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Asylum hearings in Italy: Who mediates between cultures?¹

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Abstract

According to several legal scholars and practitioners, the most crucial factor for refugee status determination (RSD) is whether or not asylum seekers can provide credible evidence of a “well-founded fear” of persecution. However, this adjudication process is extremely complex as psychological, linguistic, and general cultural factors have a substantial impact on credibility. Through examining interpreter-mediated asylum hearings in Italy, this article brings to the fore the interconnections between asylum interpreting practices and (inter)cultural factors. More specifically, emphasis is placed on the roles of communication and culture to elucidate how interpreting enables and restrains asylum seekers in their efforts to establish themselves as deserving of protection. We argue that culturally-bound norms negatively and unevenly influence the outcomes of some asylum cases and support this claim with evidence from interpreter-mediated hearings with asylum seekers and immigration officers in central Italy. In order to analyse this data, we adopt an interaction- and discourse-centred approach. Training for interpreters working in this environment and improving the quality of asylum interpretation services will ultimately lead to fairer refugee status determination procedures and better professional ethics for.

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Keywords: asylum hearings, interpreting, intercultural communicative competence, power asymmetry, intercultural training

1. Introduction

Communication between legal professionals and lay people can be challenging. When members of vulnerable groups such as asylum seekers and refugees are involved, these difficulties are exacerbated. Not being familiar with the discourse practices of the dominant culture or not speaking the majority language fluently, asylum seekers and refugees find themselves at a disadvantage when communicating with the authorities.

Over the past forty years, works related to forensic linguistics by various scholars (including Gibbons 1990; 2003; Roy 1990; Wadensjö 1998; Inghilleri 2003; and Heydon 2005) have investigated the issue of language before the law, focusing on complex legal language, but also on multilingual practices. Trained or untrained interpreters provide assistance to non-dominant language speakers in a variety of legal settings, from the courtroom to police and asylum hearings. In such hearings, the interpreter shares the narrative burden placed on the asylum seeker. In recounting their narratives out loud time and again, the asylum seeker's stakes are high, and the interpreter plays a key role in balancing or exacerbating the disadvantage of communicating to legal institutions in a foreign language.

Despite the increasing multilingualism faced by Western legal systems, not much progress has been made in terms of interacting with the multilingual community in public settings like courtrooms (Angermeyer 2014) and many jurisdictions are essentially monolingual and monocultural (Inghilleri 2003). Monolingual and monocultural norms are ingrained in power imbalances, which are particularly noticeable in asylum and refugee settings, where immigration officers' dominant ideologies impact claim assessments (Blommaert 2001).

Against this backdrop of power asymmetries, our article looks into the topic of interpreters' choices relating to intercultural communication, which may or may not rebalance power relations in a given context. In particular, the study

examines the impact of the dominant monolingual and monocultural ideologies on interpreter-mediated asylum hearings. The key question is: what are the causes behind—and solutions to—intercultural communicative issues in asylum interpreting practice?

In order to answer this question, we first discuss some of the main issues concerning the complex notion of intercultural communication in interpreting studies (Section 2), with a focus on legal and asylum settings (Section 3). Section 4 provides an overview of the normative aspects of the right to asylum in Italy, whilst in Section 5 we contextualise our data set and describe our discourse-analytical approach and Goffman's (1981) concept of *participatory framework*. Lastly, Section 6 focuses on data analysis and the discussion of intercultural challenges based on examples from our and other scholars' datasets. Conclusions (Section 7) underscore the role of interpreters as co-constructors of asylum narratives, and how their understanding of their intercultural role impacts on the interviews.

2. Intercultural communication in interpreting contexts

Interpreters fulfil the crucial role of facilitating communication and cultural understanding across various professional domains (Kondo et al. 1997). Specifically, community interpreters aid in the functioning of multilingual societies by supporting immigrant communities in legal, medical, and law-enforcement settings (Commission of the European Communities 2005, III.6). However, interpreters often encounter challenges in asserting their role as communicators due to power dynamics inherent in institutional contexts. In recent decades, translation and interpreting studies have increasingly examined the interplay between language, context, and power dynamics (Inghilleri 2003; Bassnett 2007), focusing on individual agency and its dialogue with social structures. While traditional cultural macro-level analyses risk overlooking individual agency and its drivers and constraints, cultural approaches in translation and interpreting studies have stressed how culture interacts with individual experiences, shaping perceptions and interpretations (Spencer-Oatey 2000; Katan 2009). From this perspective culture is "a fuzzy set of attitudes, beliefs, behavioural norms, and

basic assumptions and values that are shared by a group of people, and that influence each member's behaviour and his/her interpretations of the 'meaning' of other people's behaviour" (Spencer-Oatey 2000, 4).

The *performative* aspects of culture encompass the ways in which culture is enacted and expressed through behaviour, language, rituals, symbols, and social interactions. These aspects involve the active performance and embodiment of cultural norms, values, and identities within specific contexts (e.g., Simon 1996; 1997). Examples include gestures, rituals, ceremonies, language use, dress codes, and other symbolic practices that communicate cultural meanings and identities. Language is employed as a primary medium while performing culture, making it the most crucial element in both intercultural communication and interpreting (House 2020). Participants in an interpreter-mediated encounter come with different cultural backgrounds, along with diverging life experiences and positionalities. The impact of such differences is especially noticeable in dialogue interpreting, often involving migrant, multilingual/multicultural communities.

Scholars have extensively explored the role of interpreter *positionality* in shaping the construction of the performative aspects of culture, considering factors such as their linguistic proficiency, cultural background, socioeconomic status, and personal biases (Baker 2006b; Salama-Carr 2007; Snellman 2016; Ruiz Rosendo 2021; Gómez-Amich 2023). Such factors influence not only their linguistic choices, but also their interpretations of cultural nuances, gestures, and implicit meanings embedded within communication. For instance, an interpreter's own cultural beliefs and biases may (inadvertently) influence their rendering of certain cultural expressions or idiomatic phrases, potentially leading to misunderstandings or misinterpretations. In turn, how culture is performed in interpreted encounters plays a crucial role in shaping intercultural power dynamics. Interpreters must strike a delicate balance between *fidelity* to the source message and *sensitivity* to the performative aspects of culture, adapting to align with the cultural norms and expectations of both interlocutors and power dynamics (Snellman 2016).

The performative element of language and culture in interpreting can be analysed with reference to specific *discursive contexts* (Baker 2006a), which are

defined as a set of cultural norms, practices, and conditions that influence how people talk (see Foucault 1981). According to Lindstrom (1992, 102), context can be seen as a “field of power relations,” in which the rules and conditions in place impose restrictions on what can be said and how it can be said. Even though the setting in which people interact creates power disparities between them, it is still crucial to recognise the potential for individual micro-power. People in less powerful positions—such as, at times, interpreters—may say or do things that are not expected of them, challenging the context (Pöllabauer 2004; 2005; 2007). Such challenges result in a form of *recontextualisation*, which potentially rebalances the field of power relations.

Recognising the interplay of language, context, and power in interpretation, intercultural communication can be understood as broad behavioural patterns followed by individuals within contextual power systems, with language serving as a pivotal medium. Transitioning from intercultural communication in interpreting, we will turn to intercultural issues in legal contexts, particularly examining interpreter-mediated asylum hearings. We will specifically focus on the impact of monolingual and monocultural ideologies on representations and credibility assessments of asylum seekers.

3. Approaching the legal process from an intercultural perspective

Legal systems are cultural products—just like religion, ideology, or art (Geertz 1983). They are “structures of meaning in terms of which individuals and groups of individuals live out their lives, ... symbols through whose agency such structures are formed, communicated, imposed, shared, altered, reproduced” (Geertz 1983, 182).

Legal contexts—such as asylum hearings or police interviews—typically involve participants from diverse cultural backgrounds who come to the interactions imbued with assumptions about norms of communication, grounded in their individual personal, professional, and other socio-cultural affiliations. Interpreters in these contexts may affect the dynamics of such interactions and are simultaneously affected by the norms and expectations

about who they are and what they are called upon to do (see Sections 2 and 3.3).

3.1 Interactional constraints in legal settings

All legal interpreting settings share certain “contextual constraints” (Jacobsen 2009, 158), such as the ad hoc, institutionalised, and triadic nature of the speech event, in a setting involving the interpreter and two or more primary participants—that is, a member of the legal authorities with a certain amount of power and an interviewee (the non-dominant language speaker) with a small amount of power or no power at all (Englund Dimitrova 1997; Roy 2000). Naturally, these and other contextual constraints have an impact on the way meanings are negotiated within the interaction (Wadensjö 1998; Jacobsen 2002).

One of the constraints is the rule-oriented stance in legal settings, which most closely matches the beliefs, values, and norms of legal professionals. This legal perspective in interactions between professionals and lay people is discussed by Mertz (2007), who draws a picture of two (or more) distinct discourses in contact—the *real-world* discourse of experiences, social relationships, and personal narratives, and the *legal* discourse of abstract rules, categories, and analysis. Legal accounts focus exclusively on those “facts” which are relevant to legal rules and omit much of the social background which would normally form part of a lay narrative. Mertz (2007, 132) refers to this process of selection and prioritisation as “cultural dominance” and “cultural invisibility,” arguing that “important aspects of social context and identity have become invisible [while] other aspects of dominant culture and assumptions become highly visible.”

Much attention has also been paid to the very agent at the centre of interviews in legal settings—institutional setups where power asymmetry is the norm—namely, the interviewer. According to Labov and Fanshel (1977, 30), an interview is “a speech event in which the person, A, extracts information from another person, B, which was contained in B’s biography.”

Interviews in legal contexts are of such a nature that many turns on the part of the questioner can be said to function as a question, regardless of their syntactic

form (Newbury & Johnson 2006). It has been argued that there are two main functions of questions: “a genuine process of elicitation of information . . . [and] to obtain confirmation of a particular version of events that the questioner has in mind” (Gibbons 2003, 95).

Different syntactic forms exert different degrees of constraint on the possible responses, and questioners in these contexts often make strategic use of their options. In legal settings, power differentials are compounded by turns being pre-allocated, which implies that a respondent will usually be powerless to refute any propositions contained within questions, or to elaborate when question form calls for a minimal response. According to Drew and Heritage (1993, 49), the question-and-answer sequence gives members of institutions “a measure of control over the introduction of topics and, hence, of the ‘agenda’ for the occasion.”

3.2 Asylum hearings and differences in cultural norms

In asylum hearings power disparities are ever more evident, and studies in this field often look into intercultural communication problems related to super-diversity (Vertovec 2007) and multilingualism. In their attempt to determine an applicant’s credibility, officers may ask applicants to produce physical evidence of bodily harm, describe the graphic details of sexual encounters, and account for any and all delays in their decisions to flee their homes. Against this backdrop, interpreting in asylum hearings also involves mitigating the potential for communication breakdown in a setting marked by trauma and cultural differences.

A number of discrepancies are examined in Inghilleri’s (2005, 70) study, which suggests that, given the present constitution of the public service interpreting profession as a “zone of uncertainty”—a Bordieuan term used to refer to weak positions located in the gaps between fields within social spaces—the status of interpreters’ knowledge within interpreted events remains vulnerable to exercises of power. Under these conditions, the “interpreting habitus” (Inghilleri 2005) remains geared towards the maintenance of control of the social and

interactive space by the dominant legal and political institutions involved in the asylum process.

Differences in cultural norms may have an effect on the outcome of a case if applicants and officers are unaware of negotiating these differences. In a study on the Swiss asylum process, Kälin (1986) explores five obstacles that can distort communication during asylum hearings and endanger an application process: influence of interpreters, manner of expression, culturally-bound concepts, differences in the perception of time and space, and cultural differences in expectations surrounding the ideas of truth and lies. In his account, especially in cases without extensive written evidence, in-person communication between the asylum seeker and the asylum officer or immigration judge is said to be fundamental.

A factor that may contribute to communication breakdowns is the use of a lingua franca, which has become increasingly common. Variation in pronunciation—for non-native speakers but also speakers of less prestigious varieties of the lingua franca—may lead to misunderstanding (e.g., Maryns 2006; Jacquemet 2011). Maryns (2006) documents examples of difficulty associated with the use of Nigerian English in asylum hearings, whilst Du (2018) provides similar instances in Chinese courts, where comprehension between interlocutors becomes challenging when they speak different varieties of English.

Another aspect of possible intercultural miscommunication relates to different story-telling styles across cultures. When assessing credibility, consistency in narratives is the key standard in evaluations (Spijkerboer 2005). While a coherent story of reasons behind seeking protection is expected to motivate the request for protection, many asylum seekers are not familiar with the discourse requirements and may regard their individual discourse practices as appropriate (Pöllabauer 2004). Complex stories of journeys are often structurally disjointed, leaving decision-makers with insufficient amounts of information to determine credibility. In particular, many African cultures are renowned for their oral tradition of storytelling, which functions not only to transmit knowledge and information across generations, but also to teach morals, norms, and values (Alidou 2002). Descriptive communication patterns are particularly problematic

when it comes to *yes-no* questions (Cho 2021, 32). Whereas authorities may expect a single answer, applicants may provide contexts for specific events, rather than answering “yes” or “no.”

While officers are authorised to determine the truthfulness of narratives by exercising their cultural knowledge and common sense, assessing claims based on the applicants’ macro background risks uniform approaches to understanding cultures which are highly individualistic (Smith-Khan 2017). Furthermore, there is a risk that officers draw upon their limited understandings of a group and disregard behaviours which do not fit their own cultural assumptions (Shuman & Bohmer 2014).

Another area that renders communication in this context challenging is the lack of shared knowledge and officers’ cultural awareness of terms of address and kinship (Good 2007). In the asylum-seeking procedure, the credibility of asylum seekers is often evaluated on the basis of the denotational information (personal and place names) they provide to asylum officers, who then apply their own referential knowledge to assess its accuracy. Yet, problems may arise because of “discrepant semiotics of the referential world” (Jacquemet 2015, 73). In the Italian asylum procedure, as well as the hearings by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Jacquemet (2015) notices that communication breakdowns occur when officials demand absolute accuracy from asylum seekers of personal and place names. In particular, Jacquemet shows that in the authorities’ search for denotational accuracy, proper names become evidence of the lack of shared knowledge, characterizing these superdiverse institutional interactions. This leads to “an inferential avalanche of serious consequences: suspicion based on lack of shared knowledge leads to misunderstandings, and this in turn leads to a loss of credibility for the asylum-seeker” (2015, 80).

A specific miscommunication issue may stem from the broad cultural differences in terms of the notion of family. Whereas a family in the Western world is mostly associated with a unit comprised of parents and children, in some parts of Africa, a family is much wider in terms of scope. This may include not only children and parents, but also grandparents, uncles, and brothers and sisters who may have their own children and relatives (Mbiti 1990). Polygamous

marriage, which is practised in parts of Africa, may also contribute to the extended notion of a family.

Lastly, a gap between authorities' assumptions and individual practices is clear when it comes to assessing emotions when applicants provide accounts of their journeys, many of which are traumatic. Officers may expect the story to be accompanied by an appropriate amount of emotion (Spijkerboer 2005). As applicants are expected to show an "appropriate" level of emotion at "appropriate" moments, behaviours that do not fit the dominant cultural assumptions are likely to be seen with suspicion. Showing too much emotion can have a negative impact, because the officer may see the applicant as dramatic or hysterical, whilst too little emotion is not deemed credible either, although displaying little emotion when retelling traumatic events is not uncommon among refugees from particular geographical locations (Shuman & Bohmer 2014).

3.3 *Conflicting roles and expectations of interpreters in asylum hearings*

There appears to be disagreement in the scholarly literature on interpreters' role expectations and their status as intercultural communicators. Interpreters have been assigned a variety of roles, including those of *intermediaries*, *mediators*, *gate-keepers*, and "intercultural agents" (Barsky 1994).

Leanza (2005) identified four possible roles of interpreters with respect to culture. Though formulated for medical settings, this categorisation can also be fruitfully applied to legal contexts. When playing the role of system agent, interpreters transmit the dominant discourse, values, and norms to the patient by mitigating cultural differences and fostering assimilation rather than integration. The role of *community agent* implies the exact opposite, with the values and norms of the minority (patient or asylum seeker) presented as being as valid as the dominant values and norms, thereby recognising cultural differences. In the role of *integration agent*, interpreters help people from a cultural minority to understand and negotiate meanings and to adopt behaviours that acknowledge the coexistence of two different cultures. Finally, as a *linguistic agent*, interpreters attempt to maintain a position of impartiality

(as far as that is possible) by operating solely on the language and not on the object of the interaction.

In a more recent study, Leanza et al. (2015) identified very similar roles but made a distinction between the role of translator, understood as the practice of word-for-word interpreting (recognised as impossible), and that of interpreter, where “subjectivity was necessary to understand and convey meaning” (2015, 363) and understanding of the psychological concepts and cultural background of patients was a requirement (2015, 363).

Interpreter’s roles, though, are not only determined by their decisions about how to position themselves with regard to cultural differences. There can be conflicting expectations or demands by the other participants in an interpreter-mediated interaction. Pöllabauer (2004; 2005; 2007) extensively analysed asylum interpreters’ role performance, their positioning in the primary parties’ asymmetrical power relation, and their adherence to professional norms. She found “highly discrepant behaviour which seems to be determined mainly by the officers’ expectations” (Pöllabauer 2004, 174–175) and observes that the interpreters, far from being “invisible” and neutral, intervene in a number of ways. The clash of expectations is widely confirmed by other researchers.

Gibb and Good (2014) discuss expectations of literary or *verbatim* interpreting as requested by the OFPRA (French Office for the Protection of Refugees and Stateless Persons) in France and the UK Border Agency, both dealing with refugee status determination (RSD) procedures. Such expectations contradict research-based evidence showing that *verbatim* translation may result in a nonsensical or incorrect meaning (Wadensjö 1998). Cultural differences, for instance in “dates in non-Western calendars, or kin terms when kinship is structured very differently, that are inherently impossible to translate exactly or *verbatim*” (Gibb & Good 2014, 395) further compound the impossibility of meeting the expectation for literal interpreting. Conversely, interpreters may feel they have to help adjudicating authorities and make decisions which clash with their role, for instance giving their opinion on the credibility of the information provided by the appellants during RSD appeals. Such self-imposed expectations were reported by Gill et al. (2016), who surveyed 240 hearings in the UK asylum appeal system and found that in 6.7% of cases the interpreters offered their opinion to the judge.

In Italy an inherent ambiguity arises from the dual role expected of intercultural mediators: to actively facilitate communication while maintaining neutrality in interpreting settings. The definition provided by the Italian Council for Labour and Economic Affairs (CNEL) in 2009 states that intercultural mediators are active agents but should never replace the two parties in the interaction (see Section 4). While playing the role of an active agent/advocate, the intercultural mediator is expected to respect at the same time the Code of Conduct for Asylum Hearings (Centro Informazione e Educazione Allo Sviluppo Onlus (CIES) 2024), which states that individuals who interpret in asylum hearings should not side with one of the parties involved in the proceedings. How can a message be transferred into another language without adding or omitting anything while conveying cultural aspects for which the target language has no specific terms and adjusting the language to the interlocutors, as required by the same code of conduct? The complexities highlighted by scholars such as Merlini (2009), Katan (2015), and Taviano (2020) underscore the inherent tension between the roles of advocate and neutral interpreter. This tension suggests the need for clear guidelines and ongoing training to help interpreters navigate these challenges effectively while upholding professional standards and ethical principles.

Faithfulness is another conflict-ridden issue. Interpreters in asylum hearings may find themselves facing the dilemma of respecting the low register and grammar mistakes of an asylum seeker and being judged as a bad interpreter or raising the register to save face as good interpreters (Gibb & Good 2014).² In hearings where applicants had to disclose sexual abuse, Baillot, Cowan, and Munro found that interpreters mitigated expressions of sexual violence, using euphemisms or modifying them to “transform them into the ‘right English’ to the benefit of listeners” (2012, 285).

Having highlighted the complexity and dilemmas interpreters often face in asylum hearings, we will now briefly explore the provision of asylum interpreting in Italy and some of its main features.

² See also Pöllabauer (2007) for face-saving moves by interpreters in asylum settings.

4. Asylum interpreting in Italy

Asylum interpreting in Italy is mainly carried out by intercultural mediators (also called language mediators or language and cultural mediators). This professional profile was first defined by CNEL in 2000, long after a significant influx of migrants to Italy, turning it from a country of origin to a prominent destination for migrants, notably from Africa. In 2009, the job description and role definition of intercultural mediators were reviewed and are now described as follows:

The intercultural mediator is an active agent in the process of social integration and works to facilitate communication, dialogue, and mutual understanding between people with different cultures, languages, and religions. They are professionals who act in high-density immigration contexts, facilitating relations between migrant citizens and institutions, public services, and private facilities, *without replacing* either one or the other. (CNEL 2009, 4, translation by the authors)

The role boundaries are explicitly set in the text: intercultural mediators *facilitate* communication and integration but are not supposed to *replace* the primary parties involved in the process, that is, the migrant and the representative of the institution, organisation, or service provider of the host country.

The same document (CNEL 2009, 3) lists the requirements to become an intercultural mediator:

The *basic requirements* to perform the task of intercultural mediator are relational/communication skills and linguistic/cultural interpreting skills. These skills can mainly be found in people who, due to personal or family experiences of migration, are familiar with the language and culture of the target migrant population. (Authors' translation)

The requirements of communication and interpreting skills together with the knowledge of the language and culture of the migrant population are clearly stated, while a migratory background is preferred but not mandatory.

In actual fact, intercultural mediators who act as interpreters in asylum settings in Italy are mainly migrants or refugees who have different levels of proficiency in Italian. When they come from the same country as the applicant but have been living in Italy for some years, they are usually more educated, but less exposed to their native language (which becomes weaker as a result). Those who have only recently arrived in Italy are very proficient in their mother tongue but have a poor knowledge of Italian.³ Mack (2005, 9–10) identified two types of profiles for asylum interpreters in the Italian context: the large majority are intercultural mediators, often untrained in interpreting, who are frequently (children of) migrants themselves and have a similar background to the applicants; and a minority are trained interpreters who work with the main vehicular languages—such as English as lingua franca and French—and mainly have an Italian background with no significant links to the applicants' native countries. One of the reasons is that the Italian higher education system (both academic and vocational), which offers training in intercultural mediation, does not cover the languages of migrant populations, nor are there university-level courses in those languages. This precludes the possibility of receiving training to develop the relevant linguistic and cultural background along with mediation skills. The issue of (insufficient) training in this area has been raised in several studies focusing on different settings (Amato & Garwood 2011; Sorgoni 2013; Rudvin & Pesare 2015; Veglio 2017).

Another significant concern is the employment arrangement of intercultural mediators who work as free-lance interpreters in asylum settings, as well as other public service settings in Italy. They are mainly engaged by cooperatives that secure contracts through competitive bidding, where the selection criteria often prioritise cost, resulting in minimal remuneration for the interpreters. As a consequence, intercultural mediation and interpreting frequently serve as temporary employment for refugees or migrants, who often seek better-paying opportunities as soon as possible. In their study about intercultural mediation

³ A similar situation is described in Melhem, Collart, and Elman's (2022) work on interpreters working for the International Criminal Court.

at the ports of arrival and reception centres in Sicily, Filmer and Federici found that intercultural mediators “are among the first responders to the arrival of vessels to Italy” and “these figures, often professionals, at times members of NGOs, do not have to have a recognized qualification” (2018, 238). The lack of formal accreditation is primarily due to the absence of an accreditation system for interpreting or language mediation in any setting, including asylum, and the absence of specific requirements pertaining to language proficiency, legal terminology knowledge, or interpreting techniques. The same intercultural mediators who work for the police or the national healthcare service are recruited as interpreters in asylum hearings, thus creating confusion between two professional profiles with different remits.

Besides all the above-mentioned challenges and complexities, interpreters in asylum hearings are also called upon to give voice to extremely vulnerable persons, as we will see in the next section.

4.1 Vulnerability of asylum seekers and their language/cultural mediation needs

Asylum seekers and refugees who arrive in Italy have “vulnerability factors . . . in addition to those typical of other immigrants” (Catarci 2016, 27). They are often survivors of traumatic experiences such as persecution, war, or conflict, a hard and dangerous journey, torture, or sexual abuse, which have an impact on their mental and physical health. These survivors therefore need special support which they cannot obtain without language and cultural mediation. Among them there are unaccompanied children, old people, pregnant women, single parents, and disabled people.⁴ In their review of articles published in Portuguese, English, Spanish, and French by PubMed, SciELO, LILACS, and ISI Web of Science databases, Bustamante et al. (2018, 222) report that the prevalence of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among refugees is nearly twice the already very high rate of 47% in migrant workers.

⁴ In 2023, 17,319 unaccompanied children arrived in Italy by sea according to data published by the Italian Ministry of Interior (2023).

The manual by Schippers et al. (2016, 50) contains a list of protective factors for unaccompanied migrant children, based on scientific literature, which includes social support. Again, this is unachievable without language mediation which makes communication possible for a foreigner in the local language of the host country.

Another factor which increases vulnerability of asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants in general in Italy is a widespread negative attitude toward immigration, often perceived as an invasion and associated with criminality and terrorism—also due to an overestimation of the number of arrivals (Catarci 2016, 30) and to the definition by the media of a “migrant emergency” (Filmer & Federici 2018, 1).

Looking at the Italian system of language assistance briefly described above, it seems that people who are most vulnerable and in need of qualified language assistance and intercultural mediation often get unqualified linguists for lack of a better choice (Veglio 2024).

4.2 Refugee status determination (RSD) in Italy

The Constitution of the Italian Republic (Italy. Constituent Assembly 1947) enshrined the right of asylum under article 10.3 which states that “a foreigner who, in his home country, is denied the actual exercise of the democratic freedoms guaranteed by the Italian constitution shall be entitled to the right of asylum.” At international level a refugee *status* was mentioned for the first time in the introduction of the Refugee Convention signed in Geneva (United Nations 1951), which under A(2) defines a refugee as a third country national or a stateless person who has “well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a “particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.” Italy is a State party to the Convention.

Currently the procedure to obtain asylum in Italy starts at the police headquarters or stations where applicants can lodge their application by filling in a form providing details about themselves, their family, and their journey. In due

course they are summoned to undergo an asylum hearing aimed at refugee status determination, the process by which governments or the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) determine whether a person seeking protection is considered a refugee under international, regional, or national law (Arcella 2022, 87). In Italy, asylum hearings and the assessment of international protection applications are administrative proceedings entrusted to territorial commissions (TCs) based at Italian prefectures⁵ (Italy. Ministry of Interior 2019, 17). TCs' activities are coordinated by the National Commission for the Right to Asylum, based in Rome, which is also responsible for the revocation and termination of international protection status. The TCs are chaired by an officer of the relevant prefecture and are composed of two administrative officials of the Ministry of the Interior—hired through a competitive examination and with specialisation in the field of asylum and international law—and an expert on international protection and human rights appointed by the UNHCR. Extended interviews during hearings for RSD are conducted by only one member of the TC, while final decisions are taken collectively based on the interview report (a summarised transcript).

Since the hearings are always conducted in Italian, applicants who do not speak Italian have the right to express themselves in their own language or another language they speak or are reasonably supposed to speak and to be assisted by an interpreter paid by the State, while a lawyer will be at their own expense (European Parliament & Council of the European Union 2013). If the application for refugee status is rejected, the applicant may appeal before a civil court with a specialised section on immigration and free movement of EU citizens, established by Law no. 46/2017 (Italy. Parliament 2017). The court is composed of three judges, and the appellant is entitled to legal aid (Article 16, Legislative Decree 25/2008; see Italy's Council of Ministers 2008). A second-degree appeal is possible before a Court of Appeal.

⁵ The *Prefettura* (Prefecture) in Italy is an administrative body responsible for various governmental functions at the local level. Its responsibilities can vary, but typically include public order, civil protection, as well as migration and immigration issues.

Having highlighted the language and cultural barriers and the high complexity embedded in an interpreter-mediated asylum interview in the previous sections, the next sections will focus on real data collected during eight asylum hearings mediated by interpreters to try and highlight if and how intercultural mediation emerges from sequences of talk.

5. Real-life material and methods

Our data set was collected within a national project which explores the role, ethics, and training of English-Italian asylum interpreters and involves scholars from three different Italian Universities.⁶ Its major aim is to examine different aspects of interpreter-mediated communication in the asylum process by observing various hearings.

5.1 Data collection

In general, there are some issues in gaining full access to data in asylum hearings given their sensitivity (Nikolaïdou, Rehnberg & Wadensjö 2019). In particular, the main issue in Italy is that the vast majority of them are not currently being recorded,⁷ nor can they be taped for research purposes.

Before starting the project, the two researchers met with a representative of the Prefecture and it was agreed that the researchers would conduct an observational study, take field notes, and make anonymised live transcriptions for research and training purposes only. An authorisation from the National Asylum Commission

⁶ It is a national project on the role, ethics, and training of intercultural mediators who interpret in asylum hearings with English-speaking applicants. The researchers involved come from the University of Bologna, UNINT in Rome, and the University of Turin. The project's final deliverable is an interprofessional training module addressed to asylum officers and interpreters to help improve interpreter-mediated communication and teamwork.

⁷ Video recordings are provided for by Italian Legislative Decree no. 142 /2015 (Italy. Parliament 2015) but could not be made due to lack of technical equipment at the time of our data collection.

in Rome was sought by the Prefecture and granted. A framework agreement was signed by the project leader (UNINT) and the Prefecture, containing the approval of the research project and all the conditions concerning personal data protection and the consent by all participants. They were all informed that the researchers were there only to study interpreter-mediated communication and that they would leave before the hearing started if they did not want them to observe the interaction, or at any time during the hearing should they not want them to be present.

The Prefecture selected a number of interpreter-mediated hearings which involved applicants speaking Nigerian Standard English (NSE) or Nigerian Pidgin English (NPE), along with Edo and Igbo, and took place between January and July 2023. The following table summarises the main information about the hearings. In the table, the acronym ST stands for sight translation—of the written report produced by the officer—performed by interpreters at the end of the interview; capital letters A, R, I, and O followed by a number identify applicants, researchers, interpreters, and officers who took part in each hearing. The total duration of each hearing is also shown in the table.

# hearing	A	A's gender	A's spoken languages	Total duration	R	I	O
1	A1	M	NSE, NPE	2h hearing (Int) + 20' sight transl. (ST)	R2: Male	I1: Female	O1: Male
2	A2	M	NSE, NPE	40' Int + 40' ST	R1: Female	I2: Male	O2: Male
3	A3	M	NSE, NPE	1h 27' Int + 25' ST + 5' follow-up Qs	R1	I3: Female	O3: Male
4	A4	F	Edo, NSE, NPE	1 h 13' Int + 16' ST + 41' follow-up Qs	R1	I4: Female	O3: Male
5	A5	F	NSE, NPE	1 h 50' Int (No ST)	R2	I4: Female	O4: Male
6	A6	F	NSE, NPE	2 h Int + 30' ST	R2	I4: Female	O4: Male
7	A7	M	NSE, NPE	47' Int + 13' ST	R2	I5: Female	O3: Male
8	A8	M	Igbo, NSE, NPE	1h 15' Int + 22' ST	R2: Male	I5: Female	O3: Male

Table 1: List of hearings in our data set

Hearings were conducted by four different officers with the help of five intercultural mediators of Nigerian origin serving as interpreters, who all work for CIES, an organisation based in Rome that secured a national contract for language service provision. Two of the interpreters had never received any training in interpreting, whilst we have no information on the other three. It must be noted that asylum seekers had different degrees of competence in NSE, and our data analysis suggests that at times interpreter and applicant spoke different varieties of NSE/NPE (see Section 3.2 on the issue of a lingua franca).

Besides field notes and live transcriptions (see Section 5.3), the researchers also collected two written reports obtained through an association of lawyers who defend appeals against refugee status rejections.

5.2 Structure of the hearings

Although participants vary, the structure of the hearings we observed was the same and is briefly sketched below:

- *Before the hearing:*
Interviewer and interpreter collect the applicant from the waiting room. The interpreter is asked to translate a leaflet explaining the asylum proceedings, the composition of the TC, how a decision is taken, etc.
- *During the hearing (4 phases):*⁸
 - Phase 1: Closed questions—based on country-of-origin information (COI) and the form filled in at the police station—about background, family, education, religion, employment, etc.

⁸ The most widely used interviewing techniques in this field in Italy are based on the dialogical communication method—promoted by the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA 2024)—and the P.E.A.C.E. (prepare, explain, account, closure, evaluation) model, as indicated in the guidelines by UNHCR’s Quality Unit within Italy’s Commission for the Right to Asylum (UNHCR 2024).

- Phase 2: Open questions about the journey from the country of origin to the arrival in Italy, with attention to places of transit if they are relevant. Free narrative: applicants speak at length, according to their abilities.
 - Phase 3: Probing, clarifying and follow-up questions on the journey for cross examination.
 - Phase 4: Open questions aimed to introduce corrections, additions, etc.
-
- *Immediately after the hearing:*
The oral account of events is remoulded and preserved in the interview report which is the basis for the final decision. Interpreters are called upon to sight translate the report before it is signed by the primary parties.

5.3 Data selection and transcription

The combination of observation and note-taking is a complex process, thus only some sequences of talk have been annotated in their entirety and will be used in our analysis. Since they were transcribed as the interaction unfolded and no recording was available, there was no way to measure pauses which are only marked by (.). The speed of utterances or ascending or descending tone could not be transcribed except for questions. Incomplete utterances were transcribed using a slash and a hyphen was used for truncated words. Inaudible expressions are marked as xxx, vowel or consonant lengthening with colons, and emphasis in bold type. Notwithstanding the above-mentioned limitations, the data set is unique since it provides real-life data from a rarely explored setting.

The researchers were allowed to listen to the sight translation of the interview report from Italian into the applicant's language and were given a copy to read at the end of the hearing. All the examples and excerpts in this paper were checked against the officer's report in Italian for content purposes.

5.4 Data analysis

Data analysis was conducted at two interactional levels: macro level, by observing and identifying the different phases of the hearings—as reported in Section 5.2—and micro level, by a turn-by-turn analysis of some sequences of talk.

At micro level, the focus was placed on concepts which, in our data set, recurrently lead to misunderstandings or hampered communication, mainly due to differences in the applicant's and officer's cultures. In particular, the notions of family relationships, ethnicity, and nationality/citizenship will be illustrated and discussed on the basis of examples taken from our data, and from data collected and published by Pöllabauer (2004, 172) and Sorgoni (2013, 143–144), who have investigated interpreting in asylum settings. Their data will be compared to some excerpts from our own data set to highlight some similarities in terms of socio-cultural gaps between the asylum seeker on one side, and interpreter and officer on the other side, and to see if and how intercultural mediation occurs.

Pöllabauer (2004) collected the audio recordings of 201 authentic asylum hearings, between October 2000 and July 2001 at the Federal Asylum Office in Graz, with a total length of recordings of 20 hours and 46 minutes. Sorgoni (2013) collected data in different Italian police headquarters and police stations where the RSD starts with an interview by a police officer (and an interpreter) who fills in a form containing questions about personal details, family members, citizenship, religion, language, education/employment, and detailed information about the journey and arrival in Italy. The idea behind comparing sequences of talk drawn from our data set to similar sequences occurring in other asylum settings and at other times is to try and give more validity to our observations, showing that they are not isolated cases nor linked to our data set only.

Methodologically, we adopt Goffman's (1981) concept of *participatory framework*, mediated through Wadensjö's (1998) categories of interpreter renditions which are applied to the micro level in order to analyse the phenomena from a sociological perspective. Wadensjö's (1998) study of dialogue interpreters has provided major insights into the interpreter's role as translator and coordinator. Her full-length work drew mainly on Goffman's interactional sociolinguistics, and

in particular on his concept of footing, to describe the primary participants' and the interpreter's relationship to each other.

6. Cultural knowledge for intercultural mediation

In the following sections we will focus on (recurring) cultural and knowledge differences which need mediation during asylum hearings, based on the data collected by the authors and two above-mentioned scholars (see Section 5.4).

The aim is to identify socio-cultural differences that emerge during these interactions, and to exemplify how intercultural mediation can succeed or fail to bridge these differences. Due to space limitations, it is not possible to deal with all the cultural differences we encountered in asylum hearings here. They include different denotations and connotations attached to words and the different value attributed to accuracy in reporting dates and geographical names, which are part of the credibility assessment for asylum adjudicating bodies but may not have the same relevance for applicants. Here we will focus only on the concepts of citizenship/nationality/ethnicity and relationships which recurrently reveal themselves as cultural barriers in the RSD process.

6.1 Citizenship/Nationality

In the following excerpt, drawn from our data (hearing 6, phase 1), the officer asks the applicant about her nationality after having enquired about her children's nationality since they were born in Germany:

Example 1: Hearing 6

01	04.	OK (.) bene (.) er:: tu invece di quale paese di quale paese sei cittadina?
		OK (.) fine (.) er:: you instead what country are you a citizen of?

- 02 I4. he says what about you? he says which country do you have the citizenship?
- 03 A6. which...?
- 04 I4. country
- 05 A6. eh?
- 06 I4. do you have the citizenship?
- 07 A6. me?
- 08 I4. yeah (.) io?
yeah ((addressed to A6.)) me? ((addressed to O4.))
- 09 A6. no (.) non capisco (.) I don't understand
I don't understand ((first uttered in Italian and then again in English))
- 10 I4. which country er do you get the: which country do you came from?
- 11 A6. where me came from? I came from Nigeria
- 12 I4. io vengo dalla Nigeria
I come from Nigeria

The change of topic from the children's nationality to the applicant's citizenship and the concept of citizenship itself seem to confuse the applicant who, after three turns where she clearly shows she did not understand the question, finally states her lack of understanding. Since her signs of incomprehension have not been taken up by the interpreter, nor have they been conveyed to the officer, and the applicant wants to make sure she is understood, she resorts to Italian, formulating a turn partly in Italian and partly in English.

Towards the end of the exchange the interpreter rephrases the question, and the applicant finally provides an answer, although no explanation of the concept of citizenship is provided to her by the interpreter or the officer, similarly to what happens in the data collected by Pöllabauer (2004, 172) and presented in the next example. Pöllabauer's (2004) transcriptions were reformatted to be uniform with the excerpts from our data set.

Example 2: from Pöllabauer (2004, 172)

- O. dann gesamt/
we will then/
- I. mhm
- O. welche Staatsbürgerschaft besitzt sie?
what is her nationality?
- I. which nationality do you have?
- A. mhm?
- I. what is your nationality?
- A. nationality I don't understand
- I. your citizenship you understand that?
- A. no
- I. ich verstehen die Frage nicht
I don't understand the question
the/ you but you are a citizen of Nigeria aren't you?
- A. yes
- I. OK you don't understand the word citizenship or nationality?
I come from Nigeria
- A. I don't understand because I have / I didn't travel before

Although this hearing took place in another country and much before the one in example 1, a very similar issue emerges: in asylum proceedings there are not only cultural differences but also social and educational gaps to be filled. The notion and terminology concerning citizenship/nationality, which is most probably familiar to a Western citizen who has frequent contacts with their national institutions and bureaucracy, can be totally unfamiliar to a foreign national who has a different socio-cultural background and possibly a low level of education.

In example 2, the interpreter repeats the question about nationality asked by the officer twice: first the applicant states she did not understand, then the interpreter replaces the word "nationality" with "citizenship," but to no avail. The

interpreter translates, but instead of leaving the floor to the interviewer, in the same (bilingual) turn she produces a second, self-initiated attempt to obtain an answer to the question (a non-rendition in Wadensjö's terms, see 1998), referring to what she knows to be the country of origin of the applicant—who indeed agrees to be a citizen of Nigeria. When prompted by the interpreter to repeat that she does not understand, the asylum seeker confirms and produces a justification. With these discursive moves the interpreter acquires or self-assigns an institutional status, so much so that the applicant feels the need to provide an explanation for her "ignorance." The ethical and human implication is that of diminishing the applicant putting her in the position of inferiority.

6.2 Ethnic group

In our data the adjudicating officer recurrently asks applicants to what ethnic group they belong, an expression that is not familiar to asylum seekers, at least in the hearings we observed. The following example is taken from phase 1 of hearing 2:

Example 3: Hearing 2

- | | | |
|----|-----|---|
| 01 | O2. | appartieni a qualche gruppo etnico in particolare?
<i>do you belong to any ethnic group in particular?</i> |
| 02 | I2. | do you belong to any ethnic group? |
| 03 | A2. | no (.) I'm a Christian |
| 04 | I2. | what we mean by ethnic group is (.) like a clan |
| 05 | A2. | for me (.) I don't belong to any group |
| 06 | I2. | your father comes from where? |
| 07 | A2. | from Benin |

- 08 I2. then you're from Benin group!
- 09 A2. OK (.) I come from Benin group (.) I'm sorry sir ((*addressed to the interpreter*))

In example 3, the officer asks about the ethnic group of the applicant, who understands the enquiry as a question about his religion. It is immediately clear that the applicant is not familiar with the concept of ethnicity as used in Italy, and in the following turns, despite the interpreter's attempted explanation, he states he does not belong to any group. The interpreter, instead of reporting the answers back to the officer, continues questioning the applicant about his father's origin of his own initiative (again a non-mention, as in example 2). On the basis of the information obtained, the interpreter concludes that the applicant belongs to the Benin group. The applicant agrees and apologizes. Here the question is how to see this exchange. After all, the officer obtained the information he wanted, so in the officer's eyes the interpreter was able to achieve successful communication. But is this intercultural mediation, understood as a vehicle for integration? Seen in a different perspective and looking at the active and autonomous discursive moves by the interpreter, what emerges is that he performs the role of co-officer and system agent (Leanza 2005). He keeps questioning the applicant on his own initiative until he gets an answer to the officer's question and does not provide the applicant with a clear explanation about a notion which belongs to the dominant culture, nor informs the officer about this exchange.

A similar situation was described by Sorgoni (2013, 143–144) in her study about asylum seekers in Italy:

Example 4: from Sorgoni (2013, 143–144)

- 01 O. chiedigli se appartiene a qualche gruppo etnico
ask him if he belongs to any ethnic group ((*addressed to the interpreter*))

- 02 I. do you belong to a specific ethnic group?
- 03 A. ((A. looks confused and turns his gaze to the interpreter))
- 04 I. there are many groups many families apart from the state
- 05 A. no
- 06 I. in Africa (.) there are many special groups
- 07 A. language? my language?
- 08 I. no not the language (.) you know in Africa (.) there are Hutu
(.) Tutsi ...
- 09 A. no no ((shaking his head energetically))
- 10 I. so you don't belong to a special group
- 11 A. NO
- 12 I. dice di no (.) scrivi nessun gruppo etnico
he says no (.) write no ethnic group ((addressed to the officer))

Example 4 belongs to an interaction occurred during the very first step of an RSD process when a formal application is filed at a police station. In this sequence, the interpreter also engages in a dyadic exchange, attempting to obtain the information requested by the officer. She first resorts to two different stereotypes (“many groups many families apart from the state”; “in Africa there are many special groups”), then provides examples of ethnic groups from Rwanda and Burundi, and only after the applicant shaking his head energetically and raising his tone of voice repeats his “no,” the interpreter finally reports the negative answer to the officer, and in the same turn tells him what to write down in the application form. Another feature of this sequence is that both the interpreter and the officer speak about the applicant using the third-person pronoun while the interpreter uses the informal form of direct address when speaking to the officer. This shows closeness between the two versus distance towards the asylum seeker. Again, the interpreter acts more as a co-officer or an officer’s assistant than an active integration agent who helps create a common ground for direct understanding and communication between the officer and the applicant.

In both examples 3 and 4 there is no sign of an attempt to create contact between the two cultures: the interpreter does not tell the officer that ethnicity is not a familiar concept for the asylum seeker and that it may be understood differently in the applicant's culture. In these examples interpreters apply an ethnocentric view: since the notion of ethnic group exists in the host country, it must be the same everywhere else, and the applicants should know about it and its meaning. On the other hand, the officers let the interpreter temporarily conduct the interview without intervening or asking to know what was said during the monolingual exchange.

A different approach was adopted by both interpreter and officer in another sequence of talk, where meaning was negotiated and intercultural mediation was jointly carried out by the participants in a trilogue, as shown in example 5:

Example 5: Hearing 6

- | | | |
|----|-----|---|
| 01 | O4. | bene (.) grazie per queste risposte (.) ti riconosci in qualche gruppo etnico specifico (.) per caso?
<i>OK (.) thank you for your answers (.) do you identify with any specific ethnic group (.) by any chance? ((while writing on his PC))</i> |
| 02 | I4. | he said thank you for: answering (.) he asks which ethnic group you are part of? |
| 03 | A6. | what do you mean which ethnic group? |
| 04 | I4. | er che cosa: intendi per gruppo etnico?
<i>er what: do you mean by ethnic group?</i> |
| 05 | O4. | sì (.) er per: a volte viene er: tradotto come tribe o come: gruppo: di appartenenza come un clan (.) ecco (.) da questo punto di vista
<i>yes (.) er for: at times it is translated as tribe or as group: you belong to like a clan (.) well under this point of view</i> |
| 06 | I4. | he says what I mean is the: tribe (.) the part of xxx 'cause sometimes they need you to explain which xxx you come from |

07	A6.	maybe Auchi (.) Auchi tribe
08	14.	sono Auchi <i>I am Auchi</i>

This excerpt (same hearing as example 1, phase 1 but at a later stage) opens with the officer who thanks the applicant for her previous answers (including the one about nationality in example 1) before enquiring about her ethnic group. After the interpreter's translation, the applicant expresses her lack of comprehension of the question and the interpreter translates this to the officer. She does not step in and provide an explanation, nor does she start questioning the applicant as in the previous cases. This way she puts the officer and the applicant in direct contact and lets the officer

After rendering the officer's explanation, though, the interpreter provides the applicant with the reason for the question, in a way reassuring her that this is part of the procedure, while stressing the agency of the question ("sometimes they need you to explain"). In this case, the interpreter does not side with the officer; she lets him and the applicant directly negotiate meaning but also informs the vulnerable party in the interaction about the reason for the question explaining that this is a routine question in asylum proceedings. The interpreter here is really enacting intercultural mediation by promoting an exchange through listening and relaying what has been said, putting the two parties in direct contact and making sure they have sufficient knowledge and information to trust each other in a three-party conversation which does not exclude or silence the voice of anyone.

6.3 Relationships

The following examples 6–10 are excerpts from hearing 2. In particular, extracts 6–7 are taken from phase 1, whilst 8–9 are from phase 2, and 10 from phase 3 (see Section 5.1). The extracts from phases 1 and 2 feature questions about the asylum applicants' COI and arrival and stay in Italy, while the questions from

phase 3 are aimed to probe the applicant on his statements. Yet, they all touch upon issues relating to social relations, in particular family (see extracts 6 line 9, and extract 10; see also Section 3.2):

Example 6: Hearing 2

- 01 02. **senti** (.) **ma** ora (.) la tua famiglia la tua sorella (.) tuo figlio (.)
dove vivono?
look (.) *but now, your family* (.) *your sister* (.) *your son* (.) *where*
do they live?
- 02 12. where are your siblings?
- 03 A2. siblings?
- 04 12. your brothers and sisters
- 05 A2. they are still there (.) I don't know where they are staying today

Example 7: Hearing 2

- 01 02. **senti** (.) **ma** da quando hai fatto domanda di protezione (.)
qualcuno ti ha aiutato?
look (.) *but since you applied for protection* (.) *has anyone*
helped you?
- 02 12. when you did the request for helping you (.) did you get help
to stay?

Example 8: Hearing 2

- 01 02. **ma** a questo amico davi soldi per star da lui?
but did you give this friend money to stay at his place?
- 02 12. did you give him money or was it just a favour?

- 03 A2. favour
04 I2. favour favore

Example 9: Hearing 2

- 01 O2. te (.) **però** (.) eri spostato con questa donna?
were you (.) however (.) married to this woman?
- 02 I2. you were married to this lady (.) what happened?
- 03 A2. we were not married (.) she got pregnant (.) his father was very angry (.) and took my child away from me and sent me away
- 04 I2. la figlia ha fatto figlia per lui (.) che non sono stati sposati (.) questo uomo da rabbia ha preso figlio da lui (.) e lui senza niente (.) e allora ha mandato lui via
his daughter made a daughter for hi (.) that they were not married (.) this man from anger took son from him (.) and he with nothing (.) so he sent him away
- 05 A2. he didn't want me around (.) he said I'm a stupid civilian
- 06 I2. ha detto che lui (.) che il padre soldato ha detto che lui era civile stupido
he said he that/ (.) his soldier father said he was civilian stupid

Example 10: Hearing 2

- 01 O2. **senti** (.) poi però questo bambino è nato nel 2007 (.) a quel punto quand'è che ti levava il bambino?
look (.) but then this baby was born in 2007 (.) at which point (.) when did he take the baby away from you?
- 02 I2. this child was born in 2007 (.) the grandfather didn't want you to see the child (.) yeah (.) then what happened to the child?

- 03 A2. after I leave Nigeria (.) because of the fight every day (.) I haven't heard from them (.) my mom couldn't do anything (.) my father was already dead (.) I believe the child is still alive (.) I don't know
- 04 I2. lui ha lasciato il paese (.) non sapeva niente del bimbo e poi sua mamma non poteva fare niente (.) più che altro (.) essendo una donna (.) perché suo padre è già morto (.) sua mamma non poteva fare niente
he left the country (.) he knew nothing about the child and then his mother could do nothing more (.) so (.) being a woman (.) because his father is already dead (.) his mom couldn't do anything

Prior to extract 9, the applicant had referred to his partner as his “wife.” Yet, in Nigeria having a wife does not always mean to be legally married; it can simply refer to having a female partner. In the rather chaotic series of turns in examples 9 and 10, the interpreter also misses a chance to act as intercultural agent, who may contribute to the empowerment of the less powerful party. He does not say anything about (a) the notion of *wife* in Nigerian society (see “We were not married” in example 9 line 3), and (b) the conceptual and material bases of patriarchy and gender inequality in Nigeria (see “My mom couldn't do anything” in example 10 line 3).

An interesting aspect in hearing 2 is the officer's (O2) frequent use of questions prefaced by “Senti, ma” (Look, but), in which the denial is direct—that is, the proposition expressed by the *but*-prefaced clause directly contradicts (and eliminates) an accessible assumption. This expression can be said to somewhat diminish the significance of what was stated before, in particular, it triggers an inference which results in the elimination of an assumption made accessible by the prior utterance (i.e., “What you stated so far is relevant, but let us move on”). At a micro level, the question-initial discourse marker *but* is systematically left out by the interpreter (I2), who impacts upon the officer's interviewing technique and the interviewee's inferential processes.

Utterance 4 in example 6 contains an example of a non-rendition (Wadensjö 1998), in which the interpreter acts as co-interrogator. Other role shifts are evident in the case of “reduced renditions” (see example 6 line 2 and 10 line 3), missing out on potentially crucial evidence—such as A2’s lack of contact with his child—as well as of expanded renditions (see example 7 line 2, example 8 line 4, example 9 lines 2, 4, and 6), which indicate lack of accuracy. In example 7, utterance 2, as in other instances before, the interpreter struggles with the rendition of a simple legal term, that is, “domanda di protezione” (application for international protection). I2’s agency impacts on the interviewing techniques, destroying the positive communication atmosphere (as the applicant might get the impression that they are not being considered truthful) and the primary interactants’ rapport building.

7. Concluding remarks

The aim of this study was to identify the causes behind and possible solutions to intercultural issues in eight interpreted-asylum hearings we observed at a prefecture in central Italy.

Our findings have confirmed that asylum interpreters often occupy a liminal space, mediating between dominant and marginalised cultures, and negotiating asymmetrical power relations between speakers. This positioning can influence the interpreters’ choice of language and non-verbal cues as they navigate the complexities of cultural hierarchy and social dynamics.

One of the first observations is that the same interpreter acts differently when faced with the notions of citizenship and ethnicity (see examples 1 and 5), which are not familiar to the applicant. There is an intra-personal variability in assuming (or being given) roles, which highlights the need for more in-depth knowledge of communication mechanisms and dynamics both for the interpreter and the officer. The same applies to awareness about socio-cultural differences, which should not be emphasised nor minimised, but rather drawn near to create a common background for mutual understanding and knowledge (which are the basis for integration). Furthermore, I2’s role

shifts in extracts on (family) relationships (see examples 6 to 10 in Section 6.3) further show that asylum interpreters impact interviewing techniques, at times destroying the positive communication atmosphere and the primary interactants' rapport building.

In this context, the interpreter's fundamental role should be—as defined by Hale for the Australian legal proceedings—to “remove the language barrier and to the best of their skill and ability place the non-English speaker in a position as similar as possible to that of a speaker of English” (Hale 2004, 10). In asylum hearings interpreters are expected to accommodate legal, contextual, and interactional constraints (see section 3.1), cultural differences (see section 3.2), and possible conflicting role expectations (see 3.3), which require specific skills. Interpreters should never make the weaker party in an interaction even more powerless, especially when vital decisions about their future are at stake.

Research on training and provision of legal interpreting services (e.g., Mikkelsen 1996; Grbić 2001; Corsellis 2005; Inghilleri 2005; Maryns 2006; Inghilleri 2012; Maryns 2013; Tipton & Furmanek 2016) has shown that there are many deficiencies to be blamed on interpreters, yet these may be the result of systemic problems, such as the lack of standardised education and testing to develop high levels of professional competence, and the failure to further mechanisms for service delivery. Against this background, and in light of our results, this article makes a case for devoting more attention and resources to train interpreters to work in asylum settings in Italy, especially since the country is currently one of the main destinations for migrants from North and Sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East.

Considering its long history of migration, Italy may be expected to celebrate multiculturalism as a distinctive feature that enhances social cohesion. However, the intercultural role of interpreters as co-constructors of asylum narratives deserves more awareness by those who interpret and those who conduct the hearing. To share the burden placed on the shoulders of the applicants, participants in the RSD require some form of intercultural training, especially so that they can be aware of the communication problems which often arise in these contexts.

Such training would be necessary for both interpreters and legal professionals, and may take the form of joint training modules, focused on the unique bilingual and bicultural knowledge and skills required in these settings. Outreach initiatives may further raise cultural awareness among legal professionals, presenting the measures which may be taken, and evaluating their effect on communication in the legal context. Further research in this area is encouraged to develop insights into the communication issues raised in this paper that may inform communication practices and relevant training.

In conclusion, cultural differences can create barriers to effective participation in the asylum proceedings, and therefore raise important questions of fair legal outcomes for members of vulnerable groups such as asylum seekers. Insights provided by our data analysis indicate how the legal system might benefit from the untapped potential of interpreters as intercultural communicators. Both legal professionals and interpreters should work collaboratively to ensure fair and just legal outcomes particularly for people in vulnerable positions. Doing justice to language and culture ultimately leads to social justice, and small actions taken by properly informed and empowered asylum interpreters may redress the deep-seated imbalances in power relations in this setting.

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