



Interpreting in refugee contexts. A descriptive and qualitative study



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ABSTRACT

Interpreting in refugee contexts (IRC) has long been invisible to Western societies and Interpreting Studies. This paper aims at describing the background and features of IRC, and presents a small-scale qualitative study, whose main objectives are: exploring interpreters' perception regarding competences and role, and exploring refugees' perception regarding the quality of the interpreting service. For this purpose, a focus group and unstructured interviews were conducted in Spain. Data were analysed through comparative analysis and coding procedures. Results show interpreters' dissatisfaction with their working conditions and refugees' experience with interpretation seems to be negative and frustrating. Further research in this area is needed in order to raise awareness of communication and integration difficulties of refugees.

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1. Introduction

“Ohne Dolmetscher geht gar nichts. Null”

(Hassan Bouryouss, 2015).

“Poor interpreters put asylum seekers at risk” (Stanners, 2012). So ran the headline of *The Copenhagen Post* September 11, 2012, highlighting the situation of police interpreting. It was a comment on a report published by the Department of Business Communication at the University of Aarhus about the low level of training required by the Danish national police interpreters (*Rigspolitiet*) who also interpreted for the Immigration Department (*Udlændinge*) and the Refugees Appeal Tribunal. This situation could be extrapolated to most countries to a greater or lesser extent.

Within the migratory movements probably the most unknown group –at least until the massive influx of Syrian refugees to Europe that began in the summer 2015– and perhaps one of the most affected by language barriers is that of refugees (Berry, 1995). Interpreting in refugee contexts has for a long time been invisible not only to Western societies but also to Interpreting Studies. However, to highlight its importance suffice it to say interpreting for refugees often becomes a matter of life and death. It is essential to bear in mind that in order to obtain the status of refugee asylum seekers must base their request in the story of their personal experiences in a personal interview. From this story immigration officials will decide if

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an applicant's request for asylum is accepted or rejected, that is to say that the applicants have the burden of proving that they are eligible for asylum. Therefore, interpreting asylum-seekers' stories effectively is pivotal to the resolution of their application since authorities must decide if their life is truly at risk in the country of origin or not (Fenton, 2004). This paper aims at presenting a small-scale qualitative study focused on the situation in Spain regarding self-perceptions of role and competences of interpreters working in refugee contexts, on the one hand, and refugee service users' perception of interpreting quality on the other hand. The paper also features an overview of the concept of refugee and interpreting in refugee contexts.

2. Refugees' depiction

2.1. Definition

The refugee definition as contained in the Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, also known as the 1951 Refugee Convention, states that a refugee is someone who "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality, and is unable to, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country." An asylum-seeker is someone who has applied for refugee status but whose claim has not yet been definitively evaluated. However, for the sake of brevity, hereinafter the word refugee will be used to refer to both asylum-seekers and statutory refugees.

2.2. A different type of migrant

Forced migration. As can be inferred from the 1951 Convention definition, refugees differ from other immigrant groups in that other groups have usually made a positive choice to migrate and change their country of residence (Tribe and Morrissey, 2003: 198–199). The latter have generally been able to plan the move systematically over time. In contrast, refugees usually have to flee at short notice for fear of their lives and often to unknown destinations. They lack national protection and status. This circumstance "sets them apart from the ordinary alien since refugees find themselves without any country's diplomatic protection" (Read, 1961: 49). They fall into the category of forced migration which is defined by the International Association for the Study of Forced Migration as:

A general term that refers to the movements of refugees and internally displaced people (those displaced by conflicts) as well as people displaced by natural or environmental disasters, chemical or nuclear disasters, famine, or development projects (IASFM, 2016).

According to the European Union quota system refugees do not have the right to choose a particular country within the EU (European Commission, Sept. 22, 2015). Finally, eligibility for refugee status is determined by the relationship of the refugee to events (Weiss, 1954) and not by country.

Traumatic experiences. In a high number of cases, refugees or their family members have suffered some form of violence in their pre-flight experiences. Often they have escaped all sort of brutalities (Patel, 2003: 325). In some cases, their children have even been taken away (The Independent, April 2016) or suffered severe physical or psychological after-effects (Fazel and Stein, 2003; Thomas et al., 2004). Frequently, their flight turned into an ordeal, sometimes a long-lasting one with fatal outcomes regarding family members. As a result, many of them suffer post-traumatic stress disorder or develop a major depression after arrival (Burnett and Peel, 2001a, 2001b; Silove et al., 2000; Tribe and Morrissey (2003); Warfa and Bhui, 2003 cited by Williams, 2005a, 2005b: 38). Williams, however, (*ibid*: 38) stresses the danger that refugees and mental illness be conflated, "as if migration, especially forced migration, necessarily results in mental health difficulties".

Mistrust. It comes as no surprise that, after all their prior torments, refugees may be reluctant to trust official bodies and agents with whom they come into contact, especially those in uniform (Daniel and Knudsen, 1995; Summerfield, 2002 cited in Williams, 2005a, 2005b:38). An interview may reproduce past experiences of maltreatment or neglect by persons in authority (Phillips, 2013). They may show a "survival oriented mistrust" (Muecke, 1992). This might even affect interpreters if they are suspected to be fellow country persons from a different political or ethnical side. At the same time, refugees might not be trusted or treated sympathetically by statutory agencies based on a culture of disbelief and denial – the so-called "bogus" asylum-seekers (Souter, 2011).

Feelings of alienation and disempowerment. Furthermore, they might also suffer a cultural shock as they find themselves incorporated into an alien bureaucratic system (Williams, 2005a, 2005b:42) that can become very complex during the asylum-seeking process. Quite often, they are either unaware or misinformed about their legal rights and, typically, cannot afford legal support. Apart from having to grapple with the aforementioned traumas and hardships they had to go through, displaced people must also cope with the stress of building a life in a new country with little or no support (ALSINTL, 2016) and they have to do it from a position of disempowerment marked by many absences (Patel, 2003). They are unfamiliar with the different organizations and procedures, local geography, and culturally defined behaviours (Williams, 2005a, 2005b). They may not have a social network to rely on, suffer discrimination on ethnic or religious grounds, experience a lack of security, job, money, and even decent housing (MacFarlane et al., 2009). More often than not refugees live in constant fear of being repatriated or ending up destitute and homeless (expelled from refugee shelters).

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