Asylum Settings

Asylum seekers and refugees usually do not speak the language of the host country. They will express themselves either in an international lingua franca or through an interpreter. Research on interpreting in asylum settings has concentrated on those encounters that matter most to the people seeking asylum, that is, settings where they interact with the host government authorities responsible for the granting of rights (asylum and protection) and resources (counselling and medical support). Basically, these institutional encounters directly or indirectly relate to the asylum application process, a legal-administrative procedure by which a country’s authorities assess asylum claims on the basis of the 1951 United Nations Geneva Convention and the 1967 Protocol. This is an interview-based procedure in which asylum seekers have to submit personal documents and explain their motivation for seeking protection in the country to which they are applying.

National legislation for refugee status determination may vary. According to EU minimum standards, for example, asylum seekers have the right to an interpreter, either provided by the authorities or of their own choice. Considering the essentially asymmetrical nature of these encounters, the asylum status determination interview is a very intricate interpreting setting where a diversity of linguistic, socio-cultural and institutional resources and expectations meet.

Given the diversity of perspectives (from legal and linguistic to socio-cultural and sociological), research into interpreter-mediated communication in asylum settings has drawn on a range of disciplines and extended far beyond interpreting studies as such. This entry first reviews the various methods and approaches before providing an overview of the main themes and concerns, on a micro-interactional and a macro-ideological level, in the domain of asylum interpreting.

Methods and approaches

Pioneering research on asylum interviews in legal analysis (Kalin 1986) and migration studies (Monnier 1995) touches upon some critical aspects of the interpreter’s role and responsibilities in the asylum process. From the mid-1990s onwards, there was a parallel development towards a more exhaustive examination of the interactional dynamics of asylum interviews in the fields of linguistics and interpreting studies alike. Barsky (1994) was the first to conduct an in-depth field study of immigration service encounters. In his critical analysis of the written records of Canadian Convention refugee hearings, he identified a tendency among applicants, in their attempt to meet institutional requirements, to fill discursive and procedural gaps between their personal accounts and the bureaucratically recognized reports by discursively constructing the identity of a ‘productive’ Convention refugee. He suggested a “performative turn” in interpreting, identifying interpreters as involved performers in the asylum hearing who “should be legally recognized as active intermediaries between the claimant and the adjudicating body, rather than as innocuous translating devices” (1996: 46). However, his idea that interpreters can make up for institutional limitations and inadequate processing of asylum cases has been criticized for representing the intercultural space occupied by the interpreter as an “ideological void”, disregarding the “inherently heterogeneous and hybrid places where cultures/meanings overlap” (Inghilleri 2005a: 77).

The empirical base for both micro- and macro-level research mainly consists in field studies within particular national contexts, mostly inspired by Wadensjö’s (1998) study of dialogue.
INTERPRETING in institutional encounters. Such work has been done, for instance, in Austria (Pöllabauer 2004; Kolb & Pöchhacker 2008), Belgium (Blommaert 2001; Maryns 2006, 2013a), the UK (Inghilleri 2003, 2005a, 2012; Williams 2005), Sweden (Keselman et al. 2010), Italy (Merlini 2009a; Jacquemet 2011), Albania (Jacquemet 2010) and Spain (Gómez Díez 2010). These field studies draw from a set of data-collection methods: participant observation, ethnographic methods (fieldwork), survey research, interviews with applicants, asylum officers and interpreters, and audio/video recordings of authentic asylum interviews. What renders data collection particularly difficult in this domain is a general reluctance to allow asylum interviews to be recorded. The main problem, however, is not to obtain permission from the asylum seekers themselves, despite issues of privacy and the often very sensitive information they have to convey, but rather to be ‘allowed in’ by the institutional representatives. Still, notwithstanding the difficulty in accessing data, intensive fieldwork throughout the different tiers of the asylum process has yielded useful research material.

Researchers examining language in context in this field use an amalgam of discourse analytical methods, with an emphasis on linguistic-anthropological and sociological approaches. In the former orientation, various studies adopt an interaction- and discourse-centred approach to examine how identities are constructed in micro-sequences of talk (e.g. Gómez Díez 2010; Jacquemet 2011; Kolb & Pöchhacker 2008; Merlini 2009a; Pöllabauer 2004). From a more sociological perspective, several studies have used Goffman’s concepts of participation framework, ‘footing’ and ‘face’ in examining the interpreter’s role (e.g. Merlini 2009a; Pöllabauer 2007). Substantial research contributions by Inghilleri (2003, 2005a, 2012) apply Bourdieu’s concepts of habitus, ‘capital’ and ‘field’ to theorize the social positioning of interpreters in the asylum process. Tipton (2008a) has used Giddens’ concept of ‘reflexivity’ in analyzing how asylum seekers position themselves as ‘knowledgeable agents’ and advance their “authentic voice” in the narrative process.

Alongside this considerable amount of research on interpreting in asylum interviews, the role of the interpreter in communication with asylum seekers is also discussed in studies on psychotherapy, and on interpreting in mental health settings in general.

Micro-interactional research

From this range of multidisciplinary methods and approaches, a wide spectrum of interacting and partially overlapping research themes has emerged. A recurring topic in empirical research on asylum interpreting is the gap between deontology (normative standards and expectations) and professional practice. The professional status of interpreters in the asylum system has been laid down in deontological guidelines and accredited training programmes, both at national and international levels (EU, UNHCR). As a rule, these normative standards assert ‘objective neutrality’ on the part of the interpreter: apart from “a competent command of the relevant languages”, interpreters should have “adequate interpreting skills” such as “the ability to accurately and faithfully interpret what is said by the interpreter and applicant without omission, addition, comment, summarizing or embellishing” (UNHCR 2010: 33). On the assumption of absolute equivalence of meaning between languages, interpreters are placed in a position of invisibility in the triadic exchange.

Although the asylum process generally prioritizes the conduit function of the interpreter, empirical research has demonstrated that recommended practice is not necessarily matched by the actual conduct of interpreters in asylum settings. The ambiguity inherent in the interpreter’s role recurs as a leitmotiv in asylum interpreting research. Conflicting role perceptions are manifest in different facets of practice, ranging from the availability of
competent interpreters to the positioning of the interpreter in the interaction and the replicability of the interpreter's rendition.

**Availability of competent interpreters: lay versus professional**

Although certified interpreters are generally preferred, they are often not available in certain refugee languages. In these situations, freelance interpreters without any specific qualification are used. Empirical research has identified some recurring problems with the employment of such interpreters in asylum settings, including issues of language variation (Maryns 2006; Bögner et al. 2010), proficiency (Merlini 2009a; Keselman et al. 2010), accuracy (Pöllabauer 2004; Maryns 2006; Gómez Diez 2010) and neutrality (Källin 1986; Bögner et al. 2010). It goes without saying that lack of accuracy and detail may cause great damage in asylum determination contexts, where every piece of information can be used as factual evidence in the assessment of the case.

**Positioning of the interpreter in the interaction: experiential versus institutional**

One of the greatest challenges for interpreters in the asylum process is that they constantly have to navigate between the informal—experiential event perspective of asylum seekers and the formal—institutional perspective of the examining agencies. Bearing enormous responsibilities in achieving the best possible compromise between the primary participants' conflicting concerns, interpreters have to aim for comprehensibility in a space where 'ontological' and 'public' narratives meet (Inghilleri 2012). Despite deontological requirements of impartiality, research on interpreting in asylum adjudication and mental health settings has found a tendency for asylum interpreters to align themselves with the institutions they are working for, either by facilitating the bureaucratic process or, more controversially, by assuming the role of institutional gatekeeper. Increased emphasis on the adversarial dimension in current asylum procedures—establishing the credibility of the asylum seeker's account—is not insignificant here: in their rendition of the primary speakers' turns, interpreters tend to anticipate what is perceived as a bureaucratically valid account, that is, an account that meets particular formal genre characteristics—"coherent, plausible, consistent" (UNHCR 2005: 124)—which serve as a guiding principle for the assessment of the speaker's credibility. In this way, interpreters become "agents of institutional efficiency" (Kolb & Pöchhacker 2008) in the interviewing process itself, either as co-interviewers eliciting more institutionally appropriate answers (Keselman et al. 2010), or in the subsequent 'entextualization' process, as co-producers of the written record (Maryns 2006; Pöchhacker & Kolb 2009). The issue of interpreter intervention is even more problematic when interpreters become actively engaged in the determination of the national origin of applicants, where they take on the role of "auxiliary police officers" (Pöllabauer 2004) or "communicative detectives" (Jacquemet 2010) by assessing the characteristics of their speech.

**Replicability of the interpreter's rendition: transient (oral) versus replicable (written)**

The ambivalence inherent in the interpreter's role is particularly tangible in the multimodality characterizing the asylum interpreter's performance. While the interpreter is generally defined as an "oral translator" in the asylum process (UNHCR 2009: 18), the written word keeps pervading the interpreter's performance: (a) in the way particular criteria of scripted texts—coherence, consistency, fluency—are anticipated in the interpreter's rendition; (b) in the routine of interpreting "directly for the record", offering asylum officers all the necessary
and ‘ready-made’ oral input for the written record (Pöchhacker & Kolb 2009); and (c) in the practice of interpreters conducting the interview and passing on their written translations of the applicant’s answers to the asylum officer (Maryns 2006). This tension between orality and written text in asylum interpreting also involves varying degrees of immediacy and replicability of the rendering: the interpreter’s oral renditions go on record in written reports, meaning that they are no longer transient in nature but become replicable discourses in the text’s subsequent trajectory. The implications of these ambivalences can be observed particularly when dealing with vulnerable groups such as children (Keselman et al. 2010) or rape victims (Bögner et al. 2010; Maryns 2013a).

**Macro-ideological research**

Interpreting in asylum interviews has been further theorized in relation to the macro-ideological structures that directly or indirectly condition the interpreting activity. Inghilleri (2003, 2005a, 2012) has made significant research contributions in this area, discussing the ways in which the interpreting habitus is consistently attuned to reproducing target culture standards and ideologies. The work of Blommaert (2001, 2009) and Maryns (2006, 2013a) has theorized the inequality of linguistic resources in asylum interaction, focusing on the ways in which linguistic minority speakers are severely constrained in using their multilingual resources in the monolingual institutional space. In the context of language use and interpreter allocation in the asylum process, the multilingual repertoires of asylum seekers have been shown to challenge the “myth of equilingualism” (Hlavac 2010) – the prototypical form of interpreting as mediated interaction between two monolingual codes – that is still potent in the institutional space. Ongoing research on language shifting in interpreted asylum interaction (Maryns 2006; Hlavac 2010; Angermeyer 2013) shows how issues of mobility and displacement complicate the process of determining the minority speaker’s ‘dominant language’. The multiplicity of socio-discursive parameters at play in asylum interaction confirms the need for more latitude in negotiating language, including the possibility of ‘stand-by interpreting’ (Cooke 1996; Angermeyer 2013) as a means to integrate the benefits of direct and interpreter-mediated communication with the authorities.

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