is a perfect example of interactional space of multilingualism (Blommaert *et al.* 2005), in which an 'ideology of linguistic inclusion' (Reynolds 2020: 6) applies. Participants are open to communicative flexibility: all kinds of communicative resources are welcomed to promote successful communication. The combination of unresolved misunderstandings due to multilingual challenges and the confusion sparked by role ambiguity highlights how the negotiation of understanding takes place at various levels of meaning, as well as showing the need for meta-communication (in the form of verbalising the purpose of the interaction) in these linguistically complex communicative events. Had the initial ambiguity been detected and resolved by the interpreter, this would have avoided the cascading effects of communication breakdown, impacting the interviewing technique.

6.4. Acting as co-officer

At times the interpreters we observed acted as co-officers, apparently trying to support the adjudicating officer's agenda (as reported by Dahlvik 2018 and Pöllabauer 2004). In at least three instances the interpreter corrects the applicant, which is not a positive move in terms of the applicant's credibility, a decisive principle in RSD (see 2.1.).[15]

In Example 6 (hearing 1, phase 1) the officer is asking questions to confirm the age of the applicant's children. The applicant, mother of three children aged six years, two years, and 6 months, answers the question giving the age of her youngest daughter; the interpreter explicitly corrects her answer ("she is older") and then tells the age of the eldest. The applicant, who understands some Italian, at this point specifies the age of all three daughters, and the officer signals understanding ("OK") without waiting for the translation. The interpreter (again in a bilingual turn) apologises both with the applicant and the officer, mentioning the use of masks as a justification.

Example 6

A1: my daughter is six months

I1: è più grande: ha sei anni
she is older she is six years

A1: six years two years six months

O1: OK *((the officer understands with no need for translation))*

I1: with mask it is hard sorry (.) con mascherina

In Example 7 (hearing 1, phase 2b) the applicant is asked about his job in Nigeria and answers that he used to "bunker"[16] – a concept the interpreter appears not to be familiar with. One day there was a fire and two people died, so the police were after him and he went into hiding. Before translating what the applicant says, the interpreter keeps probing about the events, producing three non-renditions in a row. This shows that cultural references, a subject which cannot be dealt with for reasons of space, play a crucial role in this kind of hearings. Both the applicant and the interpreter use the present tense instead of the past tense when reporting past events, a feature we observed in all interviews.

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[15] For a discussion of the interpretation of the principle of credibility in asylum appeals in Italy see Sorgoni 2019.

[16] The theft of crude oil and its illegal transformation in petrol sold to refineries, known as 'oil bunkering', accounts for around 10 percent of Nigeria's daily production and is a highly organized operation.
See Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oil_theft_in_Nigeria and
https://www.hrw.org/reports/2003/nigeria1103/5.htm#:~:text=Yet%20theft%20of%20crude%20oil,is%20a%20highly%20organized%20operation.&text=Governor%20Ibori%20has%20stated%20that,lost%20because%20of%20bunkering%20activities (both visited 28/10/2023).

Example 7
> *A1:* `we have to hide ourself until everything is over`
>
> *I1:* `an explosion?` ***((addressing the applicant))***
>
> *A1:* `a fire`
>
> *I1:* `is it the place you're working?` ***((addressing the applicant))***
>
> *A1:* ***((nods))***
>
> *I1:* `you said we have to hide ourself because police is looking`
>   `for explosion (.) why have to hide?`

With her three self-initiated questions, the interpreter temporarily replaces the officer in the enquiry on what happened, acting as principal (Goffman 1981: 144). Once again, we do not know the reasons for this behaviour: the interpreter might be attempting to better understand what happened to provide a consistent or more complete translation, and this way protect both her face as a competent interpreter and the applicant's face by providing a coherent story (both types of face-saving moves are also reported in Pöllabauer 2007). In any case, she does not let the officer ask for more details, and never informs him about the content of the exchange, nor does she translate it back to him.

Other self-initiated moves by the interpreter can be found in this and other hearings, aimed at clarifying a concept, obtaining more information before translating what the applicant has said (for example, about the languages spoken or dates). A similar behaviour by interpreters was observed in asylum hearings in Austria when interpreters "… take the lead and elicit information they regard as necessary for the outcome of the hearings…" (Pöllabauer 2004: 154). In our dataset, in no instance do the officials step in to enquire what was said during the untranslated exchanges between interpreter and applicant.

Example 8 is drawn from the same conversation as Example 6 (hearing 1, phase 1). Here the officer asks the applicant if he knows where his mother lives. The applicant does not answer, so the interpreter prompts him by repeating the question:

Example 8
> *I1:* `where your mom did live now?`
>
> *A1:* ***((silence))***
>
> *I1:* `where you mom live now?`

In our data, this is not the only case where interpreters seem reluctant to accept silence as an answer, and often do not wait for the officer to repeat or rephrase the question. During our interviews with officers, they repeated several times that they would prefer the interpreter not to ask questions to applicants on their own initiative or prompt an answer by repeating or rephrasing a question if the applicant remains silent. In general, it would be advisable to accept moments of silence during an RSD hearing, as this might help to retrieve memories and sometimes may be necessary to handle emotions. However, officers told us that they rarely have a briefing with the interpreter to explain how they are going to

conduct the interview, and/or to agree about how to deal with silence or reluctance to answer by the applicant. Our own observation confirms that at times interpreter and officer did not seem to share 'common rules' about how interpreter-mediated communication works or should work.

6.5. From kind invitation to request

In the RSD hearings we observed, officers generally showed respect towards the applicants by various means, a feature which was not always observed in interpreters. The two following excerpts illustrate how kind invitations (Keselman *et al.* 2008) to say or do something are turned into blunt requests by the interpreter.

In Example 9 (hearing 8, phase 1), the officer is politely enquiring if the applicant has some papers with him, using the hedge "by any chance" and suggesting some countries where he could have acquired them. The interpreter translates the first question without a hedge and replaces the prompt with an abrupt request to show the papers to the officer.

> Example 9
> *O3:* hai per caso dei documenti?
> *have you by any chance some papers with you ?*
> *I5:* you have any documents?
> *A8:* yes
> *O3:* dalla Nigeria? dall'Italia? dall'Ucraina?
> *from Nigeria? from Italy? from Ukraine?*
> *I5:* make him see

In Example 10 (interview 6, phase 2a) the officer – as always before *starting any* phase of the hearing – thanks the applicant for the information provided and kindly asks to provide the reasons for leaving Nigeria, telling the applicant to proceed slowly so that the free recall phase, which is expected to follow, can be translated sentence by sentence, for the sake of completeness. As we can see, this concern for accuracy is transferred by the interpreter to the applicant. By mentioning three times the officer as principal (Goffman 1981: 144) – "he said"– the interpreter turns a kind invitation to produce a narrative into a rather blunt directive question using a 'Wh-' form, which implicitly conveys a request to refocus on something already mentioned (Keselman *et al.* 2008: 106). The introductory expression of thanks is not rendered at all. After an interlocutory acknowledgement by the applicant, who does not take the turn ("mh mh"), the interpreter produces a request to "explain everything with detail", which was not expressed by the officer in these terms. The applicant still does not resolve to speak ("is it me you waiting for?"). The translation of this turn prompts the officer to produce another polite acknowledgement ("yes please"); and a diversion to give the applicant some relief ("would you like me to close the

window?"), but again the officer's acknowledgement is not translated, and the direct question becomes and indirect one.

Example 10

O4. OK (.) grazie mille (.) ora ti chiedo (.) ecco (.) di
    raccontare il motivo perché hai lasciato la Nigeria nel
    duemila quindici (.) fai pure una frase alla volta (.) sai
    ((rivolto alla richiedente)) (.) così intanto tu traduci
    tutto
    OK (.) thanks a lot (.) now I am going to ask you (.) well (.) to tell the reason for leaving
    Nigeria in two thousand and fifteen (.) you can go sentence by sentence (.) you know (.)
    ((addressed to the applicant)) so in the meantime you translate everything ((addressed to
    the interpreter))

I4. yeah (.) so he said why you left Nigeria in two thousand and
    fifteen?

A6. mh mh

I4. he said please explain everything with detail, eh?

A6. mh mh (.)yes (.) is it me you waiting for?

I4: aspettate me?
    are you waiting for me?

O4. sì prego (.) vuoi che chiuda la finestra?
    yes please (.) would you like me to close the window?

I4. he said do you want him to close the window?

A6. no

As Aronson Fontes (2009: 141) highlights, an applicant in public service settings is disempowered as s/he depends on the interviewer's judgement to obtain the best possible outcome from the interview. When an interpreter is involved, the interviewee is even more disempowered, since interpreters in their renditions make choices about editing, embellishing, emphasizing, downplaying statements or even leave parts out (*ibid.*: 141) In our case the interpreter selects what to leave out, changes the tone of what is said and even redirects to the applicant a request addressed to her by the officer. Although politeness may be different in different cultures, such changes can heavily impact the atmosphere and possibly the outcome of a hearing.

6.6. Mediating cultures

In our dataset interpreters also acted as language mediators and this way facilitated communication between officer and applicant. An instance of this practice is shown in Example 11 below.

The example shows how the interpreter helped the applicant understand a question about belonging to an ethnic group. The concept of ethnic group is understood differently in Nigerian popular culture and refers to opposing factions in a conflict, as the interpreter explained to the researcher after the interview. The applicant therefore was not sure about how to answer, and the interpreter intervened giving examples of what the officer meant by ethnic

groups. After the interpreter's examples, the applicant provided the answer. Although the interpreter took the initiative without letting the officer explain what he wanted to know, her initiative is justified by the need to convey not only words but meanings and to clarify possible cultural differences when interpreting.

Example 11
03.   appartieni a qualche gruppo etnico in particolare?
        do you belong to any ethnic group in particular?
I5.   which ethnic group do you belong to?
A7.   er-
I5.   ethnic group?
A7.   e-ethnic group?
I5.   *((provides examples of ethnic groups))*
A7.   Delta

7. Conclusions

From the analysis of our data some recurrent issues emerge. Interpreters' roles range from language and cultural mediator to co-officer. Whereas the first role, if correctly enacted, helps communication and rapport building, the latter further disempowers the applicant and projects the interpreter as a collaborator of the authorities. In their language mediator role, the interpreters we observed often used the third-person pronoun and indirect or reported speech. The latter were mainly used to convey the officer's turns, suggesting distancing and/or respect for the authority, while at the same time also trying to maintain rapport with the applicants – a conflicting attitude vs the co-officer role. Such conflicting verbal behaviours are a source of role dissonance, and they also make it more difficult for the other participants to place trust in the interpreter (Pöllabauer 2004). Furthermore, it is the effect of interpreting upon the officer's aims and strategies that is most clearly demonstrated.

The officers who conducted the hearings and whom we interviewed are all specially trained in RSD procedures, while the interpreters are not. They are bilinguals who learned interpreting by doing but were not made aware of communication mechanisms and the effects their verbal production may have on the interaction – an aspect which is particularly important in asylum hearings. On the other hand, one of the interpreters we interviewed complained about the lack of teamwork with officers and her feeling of isolation.

Public calls for interpreting provision in asylum settings in Italy should place more emphasis on training and qualification of interpreters. Interpreting in asylum settings is a field of its own: it cannot simply be considered as PSI with no distinction from a medical consultation or a meeting with a social worker. Although it may be less distressing than working in the very middle of a humanitarian emergency or close to/within a conflict area, it still involves a heavy emotional burden and requires great sensitivity, not because of external or other environmental factors but because of the *status* and life experiences of the parties. On the one side, applicants only too often have a background of

abuse, violence, or deprivation; on the other side, institutional representatives have a totally different background, language and culture and are tasked to decide about the fate of the former. For this simple reason, among others, interpreting should be performed by qualified interpreters who have received specialised training not only in terms of language, legal knowledge and terminology, intercultural and communication skills, but also in terms of interactional and discursive mechanisms and awareness of their possible roles and respective boundaries. Following a code of conduct would also be beneficial because "[w]ithin refugee contexts the consequences of unethical interpreting can be extremely harmful for individuals who already have survived situations of betrayal and disloyalty" (Crezee *et al.* 2011: 257). A joint inter-professional training could certainly be beneficial to the fairness of RSD procedures in Italy. Interpreters and officers could gain a better understanding of each other's needs and role boundaries and teamwork could be promoted. It may also be that, in consultation with interpreters, an interviewing format could be devised which takes into account the common effects of interpreting on interviewing techniques and rapport building.

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