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Community Interpreting at Greek and International Level: A Step Towards Professional Autonomy

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### Η ΚΟΙΝΟΤΙΚΗ ΔΙΕΡΜΗΝΕΙΑ ΣΕ ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΟ ΚΑΙ ΔΙΕΘΝΕΣ ΕΠΙΠΕΔΟ: ΕΝΑ ΒΗΜΑ ΠΡΟΣ ΤΗΝ ΕΠΑΓΓΕΛΜΑΤΙΚΗ ΑΥΤΟΝΟΜΙΑ

Επιστημονική Επιμέλειο:  
Ελευθερία Δογορίτη & Θεόδωρος Βυζάς



### COMMUNITY INTERPRETING AT GREEK AND INTERNATIONAL LEVEL: A STEP TOWARDS PROFESSIONAL AUTONOMY

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## **A context-based approach to community interpreting. Perceptions and expectations about professional practice in the Spanish context.**

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### **Abstract**

*The paper provides an overview of the evolution of the community interpreter's profile in the direction of a more inclusive, participatory role where the effectiveness of the message and success of the communication rely on the basis of cooperation, empathy and mediation skills. On the basis of an empirical study carried out in medical and legal settings, this paper reflects on the perceptions and expectations among both service providers and interpreting practitioners about the interpreter's role, and the competences and the degree of involvement that should be expected as a result. The findings suggest that a gap seems to exist between real-life practices and standards of behaviour on paper, which are so limiting that they oblige the interpreter to 'step out' of the normative role. A correlation also seems to exist between the interpreter's attitudes and the level of professionalization of community interpreting; in this sense, attention will be paid to the impact that current lack of regularisation in countries such Spain has on the interpreter's performance. Finally, the author singles out clients' expectations and the nature of the interpreted encounter as key paradigms in determining the interpreter's involvement, and concludes that it is not an entirely free choice on the part of the interpreter, but also and significantly a reaction to the expectations of the clients about which role is considered appropriate in a given setting.*

**Keywords:** community interpreting, natural interpreting, normative framework, perception, expectations.

### **1. Introduction**

Despite a number of international conventions that uphold the existence of fundamental rights, including non-discrimination on the basis of ethnicity, and establish that interpreter and language assistance services should be provided at no cost (Laster & Taylor, 1994: 74), in many countries, including Spain, the regulations are not precise as to the qualifications of a competent interpreter and how qualification should be assessed. Therefore, as Metin (2015) argues, “the profession is left in the hands of the profession”.

The sensitive situations which community interpreters are frequently involved with in encounters which frequently differ in their quality and empowerment, may present dilemmas related to role-adopting and decision-making. The interpersonal interaction that characterises community interpreting was described by Mason (1999:148) as “the prime determiner of the range of concerns which dialogue interpreters experience in their day-to-day work”.

The topic of the interpreter role has dominated the field of community interpreting, and studies within this particular sphere have traditionally centred on “perceptions and expectations among users of interpreting services and interpreting practitioners” (Jacobsen, 2009:155). Determining the interpreter's role is regarded by Pöchhacker and Schlesinger (2005:162) as “the most widely discussed topic and the most controversial one” in the field.

The explanation for this focus arises from the debate about the visibility of the interpreter, his/her presence at the speech event and the fact that, although the “official role was that of a passive participant” (Lang, 1978:241), community interpreters are frequently active participants. The question underlying is to which extent it is legitimate for an interpreter to interact and mediate.

## 2. Determining the interpreter's role

The complexity of the community interpreter's role has led to opposing views of the interpreters. On one hand, an interpreter can be seen as a *verbatim* reproducer of messages in another language, remaining neutral, invisible, a *non-person* (Goffman, 1981; Berk-Seligson, 1990); and, on the other hand, the interpreter can actively manage the communication as a cultural mediator, rendering services of “advocacy” or “cultural brokering” (Giovannini, 1992) or as an “interpreter/conciliator” who plays a critical role in conflict resolution when intercultural and interracial differences arise (Schneider, 1992). So despite the near-universal consensus on the ethical principles of the profession of community interpreter, i.e. confidentiality, accuracy and impartiality (Bancroft, 2015), there is far less consensus regarding interpreting ethics and standards for interpreter's role and scope of practice, as Jiang (2007) states:

There is neither consensus on the interpreter's role in an actual interpreted-mediated setting nor a consensus on which communicative parameters determine the individual interpreter's role within those two opposite views in a concrete interpreting scenario (Jiang, 2007: 312).

Eraslan (2008) draws attention to the social turn that has taken place in interpreting studies, which prompted rethinking of the role of the interpreter and the influence of the context in the performance. The role played by the interpreter in social settings has an impact on the outcome of the interaction, and the debate about the most advisable role not only has occupied the attention of the scholars for the past years, but also of the interpreters themselves, as Roy (1990: 84) recognises: “interpreters don't have a problem with ethics, they have a problem with the role”. A plural approach to the interpreter's role is necessary, and research on this particular field should include not only users' but also interpreters' self-perceptions of their own performance.

On the other hand, Kaufert et al. (2009: 239) note that the empowerment of the interpreter through a cultural mediation approach “is not without risk”, because of its implications “for ethical practice and the maintenance of professional competence”. Indeed, the more participative the intervention of the interpreter is, the more the boundaries between professionalism and interference become increasingly blurred, and the lack of consensus that still exists about where the boundaries of the interpreter's involvement should lie is especially evident in countries such as Spain, where “the current situation of de-regularisation affecting this activity hinders the development of a specific norm framework for community interpreting and as such its consolidation” (Toledano, 2010:11). Moreover, the lack of fixed parameters and their variance in different settings make it difficult to determine a unique way of acting, as Pöchhacker (2001) states:

Interpreting is not a single invariant phenomenon but a (more or less professionalised) activity which takes different forms in different contexts. Therefore, the concept of quality cannot be pinned down to some linguistic substrate but must be viewed also at the level of its communicative effect and impact on the interaction within particular and institutional constraints (Pöchhacker, 2001: 421).

### 3. Naturalising the interpreter's behaviour

Traditionally, the concept of neutrality has only been taken for granted in the conduit or machine model, where the interpreter restricts his or her activities to interpreting. From this normative perspective, the less the interpreter would get involved in the interaction, the more objective and professional he or she is likely to be.

The new perspectives in interpreting research, however, question this equation for reasons of being aprioristic and prescriptive, not taking into account the complexity of the interpreting task and disregarding the importance of cultural mediation in community interpreting. However, the reality of daily practice shows different, as Bancroft (2015: 14) highlights, and although some countries adopt formal guidelines dictating interpreting practice, on the ground most community interpreters make decisions about their role “nearly by instinct”, depending on their training, market pressures, emotional expectations brought to bear, the influence of their cultural communities and their personal values.

The interpreters' perception also contradicts the normative approach, and interpreters in general perceive themselves as having some degree of visibility:

To some extent (sometimes greater, sometimes lesser), [interpreters] perceive that they play a role in building trust, facilitating mutual respect, communication affect as well as message, explaining cultural gaps, controlling the communication flow, and/or aligning with one of the parties to the interaction in which they participate (Angelelli, 2004: 82).

Llewelyn-Jones & Lee (2014: 9) argue that the role of the interpreter has been defined in such a way that the interpreter cannot act ‘naturally’: “many of the ‘dos and don’ts of the prescriptive/proscriptive codes merely serve to inhibit or de-normalise interactions”, so community interpreters “can only help to normalise dysfunctional interactions by acting *normally* [emphasis in the original]”. The authors claim that standards of practice telling the interpreters to “pretend they are not there” violate conversational norms and cause confusion amongst the participants, who “read the interpreter’s failure to engage not as a sign of formality or professionalism, but as a lack of interest in what they were saying” (p. 27). So by providing the interpreter with greater freedom to decide on communication strategies, i.e., by normalising or *naturalising* their own communicative behaviours, “acting in ways that are similar to other participants, interpreters can be more effective in facilitating successful interactions” (Llewelyn-Jones & Lee, 2014: 31).

Such an approach is consistent with the idea that, in many cases, the traditional models of interpreting fail in the primary principle of face-to-face interaction, that is, to develop trust among all the interlocutors, and that is so critical in interpreter-mediated encounters. In Mason’s opinion (1999: 155), instead of investigating the results of training, “based as it is on sets of normative assumptions about what constitutes appropriate behaviour”, it is important to study the spontaneous behaviour of natural interpreters, “prior to any norms of behaviour inculcated in training”, in order to better understand the mechanisms involved in the process of interpreting. The concept of *natural* interpreting was coined by Harris in 1978 to refer to bilinguals with no training as interpreters, who were –and still are–frequently called upon to act as interpreters. The intention is neither to take for granted that interpreting coexists with bilingualism nor that anyone knowing a foreign language can interpret, but to argue that interpreter’s training and professional practice can be enriched with empathy, mediation skills power management strategies and problem solving abilities, skills that Walichowski’s research (2001), among others, has shown to be a part of natural interpreters behavioural

repertoire and which have been shown to provide a more effective response when dealing with sociocultural issues.

Our approach singles out clients' expectations as a key aspect of determining the role assumed by the interpreter, and concludes that it is not an entirely free choice of the interpreter, but often a reaction to the expectations of the clients in a given setting. These theoretically-posed hypotheses about the influence exerted by the interpreting context and by client's expectations were addressed through an empirical study whose results are summarized below.

#### **4. Constraints on interpreters' behaviour and practices**

##### **4.1 The normative framework**

As Linell (1997: 64) points out, norms on interpreting, understood as what is considered to be neutral or correct interpreting, have an impact on [the interpreters'] conduct. The question, however, is whether and/or to what extent these norms would be valid in all interpreting context and situations.

Ortega & Foulquié (2008) draw attention to the correlation that seems to exist between the interpreter's attitudes and the level of professionalization of community interpreting. Research on the field underscores that in countries like in Spain where, although progress has been made still persists a lack of fixed, standardized protocol of norms about what is considered to be neutral or correct interpreting, interpreters tend to base their behavioural repertoire on intuition and personal experience, instead of pre-established protocols.

In countries such as the United Kingdom, Canada or Australia, where the figure of the community interpreter is highly professionalized and regulated, the passive role of the interpreter and the preference for the first person (and his/her subsequent invisibility) seems to predominate. For its part, in countries without such a fixed protocol to which interpreters must adhere in order to gain accreditation, such as Spain or the United States, intuition, their own judgement and empathy seem to guide the interpreters' work, and the interpreters seem more willing to act as full participants in the interaction.

##### **4.2 Interpreters' perception and clients' expectations in a particular setting**

A study conducted by Angelelli (2004) showed that the perceptions that interpreters have about their role varies, along a visibility/invisibility continuum, according to the setting in which they work. The study revealed, for example, that medical interpreters perceived themselves as more visible than court or conference interpreters and that settings in which interpreters work place constraints on their behaviour and practices.

Another survey carried out by Franz Pöchhacker (2000) on the expectations of interpreters and service providers in Vienna hospitals and family affairs centres regarding the interpreter's role showed that the demands of service providers on the interpreters in medical settings are much higher than "just translating". Interpreters are expected to take over coordinating tasks such as asking parties to clarify when statements are not comprehensible or pointing to misunderstandings. Moreover, they are expected to "adapt their utterances to clients' communicative needs and abridge circumlocutory utterances by clients" (Pöchhacker, 2000: 49-63).

#### 4.3 Interpreters' training background

A study carried out by Ortega & Foulquié (2008) about interpreting in police settings in Spain concluded that interpreters' attitudes to their work are based primarily on their intuition, their own training and personal experience, without resort to pre-established protocols. In the authors' opinion, this is probably motivated by the fact that interlocutors, being more accustomed to ad hoc interpreters rather than to professionals following a fixed, standardized protocol, see the interpreter as an accompanying person or someone with competence in the foreign language and willing to lend a hand, so they themselves often address the interpreter, instead of addressing the other party directly, using formulas such as 'tell him/ her' or 'ask him/her' (Ortega & Foulquié, 2008: 35).

Despite an evolution in the direction of a more "involved" role model, Kotzé (2014: 127) admits that the Code Model which states that the interpreter should remain as invisible and uninvolving as possible in the communicative act "still enjoys great normative support" as the "correct" role to be accepted by interpreters. In fact, it is not by chance that "those of them who stay within the conduit role tend to label themselves 'professional interpreters'" (Bancroft, 2015: 14). The influence of inculcated training on interpreter's attitude and on the dynamics of the interaction can be observed in the use of the first or third person when interpreting, and its subsequent repercussion for the invisibility of the interpreter. The results of an empirical study carried out by Valero-Garcés in 2005 about hospital interpreting practice showed that trained interpreters assumed an impartial role and were more likely to use the first person (the *non-person* approach), whereas untrained interpreters more frequently used the third person – 'tell her', 'ask her', 'she says', etc. (Valero-Garcés, 2008: 173-174), the same deictic reference that any speaker would use in a monolingual conversation to refer to others.

Our research experience supports Hale's idea that interpreters with no specific formal training would be more willing "to base their decisions on intuition and natural inclination rather than on any systematic method" (2004: 14). However, the outcomes of the inquiry out to the nature of the interaction as the most influential factor determining the patterns of behaviour in daily practice, to a much greater extent than the interpreter's training background.

The results also revealed that behavioural convergence exists for interpreters regardless of their training background or lack of it. In this sense, an increasing number of interpreters in general seems to challenge the traditional standards of behaviour that avoid responsibility for the interaction under the guise of a utopic neutrality, in favour of more expanded roles where effectiveness of the message and success of the communication rely on the basis of cooperation, empathy and mediation skills.

### **5. An approach to performance on professional practice. Conclusions of an empirical study about interpreting in legal and medical settings in Spain**

#### 5.1. Contextualization of the survey

This section provides a brief overview of the main findings and conclusions drawn from an empirical study carried out in 2015 about the perception of the interpreter's role in two primary community interpreting settings: health care institutions and courtrooms.

The aim of the inquiry was to provide insight into the common ground shared by trained and natural interpreters and also the differences, in order to establish an overview of daily

practice in Spain. The hypothesis addressed was that attitudes identified as inherent to natural interpreting, which in principle are inconsistent with prescriptive norms of conduct and discouraged by most interpreter trainings, could be also part of trained interpreters' daily performance. This finding would strengthen the idea that, despite formal guidelines dictating interpreting practice, the reality on the ground somehow contradicts the normative approach and shows that the complexity of the interpreting task demands active rather than passive roles in order to lead to more effective communication, with the interpreter acting as an agent who intervenes in re-balancing power differences between participants. Any convergence could also be used to enrich and standardize methodologies in professional training programs.

To test this hypothesis, twenty professional interpreters were interviewed:

- Ten *trained* professional interpreters, i.e. interpreters who had followed specific academic training in interpreting and had at least two years of experience as regular interpreters in legal and medical settings.
- Ten *natural* professional interpreters, i.e. bilingual mediators who had no specific training in community interpreting but have worked regularly as interpreters for public services for at least two years.

The selection criteria were therefore based on specific prior training in interpreting, or lack of it, of professional interpreters in every case, meaning by this an individual who is dedicated to community interpreting in a professional way. For this reason, family, friends or any other *ad hoc* interpreter who sporadically act as 'spontaneous', voluntary interpreters were left out of the object of study.

- Finally, in order to see if the interpreters' performance was in line with service providers' expectations about interpreter-mediated encounters, ten service providers (five lawyers as five medical practitioners) were invited to participate in the study and comment on their views about the interpreter's role in their particular setting.

## 5.2. Summary of outcomes

The empirical study came out with interesting findings; among them, noteworthy are the convergence in the behaviour of trained and natural interpreters, as well as the correlation that seems to exist between services providers' perception about the appropriate role for each context and interpreters' performance in daily practice, regardless of their training background or lack of it. This congruence points to expectations and the nature of the interpreted encounter as the two main paradigms in determining the interpreter's degree of involvement and empowerment in the encounter.

### 5.2.1. Role perception is dependent upon the interpreting setting

The results underscored a notable difference between lawyers' and medical practitioners' perceptions of interpreters' duties. The majority of lawyers (80%) call upon the interpreters to strictly translate the statements, only with possible addition of some explanation about terminology; for their part, most medical practitioners (60%) claimed to encourage interpreters to become more involved and provide the patient with some contextual information and trusted the interpreter's expert power to omit unnecessary parts of the patients speech. This finding is in line with Marrone's questionnaire-based study among end-users, which concluded that the interpreter is "quite permitted –and, indeed, encouraged- to go

beyond mere fidelity and use his/her resources as a professional linguist" (Marrone, 1993: 38).

### 5.2.2. Awareness of services providers' expectations influences both trained and natural interpreter's performance

The responses point to the view that the interpreting role is not an entirely free choice by the interpreter. Awareness of providers' expectations appeared to have an impact on the interpreter's behaviour, regardless of training background. 70% of trained interpreter and 60% of natural interpreters claimed to behave strictly as linguistic clarifier, i.e. the normative role, in courtroom sessions, which is consistent with the expectations of the majority of lawyers (60%).

As regards medical encounters, again, the interpreters' performance seemed to be in line with practitioners' expectations, which in general dismissed passive roles. In this line, a much more active and involved role was described as being the most desirable one by 70% of trained interpreters and 90% of natural interpreters.

### 5.3. Reasoning about context-dependent performance in community interpreting

Various explanations can be put forward for the different attitudes towards the interpreter's role in different contexts. One explanation might be that the more the interpreter becomes an active party in an interaction, the higher his or her degree of responsibility is thought to be. This might explain why most interpreters prefer to avoid unnecessary contact with the parties in legal settings; instead, they stick to the rules established by most of the codes of professional responsibility for interpreters in the Spanish Court system.

Another reason may be the interpreter's perceptions about the dynamics of communication: whilst the exchange that takes place in the courtroom is considered as a question-and-answer session which will become a signed declaration with legal implications, a medical consultation may be conversational, with the focus, especially in the initial stages, on information sharing between the patient and the doctor. This could explain the shift of footing over the course, from a strict linguistic role to a culture-broker or mediator's role, depending on the nature of the questions (specific, direct questions or broader questions).

### 5.4. Behavioural convergence and divergence in trained and natural interpreters performance

The results of the study show that, within each context, a majority of interpreters appears to follow similar patterns of behaviour. Courtroom interpreters, regardless of their training and inculcated norms or lack of it, followed stricter patterns of behaviour and displayed closer adherence to established standards of conduct, which is likely to be influenced by providers' expectations, the very nature of the context (e.g. greater awareness of the legal consequences of their choices) and the fact that the procedure is long established, which ensures homogeneous behaviour. On the other hand, a greater freedom in deciding on communication strategies, based much more on one's own criteria and what the interpreter considers as appropriate according to the nature of the session seems to be a more common behavioural pattern in medical settings, not only for natural interpreters, which was predictable, but also for a substantial portion of trained interpreters. This could also explain why 80% of service providers from our sample did not point out significant disparities in the behaviour of trained and natural interpreters in medical or legal settings.

That said, it is worth noting that natural interpreters seem to play a slightly more participatory role than trained interpreters in both contexts, but more so in medical settings, where only 10% of natural interpreters claimed to adhere to a normative, strict linguistic clarifier role, versus 30% of trained interpreters.

The most obvious difference in performance between trained and natural interpreters concerned discourse markers, and more specifically the use of personal deictics ('I say' *versus* 'he/she says'). Whereas the use of direct first-person speech seems consistent in legal settings –used by 80% of trained interpreters and 70% of natural interpreters in the study-, the difference appears to be much more marked during medical encounters, where 60% of trained interpreters claimed to use the direct speech when interpreting, against only 30% of natural interpreters.

The lack of pre-established protocols is probably behind this divergence, causing that many trained interpreters make their choices under the influence of rules inculcated in training (like the use of 'I' statements when interpreting), whereas natural interpreters, in the absence of explicit behavioural parameters indicating otherwise, would prefer to normalise the interaction by naturalising their own communicative behaviour.

Despite this particular use of discourse deictics inculcated in training, the fact that only 30% of trained interpreters in medical settings chose to play the normative role of strict linguistic clarifier underlines how, regardless of the standards of the profession, interpreters in general consider more expanded roles to be appropriate.

## 5.5. Discussion

Unlike in courtroom settings, where interpreters are bound to a strict code of conduct, the interpreter's performance in medical settings would be perceived to be more natural, less mechanical and therefore less technical. The interpreter is often put in the front line of the interaction, as a visible participant, the basic translating function often being extended, for example, to providing the doctor with extra information which might be useful in understanding the patient's cultural background, encouraging the patient's collaboration and, in general, building trust between doctor and patient. This would explain why, besides linguistic proficiency, the interpreters interviewed enhanced the importance of personal and psychological skills such as empathy and personal engagement -that Llewelyn & Lee (2014: 135) called "emotional intelligence"-, along with good judgements, intuition, cultural understanding and sensibility and non-verbal communication skills.

The results seem to support the idea that the degree of interpreter involvement is inevitably affected and therefore significantly influenced by the nature of the interaction being interpreted and by service provider's expectations about the kind of behaviour considered advisable in a particular setting. In line with this, research reveals that a dichotomy exists between codes of ethics and everyday professional practice, as well as a break with the one-dimensional, unidirectional concept of transfer, which was characterized by strong confidence in a set of rules and the adjustability of such rules to any interpreting situation, like some sort of "recipe for interpreting" (Bahadir, 2011: 20).

Establishing some reference standards for community interpreting is needed in order to provide consistency, improve the quality of interpreter services and contribute to better understanding and more fruitful relationships between interpreters and public services providers. That said, daily practice seems to move from prescriptive rules to a descriptive and

more realistic, context-based approach, where the interpreting performance is linked to an ethical reflection and defined in terms of the nature of the session, and the interpreter is able to switch models according to the circumstances and especially to the expectations of service providers, who, in the absence of a formal, regulatory framework, would assume the role of normalising agents in practice.

### Thoughts on future challenges

Capturing reflections from the interpreters' self-perspective and from those who interact with them in daily practice from a context-based approach will contribute to progress towards the understanding and professionalization of the community interpreter. Likewise, further ethnographic studies which analyse the implications of the micro and macro context on the interpreter's performance should be provided, and descriptive studies should be enriched with the analysis of semiotic and pragmatic constraints such as footing shifts, social interaction, power dynamics and negotiation of meaning and distance.

Like in any other profession, recognition shall be achieved through education, legislation and public relations, and for this, as Toledano (2010: 14) argues, universities can play a very important role as "a norm-setting authority" by providing research, training and informative activities.

Finally, integrating mediation and empathy open new opportunities to reflect on community interpreting and broaden educational horizons in training programs from a more realistic perspective, increasing the basis of the interpreter's power and giving a new meaning to the concepts of invisibility and neutrality in community interpreting.

The greater visibility of the interpreter would help both users and Public Services' providers gain better understanding of the interpreter's role, increase awareness of how much can be gained from the interpreter's language, social and cultural expertise, and consolidate community interpreting as an professional, independent discipline. For this, a flexible approach based on empathy and critical skills, which does not lose sight the negotiable nature of this profession, should be encouraged since the student training, alongside establishing realistic rules from a multi-dimensional perspective based on daily practice.

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