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Public Service Interpreting: Paving the Way to Social Justice Through Professionalization (Special Issue)

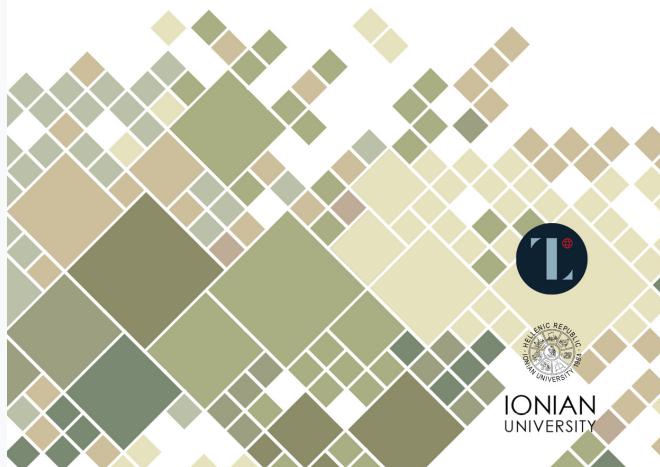


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## SPECIAL ISSUE ON PUBLIC SERVICE INTERPRETING: Paving the Way to Social Justice Through Professionalization

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### Guest Editors' Foreword

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## Guest Editors' Foreword

### Public Service Interpreting: Paving the Way to Social Justice Through Professionalization

Sotirios Livas & Stefanos Vlachopoulos

#### Language barriers, interpreters and access equity

Against the backdrop of increasing global migration flows, language barriers often prevent individuals from accessing essential services or understanding their rights. As people move across borders, linguistic diversity grows, creating challenges for public institutions to communicate effectively with non-native speakers. Moreover, language barriers often overlap with other forms of inequality, such as racial or economic discrimination. Interpreters help address these issues by ensuring that language doesn't become an additional obstacle. For example, in legal settings, a lack of interpreters can lead to unfair outcomes for non-native speakers. By providing reliable interpretation, they uphold fairness and equality (Kletečka-Pulker et al. 2019). But where exactly lies reliability and how can it be attained?

Public Service Interpreter (PSI) registers address this issue by providing a state-run platform to connect individuals with qualified interpreters. This ensures that migrants and others who do not speak the dominant language of their host country can still communicate effectively with healthcare, legal, security or educational systems. By removing the language barriers, interpreter registers promote equal access to information and services, a key aspect of social justice in an increasingly diverse and mobile world.

In other words, Interpreter registers play a crucial role in connecting standardized language practices with social justice. They act as institutional tools that ensure fair access to language services, helping to reduce inequalities in multilingual settings where language barriers can worsen existing disadvantages.

**Technically, PSI** registers provide a structured system for certifying and ranking interpreters based on their skills and qualifications. This encourages ongoing professional development and ensures that public services use competent interpreters. By setting clear standards and requiring training, these registers improve the quality and reliability of communication between service providers and non-native speakers, building trust in public institutions.

Interpreter registers make public services more inclusive by offering interpretation in multiple languages and ensure access equity to everyone, regardless of language. In areas like healthcare, education, and legal services, this inclusivity is critical to preventing misunderstandings and ensuring fair treatment. Moreover, the registers help integrate newcomers and minority communities, fostering social cohesion.

## The challenge: Professionalisation

A pertinent question arises: Why do not all countries implement formal accreditation systems for public service interpreters, akin to those in Norway, Australia, Sweden, and other nations<sup>i</sup>? It is acknowledged that no system is flawless, as challenges are multifaceted and dynamic. Issues such as the underutilization of professional interpreters, complex stakeholder dynamics, language market complexities, and the scarcity of individuals willing to undergo specialized training contribute to these challenges.

What Sela-Sheffy and Shlesinger wrote nearly 15 years ago still holds true: Translators and interpreters are an extreme example of an understudied semi-professional occupation (2011: 3). Indeed, public service interpreting (PSI) continues to be regarded as a semi-profession.

In Skaaden's words, the professionalization of public service interpreting is an ongoing – we would say never ending due to the dynamic nature of the migratory flows - process facing several challenges. While interpreters fulfill performative aspects of professionalism, organizational aspects remain underdeveloped (Skaaden, 2016). Non-state agencies in any form play a crucial role as institutional gatekeepers and centers of occupational communities, potentially impacting professional autonomy (Dong & Napier 2016). Debates persist regarding interpreters' ethical responsibilities, with implications for their professional status and the integrity of interpreted institutional encounters (Skaaden 2018).

Public service interpreting shares characteristics with semi-professions like nursing, including lack of specialized training, increasing feminization, and the caring nature of tasks (Gentile, 2016). Both professions are still on the path to full professionalization. The development of professional trust, exercise of discretion, and construction of organizational professionalism are key factors in advancing the field (Skaaden 2016; Dong & Napier 2016; Skaaden 2018).

The classification of PSI as a semi-profession reflects an occupation that has acquired some characteristics typical of professions but lacks full professional status. PSI has made strides in certain areas, such as establishing standards and training programs, but it still faces challenges in achieving full recognition and regulation akin to established professions like teaching, engineering law or medicine.

## The project behind this volume

Our recent experience in Greece proves the above point. Public service interpreting (PSI) in Greece is plagued by systemic challenges that hinder its professionalization and effectiveness. The absence of a formal accreditation system is a critical issue, leading to inconsistent service quality and weak accountability mechanisms. Language access disparities further strain the system. Ad hoc certification initiatives exist, and the lack of a unified national framework allows unqualified practitioners to operate, particularly in high-stakes settings like asylum procedures.

The problem is increased by complex stakeholder dynamics. The PSI sector in Greece is fragmented, with coordination between government agencies, private contractors, and freelance interpreters lacking or even non - existent. This fragmentation impedes consensus on standards, with competing priorities often sidelining quality assurance.

The development of such a register was - and still is - particularly timely in Greece, given the country's experience with high migration flows and the challenges associated with providing adequate support to asylum seekers.

The Department of Foreign Languages, Translation and Interpreting at the Ionian University has been instrumental in this process, providing scientific and technical assistance to the Greek Ministry of Migration and Asylum (MOMA) in designing the register. The project was funded under the [EEA Grants Greece](#) scheme.

At this point we would like to express our gratitude to Leonardo Doria de Souza, former Senior Advisor at the Norwegian Directorate for Integration and Diversity (IMDi), now UDI, for his invaluable support in bringing us together with the Ministry. His vision for a PSI Register was instrumental in kickstarting this project.

The project included designing an accreditation system for interpreters, developing a code of ethics, creating bilingual language test batteries for basic accreditation purposes and introductory level training modules.

The design of a Public Service Interpreter Register on behalf of MOMA marks a significant milestone in the professionalization of the field in the country and offers a unique opportunity to reflect on the broader implications of professionalizing interpreting services. It highlights the need for a structured approach to PSI, one that integrates legal frameworks, ethical standards, and continuous professional development.

Additionally, it serves as a crucial milestone in managing crises related to the language and communication necessities of, among others, asylum seekers. Given the continuous influx of asylum seekers since 2015 (and the related problems it has created), and the reliance of the Greek Ministry of Migration and Asylum on contracted providers for all relevant interpreting services, including interviews for asylum seekers, an interpreter register could offer a suitable and long-term solution for the Ministry's enhanced interpreting needs, as well as for other public sector services.

As a team we saw this task as a contribution to a broader effort to enhance the provision of interpreting services in public institutions, ensuring that non-native speakers can access essential services equitably. The Public Service interpreter (PSI) plays a critical role in bridging the communication gap between public service providers and users from diverse linguistic backgrounds.

## **This volume**

This volume explores the thematic areas relevant to PSI in Greece and beyond, including professionalization, register creation, testing and assessment, training,

certification, codes of ethics, and technological challenges. By examining these aspects, the volume aims to contribute to the ongoing discussion on how PSI can be professionalized and standardized to ensure social justice and equitable access to public services.

The contributions in this volume will provide readers with experiences and with an image of the current state of public service interpreting from various countries. Notably, many of these experiences and challenges are not unique to individual countries; rather, nations with similar levels of maturity in providing translation and interpreting services for public settings often grapple with similar issues.

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<sup>1</sup>For a comprehensive overview of major accreditation systems see Hlavac, Jim (2015) "Formalizing Community Interpreting Standards: A Cross-National Comparison of Testing Systems, Certification Conventions and Recent ISO Guidelines," *International Journal of Interpreter Education*: Vol. 7: Iss. 2, Article 4.

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