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'To translate feelings not words'. Humanitarian interpreting: challenging institutional and professional boundaries in interpreting for refugees

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the findings of a qualitative research project that examined the experiences of humanitarian interpreters in four different European countries: the United Kingdom, Greece, Italy and Spain. The article engages with the question of emotional involvement required from humanitarian interpreters, which leads them to challenge institutional and professional boundaries but also to set clear limits to safeguard their wellbeing. Despite differences in understanding the humanitarian interpreter's role and responsibilities in the four contexts of the study, the findings allow us to argue that humanitarian interpreting should be guided by the principles of trauma informed practice.

Questo articolo esplora i risultati di un progetto di ricerca qualitativo che ha esaminato le esperienze di interpreti umanitari in quattro paesi Europei: Regno Unito, Grecia, Italia e Spagna. L'articolo esamina questioni relative al coinvolgimento emotivo degli interpreti umanitari, che li porta a sfidare barriere istituzionali e professionali ma anche a porre chiari limiti per salvaguardare il proprio benessere. Nonostante differenze nella concettualizzazione del ruolo e delle responsabilità dell'interprete umanitario nei quattro contesti di studio, i risultati della ricerca ci portano a concludere che il ruolo dell'interprete umanitario dovrebbe essere guidato dai principi della *trauma informed practice*.

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Introduction

This article explores timely and applied aspects of cross-cultural communication by analysing the findings of a qualitative research project that examined the experiences of humanitarian interpreters in four different European countries: the United Kingdom, Greece, Italy and Spain. The article engages with the question of emotional involvement required from humanitarian interpreting, which leads interpreters to challenge institutional boundaries but also to set clear limits to safeguard their wellbeing.

Originally, the term 'humanitarian interpreters' was used to refer to interpreters working in conflict zones (Fitchett, 2012), but it was later expanded to also include interpreters working alongside humanitarian agencies which provide relief in contexts of crisis, as well as those working in the complex transnational contexts of asylum processes (Delgado Luchner & Kherbiche, 2018). In this

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article, when talking about ‘humanitarian interpreters’ we refer specifically to interpreters who work with people who are seeking asylum and, in this role, mediate linguistically – but also culturally – between them and the professionals who they interact with (e.g. lawyers, staff from official agencies, service providers, third sector organisations, health professionals) both in institutional and community settings.

The humanitarian interpreter in asylum settings is a professional figure that is present in many countries where people seek sanctuary, but in slightly different permutations in relation to the tasks they are expected to carry out. In Greece, for example, interpreters that work in humanitarian contexts are referred to as ‘community interpreters’, while in Italy interpreting may be part of the tasks performed by ‘mediators’ who are also known as ‘cultural mediators’ or ‘linguistic-cultural mediators’ (Koskinen & Pokorn, 2021). While interpreting is part of the role in both countries, in Italy the task of ‘cultural mediation’ is very flexibly understood, and so linguistic-cultural mediators may be required to do tasks beyond interpreting, to ‘facilitate relations’ or ‘spread interculturalism’ (Koskinen & Pokorn, 2021). The role of the interpreter is alternately played by intercultural mediators and qualified interpreters. However, in some countries, like Italy, it is more common for qualified interpreters to have a key role in legal contexts in the courts, while intercultural mediators, who are not necessary interpreters, are frequently involved in interpreting for social services. Thus, as well as having a crucial role in ensuring communication, many humanitarian interpreters can find themselves called to inhabit an in-between position as intercultural mediators who are, at the same time, outsiders and insiders of two (or more) languages and cultures. They also find themselves in an in-between position in relation to the power accorded to people seeking asylum and to (most of) their interlocutors from official agencies or third-sector organisations (Delgado Luchner & Kherbiche, 2018). Moreover, the role of humanitarian interpreters is not a fixed one, as interpreters adjust their positioning along a spectrum from invisibility to advocacy (Brader de la Iglesia, 2017; Gallai, 2019), that is, from facilitating cross-cultural communication in ways that are as little intrusive as possible, to being someone who actively supports people who are experiencing difficulties in an unfamiliar environment.

In the asylum-seeking process, language ‘is both a key, and a barrier, to refuge’ (McFadyen, 2019, p. 168). While reliable and accurate interpreting is always extremely important, in the case of people seeking asylum it can literally be a matter of life and death, as the difference between being given sanctuary and being refused it – and sent back to a potentially lethal context – is made largely on the back of narratives (Jiménez-Ivars & León-Pinilla, 2018) that rely almost entirely on language. These narratives are attempts to convey in a linear and clear format what are often rather chaotic and tangled experiences, collected at a time of distress and through the linguistic mediation of an interpreter who may not be (fully) familiar with the experiences being reported (Gibb & Good, 2014).

Humanitarian interpreters work in a profession that is regulated (if at all) differently in each European country. In the countries we researched (the UK, Greece, Italy and Spain), for example, there is no official accreditation nor are there formal standards for those entering the profession, while opportunities for specific training vary between countries but also within them. In most countries, even beyond the ones we investigated, the profession is still unregulated and it often happens that anyone speaking two or more languages is called to act as a humanitarian interpreter (Radicioni, 2021). As abundantly noted by the literature, in situations of emergencies and crisis, in particular, untrained people are recruited because of their knowledge of the local language(s), and the language of international relief operations, which often is English (Federici, 2016; Federici & Al-Sharou, 2018; O’Brien, 2016; Rok, 2014).

This article examines the complexity of the role of interpreter in humanitarian contexts and emotional tensions and ethical dilemmas that can lead some of them to challenge institutional and professional boundaries of their role. The article is divided into five sections: the first section looks at the specific demands of humanitarian interpreting in relation to different groups: refugees, including children and young people; victims of gender-based violence; and survivors of trafficking.

The second section examines the ethical issues that interpreters may face and reflects on what requirements may be included in a code of ethics for humanitarian interpreters. In the third section, we highlight the importance of ‘trauma informed practice’ in humanitarian interpreting. The fourth ‘research methodology’ section introduces the qualitative empirical material gathered as part of the project, while the following section (five) reports and discusses some findings in relation to humanitarian interpreters’ understanding of the role. The findings section looks at the key ethical principles of interpreting, such as: confidentiality, accuracy and impartiality. Since participants in the study put a particular emphasis on the ethical principle of impartiality, we discuss this principle in further detail, focusing on interpreter’s empathy and personal engagement with narratives of people from refugee backgrounds. We conclude by summarising the main take away points from the findings and by offering some considerations on the ways in which humanitarian interpreting could be more effectively and purposefully trained to work with people who are likely to be in extremely vulnerable situations.

Interpreting for different demographics

As noted earlier, humanitarian interpreting requires engagement with people who find themselves in very difficult circumstances, such as people facing situations of conflict or environmental disasters, and people who are fleeing war and/or persecution. In this article, we focus on interpreting for refugees,¹ i.e. people who had to leave their homes and who seek protection in a new country. People seeking asylum can find themselves in particularly vulnerable situations, both because of the reasons which compelled them to leave and because of the challenges created by the asylum system itself, which is increasingly largely geared, in many countries, to discourage applications (Isiffou, 2020). It is also important to consider that the refugee population is not homogeneous, and some groups may find the demands of claiming asylum especially challenging, and thus require extra support. Children and young people, victims of gender-based violence, and victims of torture are just some examples of groups that may need additional consideration also in relation to their interpreting needs. Below we give a few points to be considered when interpreting for these different demographics. Of course, these are not neatly distinct categories, nor are they fixed. Some people may be at the intersection of two or more of these (Gangamma & Shipman, 2018) and so the reflections and considerations we make for one group will be important also for other groups, as well as more generally when interpreting in any context. What we wish to convey in this section, is that those providing services to refugees, including interpreting, should consider the likelihood that the people they are working with have faced traumatic experiences, and remain alert to the fact that each person may require a slightly different approach to ensure that they have the best possible chance to be fully understood.

Children and young people

While many adult refugees will be taken aback by the complexities and demands of the asylum process and by the requirements of different official figures and service providers, children and young people are likely to struggle even more to understand what is happening to them, what they are expected to do and say at any particular time, and to grasp the consequences that this may have on their future (Heck, 2005). It is the professionals’ duty to ensure that children and young people are always treated in ways that consider their specific needs, for example by providing appropriate settings and by allowing plenty of time for children to settle and to become acquainted with people and spaces (Heck, 2005). Studies on professionals’ practices with interpreters working with minors, emphasise the need for a creative way of attending to power dynamics in interpreter-mediated communication, and for the need to ensure the building of trust (Salaets & Balogh, 2015, p. 63) to allow children and young people to feel they can safely tell their story and be heard.

Victims of gender-based violence

Gender-based violence or persecution can drive people, and women in particular, to seek asylum, or it may further exacerbate the traumatising experiences of war or of man-made/natural disasters (Phillimore et al., 2018). Victims of gender-based violence are in a particularly vulnerable situation, and adequate care must be taken to create an environment where they feel safe to recount their experiences. The likelihood that victims of gender-based violence are deeply traumatised, ashamed, and that they have lost the ability to trust others needs to be kept at the forefront by all those involved in the asylum process (McFadyen, 2019) including interpreters. It is likely that a woman who has suffered gender-based violence will prefer to speak through a female interpreter (Fassetta et al., 2017), but it is also possible that she may be scared that her story will be revealed to others, regardless of the interpreter's gender. Allowing time for victims of gender-based violence to tell their story and ensuring that they are aware that all they say will remain completely confidential, is extremely important for all asylum seekers, but for the victims of gender-based violence it is crucial, because of the stigma this form of violence can carry (Ogbe et al., 2021). Moreover, interpreters and professionals need to bear in mind that taboo subjects are more likely to be expressed through euphemisms and in indirect ways, as this may cause important information to be missed.

Victims of torture

People who have experienced trauma and torture may be particularly anxious around official-looking professionals and situations, while feelings of shame and guilt can further affect their ability to make clear statements (Wormersley, 2019). Moreover, interpreters – as well as the professionals who work with them – need to be aware of the possible impact that being from the same country (or speaking the same language) as those who tortured them may have on the people they are working with. While an interpreter from the same country as the person seeking asylum may have better knowledge of the situation and contexts, the possibility that this may also generate suspicion and fear of being reported needs to be considered as a factor that can influence what a refugee is prepared to say, and how they say this (Jiménez-Ivars & León-Pinilla, 2018). At the same time, interpreters may be confronted with a depiction of their country of origin that they are struggling to acknowledge and recognise or, if they are from a refugee background themselves, they may find some narratives of persecution retraumatising (Engstrom et al., 2010).

People who have been living in difficult circumstances and have experienced traumatic events may find it difficult to communicate distress, even in their own mother-tongue (Costa, 2010; 2017). Trauma, violence and psychological disorders can affect the capacity to verbalise. A traumatic event can cause 'alexithymia', i.e. having no words to describe and express one's emotions and feelings (Costa & Dewaele, 2019). Therapists, scholars and health professionals – especially those working cross-culturally – have been concerned with developing shared understanding of ways in which traumatic experiences can be communicated through 'idioms of distress' (Nasir et al., 2018; Nichter, 2010). The concept of 'idioms of distress' was introduced to draw attention to the fact that reports of bodily distress can serve a communicative function (Nichter, 2010). However, these idioms are often culturally specific and contextual (Imperiale, 2020) and therefore the role of interpreters is crucial to 'translate' distress as accurately as possible to support the work of practitioners.

Interpreter's code of ethics

A professional code of ethics provides guidelines and standards to follow for the benefit of all parts involved: the client, the interpreter, and the practitioner. Qualified professions as such doctors, solicitors and social workers have an ethical infrastructure through which they receive support and

guidance when ethical dilemmas emerge (Drugan, 2017; Hale, 2014). Codes of Ethics help maintain the integrity of the profession and lessen arbitrariness and personal opinions about what is appropriate/beneficial and what is not, especially when practitioners are confronted with potentially difficult dilemmas. In the professions regulated by a code of ethics, practitioners must abide to the rules in the code.

However, even though interpreters work alongside the professions mentioned above, interpreters and translators are often unregulated professions, and as such, do not have a strong ethical infrastructure to support their work (Drugan, 2017). In most countries, codes of ethics do exist, but these are usually advisory and apply only to those who join official associations that have a stated code of ethics (Hale, 2007). Even within the same country, associations and employing agencies do not have a uniform code of ethics: they can include different principles, which are considered standards to which interpreters should aspire, but do not have a regulatory function (Gibb & Good, 2014; Pym et al., 2012). The responsibility to reflect on ethical issues and to make decisions about ethical dilemmas is therefore placed on the interpreters themselves (Drugan, 2017).

In recent years, scholarly work has been paying increasing attention to ethics in translation studies. For example, *The Routledge Handbook for Translation and Ethics* (Koskinen & Pokorn, 2021) is a comprehensive and timely work which provides insights about long-standing ethical issues, while also identifying emergent ones, including ethics in contexts of emergencies and crisis, where humanitarian interpreting occurs (Tryuk, 2021). In their chapter, Tryuk (2021, p. 398) discusses three main themes: first, the historical trajectory of language brokering and interpreting in humanitarian contexts; second, the main ethical issues within humanitarian interpreting, which were traditionally related to ‘neutrality, identity, loyalty’ and more recently extend to issues related to untrained civilians who act as translators and interpreters; third, emergent debates, such as gender issues in translating and interpreting, interpreting in mass migration and in humanitarian crisis zones, and the demand for effective and specialised training.

Bello (2014) and Fitchett (2012) have argued respectively for a specific code of ethics – or at least for specific guidelines for war translators and interpreters. These could facilitate the work of interpreters in war zones, and shed light on interpreters’ rights and responsibilities, including safety, protection and specific training on issues of neutrality/impartiality, confidentiality, and accuracy. Accuracy, impartiality and confidentiality are the most common principles found in different Codes of Ethics. Sandra Hale (2007) compared sixteen codes of ethics from nine countries (Australia, Austria, Canada, Colombia, Indonesia, Ireland, UK, Spain, and United States). According to her analysis, the ethical principles underpinning codes of ethics can be divided into three broad categories quoted in full below:

Interpreters’ responsibility to the authors of the utterances, which includes accuracy, impartiality, and confidentiality; interpreters’ responsibility to the profession, which includes professional conduct such as dress, punctuality, and solidarity; and interpreters’ responsibility to self as a professional, including the need for professional development, role definition, adequate working conditions and pay rates (Hale, 2007, p. 110)

The tenets in the first category, namely: accuracy, impartiality and confidentiality are the most prominent, but these are not present in all codes of ethics. In the countries compared by Hale (2007) confidentiality was included in 13 over 16 codes: accuracy in 12/16 codes, and impartiality in 11/16 codes. The principle of confidentiality refers to the obligation of not disclosing information that the interpreter has learned during their performance. It seems a straightforward principle, however – when interpreting in difficult contexts – the interpreter may find themselves in a difficult position. For example, they may be told information that a client does not want to disclose with the provider, but which seems crucial for the client’s general wellbeing, thus creating a conundrum for the interpreter.

All the entries examined by Hale (2007) concerning ‘accuracy’ speak about being faithful to the original meaning. The Canadian code of the Association of Visual Language Interpreters of Canada

(AVLIC), for example, explicitly explains that, to render the exact meaning of the source, the translation cannot be a literal, word-for-word rendition:

A faithful interpretation should not be confused with a literal interpretation. The fidelity of an interpretation includes an adaptation to make the form, the tone, and the deeper meaning of the source text felt in the target language and culture. (Hale, 2007, p. 109)

Finally, impartiality is a highly debatable principle. Even in less challenging circumstances, impartiality, neutrality, invisibility may not be achievable, but in humanitarian contexts and war zones, Rok (2014) argues, impartiality is the greatest obstacle to developing guidelines for humanitarian interpreting. Rok (2014) propose the development of a 'legal' definition of neutrality as a concept – that would help interpreters avoid identification with either party of the conflict. The codes of ethics generally state that interpreters' opinions should not interfere with their commitment to render the meaning accurately. However, at times it may be difficult for interpreters to remain impartial, for example when interpreters have to say out loud something that goes against their beliefs.

The emerging field of trauma informed interpreting

Several research studies reveal that interpreters disclose empathetic connections to their clients. For example, in a study by Shakespeare (2012) interpreters explained that, when they interpret, they 'become the speaker'. They must use the first person when interpreting (e.g. 'I was attacked ...') and this inevitably has an impact on the interpreters' feelings and emotions. Moreover, the words and expressions they must use in interpreting, may be ones that the interpreters would normally never use, and this can have emotional repercussions. Other interpreters may have lived through some of the same experiences as their clients and may find the situation re-traumatising. All this may be emotionally demanding and may also result in empathic distress: the refusal to empathise and/or disbelieving the stories told by the clients as a defence mechanism (Shakespeare, 2012).

The need for trauma informed practice in the provision of support services was first discussed in the US by Harris and Fallot (2001) and by Bloom (2013), whose work highlighted the complex and pervasive impact that trauma can have on a person's world view and relationships (Homes & Grandison, 2021). Increasingly adopted in healthcare (Schock et al., 2015) and in social care, trauma informed practice is grounded on a recognition that 'people [may] have had traumatic experiences, and as a result may find it difficult to feel safe within services and to develop trusting relationships with service providers' (Homes & Grandison, 2021, p. 8). While aiming to promote safety and trust and to prevent 're-traumatisation', trauma informed practice is quite distinct from the provision of services that are specific to the *treatment* of trauma through professional therapies and approaches. Rather, trauma informed practice is more akin to the requirements for 'reasonable adjustments' to accommodate disability as part of disability informed service provision (Homes & Grandison, 2021, p. 8), advocating for provision that considers, in the way it is designed and delivered, the *possibility* that service users may be dealing with past or present traumas.

Trauma is particularly prominent among people seeking asylum, and can be experienced in the context of departure, as the reason(s) that compel people to leave; during flight (e.g. loss, separation, abuse); and in the country of arrival (e.g. lack of support; threat of detention; the demands of the asylum process), in any combinations (González Campanella, 2023a). While not all people seeking refuge may experience or present trauma symptoms, trauma informed practice should be at the heart of all service provision, including interpreting (González Campanella, 2023a). Despite the strong likelihood of trauma in people who are seeing asylum, however, interpreters who mediate their communication with essential services are not generally trained to offer culturally responsive, trauma informed language support. Some interpreters do this in an intuitive manner, but lack of

training carries the risk of negative impact on both the interpreters and their clients (González Campanella, 2023b), when the interpreters may have faced traumatic experiences themselves. There is a need to train interpreters to offer trauma informed interpreting as part of a broader commitment to trauma informed practice and as part of care for their own wellbeing (Naimi, 2022), but most humanitarian interpreters in many countries still do not receive sufficient training nor the support they require to do the crucial work they are asked to do.

In the next section, we consider the points discussed above (confidentiality, accuracy, neutrality/impartiality, empathy and trauma informed practice) with relation to the data collected from interpreters in the four European countries that were part of the project. The data reported illustrate the understanding of the role, ethical dilemmas and emotional tensions interpreters encounter in their cross-cultural work with asylum seekers and refugees.

The research methodology

This article is based on qualitative research conducted as an initial part of the research and training project called CVET and accreditation framework to up-skill interpreters to support the social inclusion of refugees (Ref: 2018-1-EL01-KA202-047813). The national data collection was carried out in the four project partner countries (Greece, Italy, Spain and the UK) and consisted of two stages: 1) field research through semi-structured interviews and 2) desk analysis of relevant literature.

The interviews were conducted in one of the partnership languages and/or in English in Spring 2019, in person or online depending on the interviewers'/interviewees' availability. The fieldwork started, in all four countries, with the identification of stakeholder, which represented two target groups: (1) humanitarian interpreters who support refugees and asylum seekers, hired by private and public organisations, and by regional, national and international NGOs; (2) field experts – i.e. people who work with interpreters within NGOs or public organisations (as managers and professionals) that support refugees and asylum seekers; experts who supervise and manage interpreters; training providers; representatives of interpreters' associations.

The composition of the two participant samples was: 30 humanitarian interpreters (9 in Greece, 6 in Italy, 8 in Spain, 7 in the UK) and 18 field experts (8 in Greece, 4 in Italy and 8 in Spain) working in various locations across the partnership countries. We discuss only the interpreters' sample in this article in order to recognise their direct experiences. The interpreters interviewed for the project worked at all stages of the asylum process and across all sectors of public services (i.e. health; mental health; legal services; detention centres) as well as with third-sector organisations. The participants working experience in the sector ranged between three and ten years. Women (14) and men (16) interpreters were fairly represented in all countries' samples; the samples also included both interpreters from refugee and non-refugee backgrounds. Data collected on the interpreters' background in relation to training and the training needs they communicated during their interviews suggest that, in all project countries, interpreters were not required to have a university degree. Despite a degree not being a requirement only 6 out of 30 interpreters in our study did not have a university degree. However, most of the participants held university degrees in fields not related to interpreting and translation.

To identify interviewees in each national context, the partnership teams contacted interpreters' associations, NGOs and public organisations where interpreters work with refugees and asylum seekers, as well as universities and training organisations. The participants were all informed about the project aims and consent was obtained for their collaboration. The interview schedules comprised: (a) interpreters' educational and training background and professional identity; (b) description of interpreters' role and tasks in the humanitarian field and for the support of refugees and asylum seekers; (c) clients' needs and work challenges for interpreters; (d) views on current training needs in relation to knowledge, skills and competences.

Findings

The role of the humanitarian interpreter: questioning and setting professional boundaries

Our interviews show that in social, health and reception services interpreters frequently also take on a role of support and mediation, which overlaps with the cultural mediator's role. For instance, in Spain mediators, educators and social workers, who are also acting as interpreters, all stressed the importance of trust and of the possibility of merging the tasks of interpretation and mediation in one role. Participants, however, noticed the catastrophic consequences of this double role, because fundamental principles such as impartiality in professional interpreting are put aside. Additionally, the understanding also changes between countries: in Spain the humanitarian interpreters' role is conceived as going beyond the translation of linguistic content between the two parts, to include a 'cultural counselling' role that is also a source of discrepancies in understanding the interpreter's role.

Interpreters we interviewed in the UK, on the other hand, noted that they are required *not* to give any form of advice or support. Rather, they are expected to translate everything that is said and disappear as much as possible in the background, which can be very difficult to achieve while working in the humanitarian field. While the role of the interpreter is often seen as one that should place all parties in a position akin to a monolingual situation, where an interpreter would not be needed, this is not easy to achieve in practice. For example, the need to ensure accuracy may lead interpreters to add information that may be seen as going beyond the interpreter's role (Hale, 2014). Knowing how much cultural knowledge the interlocutors share is very difficult to assess as illustrated by the example below from an interview with a humanitarian interpreter who reports about interpreting in a British court:

Knowledge of the country of the clients is helpful. In Syria, I know events, names, places and culture. For example, I was in court and the appellant in the previous court session told the court the name of the place he came from and then he repeated the name in the session I was interpreting but pronounced it differently. The court said that he was lying. So, I said to the judge: "I am sorry to intervene but this is a dialect issue and he is talking about the same place but he pronounces the name of the place in his dialect." And the judge was very helpful; he addressed the appellant again to clarify the situation. I was happy I intervened because it was something that could affect the appellant's life. (Interpreter, UK. English in the original)

In the court case described above, the interpreter took the initiative to clarify language differences that explained the client's responses to the court's questions. Here, clearly the interpreter needed in-depth knowledge of the languages, language varieties and of the country to do an adequate interpreting, even though this went against the stated need for interpreters to 'disappear in the background'.

The ability to capture cross-cultural nuances can serve as a useful interpreter's trait. In the example reported by the UK based interpreter, her Muslim female clients were asked in the routine medical interviews whether they drink alcohol. As a Muslim woman herself, the interpreter describes her clients as becoming defensive and being offended by these routine questioning. She recounts preventing the client from answering these questions, 'And I just say 'no, she does not drink alcohol' and further explains:

I consider myself to be part of two cultures [...] over the years I have managed to bring these into a very harmonised balance [...] but there have been situations in which I found myself forced to neutralise, not to cause insult to anyone in the room. I didn't change the content of the information that has been said, but I had to re-tune it and say it in a different way. (Interpreter, UK. English in the original)

This pre-emptive explanation by the interpreter exemplifies how some humanitarian interpreters challenges the boundaries that are put in place by the organisations they are working for. Rather than disappearing in the background, as expected in the UK context, the interpreter uses her judgment and draws on her 'in-between' position to avoid what to her is an embarrassing situation for the client.

In the project partner countries, ethical codes are defined by the different organisations or interpreters' associations, who are meant to guarantee accuracy, impartiality and confidentiality in all circumstances, including the humanitarian context. However, the situation on the ground appears heterogeneous. Some organisations allow for more personal contact with 'clients' (i.e. people seeking asylum or with refugee status) while others require the interpreter never to engage personally (e.g. in the UK). Some interpreters we interviewed reported that they often interact personally with their clients, which can put some of them into a conflicting situation with institutional understandings and expectations of how they should fulfil their professional role. In Greece, clients are informed that their sensitive information will be transferred by the interpreter to the social worker and the other members of the team; occasionally, however, the interpreter makes the call about whether to reveal or not information, depending on their reading of the context, again pushing back against expectations and ethical codes in order to act in ways the interpreters believe to be more beneficial for the clients.

Vulnerable clients may come to rely on the interpreter even when they are not working. They may not respect an interpreter's work hours and, since many interpreters are keen to help, some may struggle to establish healthy boundaries. While interpreters are formally requested to support communication, people in the asylum system may consider them as referents for any difficulty and information they experience. The extract from an interpreter in Greece illustrates that point:

They [the refugees] treat me as though I am their continuity, totally attached to them, as if I am responsible for every need they have. At the beginning, this was unbearable, and I could not put limitations to their expectations. But slowly I learnt that if I explain [my boundaries] to them, again and again, after some time they understand and they don't feel so frustrated and angry when I can't do more than what my role requires. (Interpreter, Greece. Greek in the original)

While some interpreters push back against code of ethics and professional boundaries to help their clients, others – as the interpreter quoted above – need to enforce boundaries in order to protect their time and wellbeing, something that we discuss more in detail in the next section.

Ethical dilemmas and emotional tensions: benefits and challenges of developing empathetic connections

Interpreters working within humanitarian contexts report that they sometimes take a decision based not on codes of ethics but on their sensitivity and judgment. In these cases, some apply a 'lesser harm' principle, considering whether keeping confidentiality will serve best the client's interests or whether it will make things worse for them, as the following extract from an interpreter in Greece exemplifies:

There was an abused woman, she told me not to tell the social worker. Regarding these kinds of issues, the rule is to tell everything, to inform the social worker about anything we suspect, or we hear about. This is the rule, and of course we tell the clients that we must apply this rule. However, there are cases, depending on the social worker, for example, and his/her sensitivity/approach, when I may decide to not transfer this kind of information to him/her knowing that his/her decisions practically will make things worse for the beneficiary. So, in that case I try to offer sympathy and advice, but I may not transfer information if I believe that it would be worse for the life of the person. This is what I do by experience, it is when I break the rule (Interpreter, Greece. Greek in the original)

The words of this Greek interpreter show the extent to which they tried to walk the fine line between ensuring fairness and respect (as defined by institutional guidelines of the specific agencies they work for) and intervening to protect the 'beneficiary' (i.e. the asylum seeker/refugee) from potential repercussion coming from a lack of sensitivity on the part of the service provider. The interpreter here acknowledges clearly that they are breaking the rules by not transferring information, but they believe that their primary duty is to protect the client from the potential repercussions of transferring information to people who may not appreciate the repercussions of it. They say that they offer sympathy and advice, thus taking on a safeguarding role that goes beyond interpreting and bleeds into that of service provision, as they acquire, over the years, a working knowledge of the system and processes.

In the perspective of humanitarian interpreters, their work involves not only translation between languages, but also the understanding of the emotional context and of individual conditions. Although language is crucial to the process of attaining refuge, it appears that there is still much to be understood about language and its connection with traumatic experiences of those seeking asylum (McFadyen, 2019), something which should be also part of the understanding of the humanitarian interpreters' role and their need for specific competence and training. While the participants did not conceptualise their practice as trauma informed, their experiences and views on the nature of their work the study recorded, show that many humanitarian interpreters are fully aware of and sensitive to the potential of trauma in their clients, and that, while not specifically trained, they build the potential of trauma into their interpreting.

Our participants appreciated that their clients who had experienced trauma, and/or those with lower educational levels, need more support to be provided with an accurate interpretation. An interpreter in Italy, for example, told us that:

I realised that all these [refugee] women have a great confidence in faith, in God, in religion ... often during the interview they say, "God will help me, it will be with me because I am a good person", often in repetitive way, which at conference would be interpreted once ... but in those cases, in my opinion, this is part of the psychological assessment of the person and should be transmitted to the assistant or psychologist working on their case. It is not always easy, because it is an emotional thing, which has nothing to do with the story ... this is the most difficult aspect to manage. (Interpreter, Italy. Italian in the original)

The Italian interpreter here noted how she felt that, during her work with refugee women, it was important to include all expressions related to faith, however repetitive they may be, to convey the distress experienced by the clients. This Italian interpreter, as several others in our study, placed great emphasis on the humanitarian interpreter's urge to 'translate feelings, not words'. Although they demonstrated some awareness of the communicative function of 'idioms of distress' (Nichter, 2010) they highlighted the need for training in this area, as the same participant further explained referring to the asylum process interview:

There are moments, generally at the end of the interview, when a migrant asks "please help me ... I need help". Translating this thing can help to better understand the psychological state of the migrant ... I always perceive it as very invasive ... because I realise that it is never easy to translate feelings and not words [...] for ethical reasons I feel I must do it better, but I do not think I have the skills, that is I do not have the psychological skills to convey that feeling, I can translate words ... (Italian in the original, our translation)

Avoiding personal engagement with the client is one of the guiding principles for many humanitarian interpreters but, as several interpreters in the partner project countries noted, having to interpret repeatedly for the same clients is very common, and usually something to be welcomed as it can enable the building of trust.

However, this trust can come with challenges for the humanitarian interpreter's wellbeing. A common challenge mentioned by participants is maintaining emotional distance. Interpreters working within humanitarian contexts, reported that, especially at the start of their career, they felt morally obliged to be always available and help in different ways. Knowing that they are working with people who are often anxious and alone can make interpreters feel they have moral duty to help. While most also say that they learnt to put strict limits to their availability, saying 'no' to those who need help can be very difficult and can clash with an interpreters' convictions and with their identity as a caring individual. The quote below illustrates an interpreter's learning curve in acquiring emotional distance:

It is very important as an interpreter not to get emotionally involved. My motto is: "I let information get to my brain but not to my heart." It is difficult to control your emotions, but you must. It has happened to me a lot that at the end of an interview I had to go home and cry. It is something that we need to control and, most importantly, avoid that anyone notices. (Interpreter, Spain, Spanish in the original)

Even experienced interpreters may find it challenging to maintain emotional distance. This can come from a desire to help others, and from the responsibilities that interpreters feel towards people who are in challenging situations or may have experienced trauma. Although training and interpreting

courses do not encourage empathic relations, these may be an inevitable result of interactions, when these involve people who are distressed. Regardless of the country in which they are based, several interpreters in the project confirmed that it is acceptable for an interpreter to help an asylum seeker/refugee beyond their interpreting assignment, as the following extracts exemplify:

They could call any time! Whenever they think that they need something, they might call me and ask for it. Now I tell them that if it is not an emergency (of course when it is an emergency I always reply), but if it is not, and it is not my working hours, I will not answer the phone. (Interpreter, Greece. Greek in the original)

Sometimes the clients ask your number, you know. But I say, "No, I cannot give you my number". However, regular clients have got my number, and I've got their number ... so sometimes they cannot get through to the lawyer and they ask, "Could you find that?" because I know the language. "Help us." I don't say no. (Interpreter, UK. English in the original)

Valero-Garcés (2005) notes that, in a context where the interpreter is often literally 'the only one who understands' the client, there is a tendency to establish an emotionally intense relationship between interpreter and client, since they may share not only language and culture, but also country of origin, traditions, ethnic group, and/or certain demographic characteristics such as age or gender. In these cases, the interpreter's help can be of crucial importance, for example, in making an asylum claim, as they are more familiar with the context, and may support them to better convey nuances that would otherwise be lost. One of the UK interpreters interviewed, for example, spoke about a case of family reunion in which the Home Office wanted to make sure that the beneficiary was really married to the person she called her husband.

I interpreted for this lady who came from an African country and felt sorry for her as I saw she did not understand the questions in the tribunal. The court started to ask questions like: "What does your husband do? What is his income? How much money does your husband have?" And this lady was like: "Who am I to ask him about his money, who am I? I would not dare, I would not dream to ask him about his money!" So, for the Home Office it was like: "She is definitely lying, she is not his wife" (Interpreter, UK. English in the original)

Cultural knowledge about how relationships among family members are understood and performed in a specific group of clients can be crucial to avoid or clarify potential misunderstanding to the court, and thus avoid harm. McFadyen (2019), for example, highlights the high level of rejection of female asylum seekers, and shows the silencing of female asylum narratives within the asylum system in the UK. She also suggests the need for greater cultural and linguistic awareness within the system, and the acknowledgement that individuals will react and engage with the system in a multitude of ways, which puts a lot of expectations on the knowledge and competencies of interpreters working in this context.

Conclusion

This article illustrates, contextualises and discusses the experiences of humanitarian interpreters working in four different European countries. Interpreters who work with people seeking asylum or with refugee status need specific training and support, as in many ways their role is not the same as working with other clients who are not in vulnerable situations and/or who are less likely to have experienced trauma. Humanitarian interpreters need to ensure the people with diverse experiences have the best possible chance to be understood, but they also need greater recognition of what their role involves (McFadyen, 2019).

Although language is central to the process of attaining refugee status, it appears that there is still much to be understood about language and interpretation, and their connection with and influences on the traumatic experiences of those seeking asylum (McFadyen, 2019). For example, how the working knowledge of the asylum system and processes can prompt interpreters to resist professional boundaries and take on a safeguarding role.

Despite differences in understanding the humanitarian interpreter's role and responsibilities in the four contexts of the study, the findings allow us to argue that humanitarian interpreting should be guided by the principles of trauma informed practice, which is grounded in the understanding

that trauma can impact the ways in which people present themselves, including through language. Thus, we advocate for provision that considers, in the way it is designed and delivered, the possibility that service users may be dealing with past or present traumas (Homes & Grandison, 2021).

Emotional reactions can also hinder the observance of the professional code of neutrality (Cambridge, 2002). Interpreters are not usually trained nor given the support they require to work with survivors of what can be severe traumatic experiences, and this can have negative impact on all involved (Berthold & Fischman, 2014). Embedding trauma informed practice in the teaching and training of humanitarian interpreters could help to solve this tension and ensure that people in the asylum system receive appropriate support, while interpreters could avoid the risk of becoming too emotionally entangled or of making judgment calls that may go against principles of impartiality and neutrality.

The article also highlights the benefits to practitioners (interpreters and referents in the refugee sector) of engaging in moral case deliberations as a professional development activity (Howes, 2023). Ethical dilemmas may not always be conspicuous. Rather, they may appear as problems in professional situations, for which there is no clear right or wrong solution (Howes, 2023). While the need for effective training to counter poor-quality translation or interpreting, and for the inclusion of ethics as part of training programmes have been discussed for a long time (see for example Baker & Mayer, 2011; Cambridge, 1999; Drugan, 2017), new training models for non-professional translators and interpreters and specifically to the humanitarian context, are only recently being developed (Federici & Al-Sharou, 2018). To make the new training models effective, ethical issues should be put at the forefront (Tryuk, 2021), with a special focus on impartiality and neutrality, and on the strategies for trauma informed interpreting.

Note

1. Although we are aware of the difference, to improve readability we use the term 'refugee' in a generic rather than legal form to include people who are seeking refuge in a new country as well as those who have already been granted refugee status. Unless otherwise specified, therefore, the term will refer also to asylum seekers, i.e., those who have undertaken the process through which legal recognition in a host country is granted.

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