ISSN: 2386-9658 DOI: https://doi.org/10.21071/arf.v35i.16529

Voices from Transit Zones: A Study of Humanitarian Interpreting Challenges

*(*Voces de las zonas de tránsito: un estudio sobre los retos de la interpretación humanitaria*)*

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Fecha de recepción: 9 de octubre de 2023
Fecha de aceptación: 10 de noviembre de 2023

Resumen: Este artículo presenta los resultados de las entrevistas realizadas a representantes de ONG e instituciones públicas, así como a intérpretes con y sin formación, en los países socios del proyecto ReTrans, Austria, Eslovenia, Grecia y la República de Macedonia del Norte. El objetivo del estudio es obtener información exhaustiva sobre las necesidades específicas de los intérpretes del ámbito humanitario y los usuarios de los servicios. Además, pretende arrojar luz sobre las dificultades a las que se enfrentan habitualmente. Los resultados han demostrado que la interpretación humanitaria implica con frecuencia la participación de intérpretes sin formación y que los conocimientos culturales desempeñan un papel esencial. Además, el uso de una lengua pivote, la preparación temática y la participación en tareas adicionales más allá de las funciones tradicionales de interpretación, como recabar información sobre ayudas económicas o ayudar a encontrar alojamiento, son aspectos cruciales de la interpretación humanitaria. Sin embargo, debido al alcance de este artículo, nos

centraremos en los retos operativos como la falta de formación, las tareas adicionales y las horas de trabajo, así como en los retos relacionados con el rol de los intérpretes y las expectativas.

Palabras clave: Interpretación humanitaria. Rutas migratorias. Traducción en situaciones de crisis. ReTrans.

Abstract: This paper presents findings derived from interviews with representatives of NGOs and public service institutions as well as trained and untrained interpreters within the ReTrans partner countries Austria, Slovenia, Greece, and the Republic of North Macedonia. The study's aim was to gain comprehensive insight into the specific requirements of humanitarian interpreters and service users. Additionally, it sought to illuminate the dilemmas they routinely face. The findings have shown that humanitarian interpreting frequently involves the participation of untrained interpreters, with the essential role played by cultural knowledge. Additionally, the use of a pivot language, thematic preparation, and engagement in additional tasks beyond traditional interpretation roles, such as gathering information about financial support or assisting in finding accommodation, emerge as crucial aspects of humanitarian interpreting. Given the scope of this paper, we will focus on operational challenges such as lack of training, additional tasks, and working hours as well as on role-related challenges and expectations.

Keywords: Humanitarian interpreting. Migration routes. Crisis translation. ReTrans.

1. Introduction

Austria, Greece, the Republic of North Macedonia, and Slovenia are reception and host countries which lie along a major migration[1] route, the Western Balkans Route. As such, these countries face various challenges related to communication requirements in refugee camps and reception centres. One such challenge is interpreting. Interpreting in the humanitarian emergencies that

[1] In this paper we use the terms *migration* and *migrants* in their neutral meaning in line with the definitions of the International Organisation of Migration (IOM), which considers the word *migrant* as an "umbrella term, not defined under international law, reflecting the common lay understanding of a person who moves away from his or her place of usual residence, whether within a country or across an international border, temporarily or permanently, and for a variety of reasons" (IOM 2019: 132).

take place at the border zones is a form of humanitarian interpreting (Delgado Luchner & Kerbiche 2018, see also Section 3).

This paper exclusively addresses humanitarian interpreting within the scope of the project titled "Working with Interpreters in Refugee Transit Zones: Capacity building and awareness-raising for higher education contexts" (hereinafter referred to as ReTrans) in the following countries: Austria, Greece, the Republic of North Macedonia, and Slovenia. The aim is to address the following research questions:

1. What salient features of humanitarian interpreting have been identified?
2. What is the role played by humanitarian interpreters?
3. Which activities do humanitarian interpreters perform?

The paper draws on data obtained from interviews with representatives of public service institutions and non-governmental organisations, as well as with both trained and untrained interpreters (see Section 4). The primary objective of this study was to obtain comprehensive and relevant insights into the specific needs of trained and untrained interpreters and service users, including institutional representatives, within these contexts. It also aimed to identify the challenging dilemmas they encounter. By incorporating the perspectives of often overlooked actors in the field, this study endeavours to foster a more inclusive understanding of the situation.

The paper begins with an introduction to the ReTrans project[2], providing insight into its goals, timeline, and objectives. Following this, it provides an extensive literature review focused on humanitarian interpreting, with specific emphasis on the four participating countries. This review highlights the central challenges in humanitarian interpreting. Subsequently, the paper details the research methodology and data collection process. Ultimately, the collected data undergoes rigorous content analysis, leading to the presentation of concluding remarks. To the best of our knowledge, no prior research has examined the experiences of users and interpreters in these regions. This paper seeks to fill this gap, providing original contributions to the field by offering fresh insights and a nuanced understanding of the dynamics surrounding humanitarian interpreting in these specific contexts.

[2] The project team comprises five partners: University of Vienna (Centre for Translation Studies), University of Maribor (Department of Translation Studies), University of Continuing Education Krems (Centre for Applied Games Studies), Ionian University (Department of Foreign Languages Translation and Interpreting), Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje ("Blaze Koneski" Faculty of Philology - Department of Translation and Interpreting) and Faculty of Dramatic Arts. Webpage: https://www.retrans-interpreting.com/.

2. ReTrans project

The two-year ReTrans Project (2022-2024), funded by the European Union's Erasmus+ programme, was collaboratively undertaken with partner universities from Austria, Greece, Slovenia, and the Republic of North Macedonia. The project aims to address the challenges of interpreting in humanitarian and transborder migration contexts. Its focus is on language mediation issues within refugee transit zones, based on which easily accessible didactic materials (e.g., vodcasts, podcasts, educasts and interactive games) will be developed to serve both students and teachers in higher education (HE) interpreter institutions. Specifically, the materials will address the needs and challenges faced by individuals, interpreters, and institutions operating in refugee transit zones. They aim to meet the needs of trained and untrained interpreters working in transit zones and enhance the understanding of students and teachers in HE contexts. This includes grasping the challenges of interpreting within such contexts, as well as effectively managing language services for all parties involved. It is, however, noteworthy that the didactic materials do not form part of this paper, and we cannot elaborate on them here to avoid exceeding the scope.

The ReTrans project unfolds across four distinct work packages (WP). Initiated with a comprehensive survey (WP1) conducted across all project countries, the primary objective of the first work package was to gain insight into the needs and challenges faced by institutions in recruiting humanitarian interpreters, resulting in sixty-four responses. Following this, WP2 involved a follow-up qualitative study, encompassing face-to-face interviews with trained and untrained interpreters, representatives from public institutions and NGOs as well as with migrants. The subsequent work packages, WP3 and WP4, involve the creation of educasts, quizzes, subtitles, and audio descriptions, as well as various dissemination activities, community tools, and game-based simulations.

3. Humanitarian interpreting in Austria, Greece, the Republic of North Macedonia, and Slovenia

According to Frontex, the Western Balkan route is one of the main migratory routes for accessing Europe. From Turkey and Greece, migrants make their way through the Republic of North Macedonia towards Central Europe, via Slovenia, with the final countries of destination being Austria, Germany, Italy, or France. In 2015, the Western Balkan Route registered a record number of arrivals which, in subsequent years, decreased and then started to increase again from 2019 (Frontex 2023). According to the IOM's report *Migration Trends in the Western Balkans in 2022*, most migrants on the Balkan route stem from Afghanistan, Syria, Pakistan, Morocco, and Bangladesh (IOM 2022: 4-5). Along the route, they have

been at least once a victim of violence, exploitation, abuse, or robbery and have experienced health issues (IOM 2022: 5).

Being situated along migratory routes, the countries involved in the ReTrans project face various challenges related to communication requirements in refugee camps and reception centres. The circumstances observed at the borders can be labelled as a humanitarian crisis or emergency due to the inhumane conditions prevailing in densely populated refugee camps and reception centres.

A humanitarian emergency can be classified as "an event or series of events that represents a critical threat to the health, safety, security or wellbeing of a community or other large group of people, usually over a wide area" (Humanitarian Coalition 2023). Humanitarian emergencies or crises are nowadays a typical element of the current international geopolitical situation and mostly originate from conflicts, migration, or health emergencies (Ruiz Rosendo & Radicioni 2023). One of the main characteristics of such emergencies is the vulnerability of the people concerned, which can be defined as "a reduced capacity of individuals or groups to resist and recover from life-threatening hazards and is most often connected to poverty" (Humanitarian Coalition 2023). Migrants in refugee camps or at the borders often fall into this category of vulnerable people (Todorova 2020).

Interpreting in the humanitarian emergencies that take place within border zones is referred to as humanitarian interpreting. Delgado Luchner & Kerbiche (2018) define humanitarian interpreting as a form of interpreting that occurs in contexts where humanitarian organisations are involved:

> The term 'humanitarian interpreting' describes interpreting practices that fall within the legal framework of International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and International Refugee Law and aim to enable humanitarian organizations to communicate with public authorities, and protected individuals/beneficiaries, in order to allow the latter to access their rights (2018: 424).

The situations of crisis or emergencies in which humanitarian interpreting occurs arise in conflict or post-conflict scenarios (Todorova 2021; Ruiz Rosendo & Radicioni 2023). For this reason, it can be framed within the broader context of crisis translation (Federici 2016, 2021; Federici & Declercq 2019), an umbrella term created to denote all language transfer activities, both oral and written, used to mitigate the harm of a crisis which indicates "an event, or series of events, that is non-routine, [and] poses a significant threat and requires a response to mitigate the harm" (Hunt *et al.* 2019: 25). Through interpreting and translation, the

communication flow between the communities affected by the crisis and the institutions active in the field is enabled, information is made accessible, and the risk of harm is reduced (Hunt *et al.* 2019: 25). Studies on crisis translation stress its key role in crisis prevention and mitigation. If integrated into the "humanitarian programming cycle" (Moser-Mercer *et al.* 2014: 142; Moser-Mercer *et al.* 2021: 6), humanitarian interpreting can help both in disaster preparedness as well as in the phase of recovery.

During recent years, several publications (e.g., Delgado Luchner & Kerbiche 2018, Todorova 2020, 2021; Moser-Mercer *et al.* 2014, 2021; Taviano 2020; Radicioni 2021)[3] have dealt with humanitarian interpreting, shedding light on its characteristics and challenges such as positionality, role, agency, clarity, and the lack of or need for specific training of humanitarian interpreters. Tedjouong and Todorova (2021: 102) summarise the main traits of humanitarian interpreters as follows: they are often untrained professionals with a completely different educational background, can belong to the beneficiaries with which they share a cultural and linguistic background (they are sometimes former migrants) or belong to the group of humanitarians. Besides enabling communication between authorities, humanitarian organisations and migrants, humanitarian interpreters often are humanitarian actors (Delgado Luchner & Kerbiche 2018: 424) and provide humanitarian assistance (Ruiz Rosendo & Radicioni 2023). The humanitarian role is also reflected in the perception of their own activity: untrained interpreters are particularly likely to see themselves more as humanitarians than as interpreters. Hence, "their role as interpreters becomes a secondary source of professional identity" (Delgado Luchner & Kerbiche 2018: 424).

3.1. Challenges of humanitarian interpreting

According to Moser-Mercer *et al.* (2014: 143), the main challenges of humanitarian interpreting include "language- and culture-related challenges, role-related challenges and emotional challenges". Although language- and culture-related challenges are not exclusive to humanitarian interpreting, in humanitarian crises the languages spoken by the migrants are remarkably diverse and often present diatopic, diastratic and diaphasic variations. Since it is not always possible to find interpreters for the languages needed, sometimes other strategies such as the use of a pivot language or linguae franca are used (see Čemerin 2020; Taviano 2020). Enabling communication between different parties from diverse cultural backgrounds also means bridging cultural differences. Such differences are

[3] In her 2020 contribution, Ruiz Rosendo provides an overview of the literature on this topic.

visible in the language but also in the way the interactions are conducted (Radicioni 2021: 245). Since interpreting is a culturally embedded practice, "cultural differences between communicating parties may lead to conflicts and exacerbate an already difficult situation" (Radicioni 2021: 232).

In research on humanitarian interpreting various terms are used to designate interpreters working in this field such as *advisors*, *interpreters*, or *(inter-)cultural mediators*, to name but a few. This terminological variety is also reflected in the range of terms employed by interpreters working in this field to refer to themselves. These vary depending on their educational, professional, and cultural background: In some countries, interpreting and mediation are used as synonyms (see Pöchhacker 2008), while in other countries, mediation is seen as a different activity which includes support, advisory activity, and greater involvement (see Radicioni 2021; Todorova 2020). In line with this latter meaning of mediation, interpreters/mediators are considered as "active participants in a mediation process" (Todorova 2020: 157) who can advocate for vulnerable migrants and empower them. For Todorova (2020: 154), it is important that interpreters as mediators be empathetic, i.e., can understand the migrants' perspective, needs in and reactions to specific situations. Through empathy it is possible to communicate in an effective way and to establish a relationship of trust (Todorova 2020: 167).

Delgado Luchner & Kerbiche (2019: 255) state that humanitarian interpreters are embedded in the humanitarian field and therefore "face the same ethical dilemmas as other humanitarian aid workers". Their positionality when they work for NGOs, international organisations or national institutions can also be a challenge (Delgado Luchner & Kerbiche 2018; Todorova 2020). Literature on training programmes for humanitarian interpreters (e.g., Moser-Mercer 2014, 2021; Delgado Luchner & Kerbiche 2019) stresses that humanitarian interpreters need the same ethical competences that are required in other interpreting situations. Delgado Luchner & Kerbiche (2019: 256) claim that the guiding principles should be "humanity, impartiality, neutrality, accuracy, confidentiality and respect". These should be applied with ethical decision making, and with actors being aware of the consequences of their own actions and decisions. Similarly, Prunč (2017) addresses ethical decision making and connects it with the concept of agency proposed by Kinnunen and Koskinen (2010). The definition of agency presented by Kinnunen and Koskinen (2010: 6) as "willingness and ability to act", is expanded by Prunč to encompass the willingness to "subordinate communicative events to a socially recognized value system" (Prunč 2017: 32). In addition to normative postulates such as neutrality, accuracy, and fidelity, which remain firmly entrenched, especially in the

professional translation context, Prunč (2017: 32) argues that maxims such as upholding human rights, promoting equal opportunities, fostering dialogue, minimising conflicts, and protecting the marginalised and deprived are also significant[4].

Further challenges experienced by humanitarian interpreting are the risk of vicarious trauma (e.g., trauma experienced by some interpreters could be reactivated by interpreting an analogous situation) and fraternisation (see Tryuk 2017). In this regard, Tryuk (2017: 191) specifically points out that interpreters are often of the same nationality as the migrants and that it is highly problematic for the interpreter not to feel a bond with the migrant in an interpreted encounter.

The ethical dilemmas humanitarian interpreters face, the unpredictable situations and the encounters and narrations, often very emotionally charged and touching, can be a source of stress (see, for example, Villalobos *et al.* 2021, on interpreters' challenges when working with trauma patients). In her paper on the impact of emotional and psychological factors, Valero-Garcés states that challenging contexts, and sensitive content but also physical, psychological, and environmental factors can place interpreters under "substantial psychological and emotional stress" (2015: 99). These factors are typical of interpreter-mediated encounters in humanitarian crises. In the survey conducted by Moser-Mercer *et al.* (2014: 148), almost a quarter of the interpreters reported experiencing "moments of extreme stress".

This paper aims to contribute to the discourse on humanitarian interpreting by highlighting its key features, the role of interpreters working in the field, and the tasks they perform during migration emergencies in Austria, Greece, the Republic of North Macedonia, and Slovenia.

4. Dataset and methodology

The present study took place as part of the ReTrans project's WP2 (see Section 2). Specifically, the study comprises thirteen interviews with trained and untrained interpreters and eleven representatives from NGOs, public or

[4] In her study, Tălpaş (2016: 241-243) highlights the role of interpreters during and after the war in Afghanistan between 2001 and 2015. Ensuing from the risks to which interpreters were exposed during this period, Tălpaş develops possible strategies for interpreters and users which can be used in future similar armed conflict situations. Specifically, she explores the difficulties interpreters encounter when striving to remain impartial in conflict scenarios, particularly outside the realm of conference interpreting, such as in armed conflicts. This challenge arises in situations where conflicting political and/or ideological perspectives, as well as economic and/or social interests, come together. Interpreters "may be tempted to intervene and water down declarations or formulations, which comes into contradiction with his/her neutrality".

governmental institutions. These interviews were conducted either in person or online from October 2022 to December 2022 (see Table 1 and Table 2). As project partner in charge of this work package, the Republic of North Macedonia drafted the guidelines for the interviews. The document included crucial information on the roles of interviewers and interviewees, diverse types of questions, and the most relevant steps to follow (e.g., preparation, consent of the interviewees). The interviews with the interpreters focused on their biography and job profile, the required competences, and the main challenges encountered. In contrast, the interviews with representatives from public or governmental institutions and NGOs were less structured than those with interpreters. They encompassed a broad open question, as well as questions related to the job profile of the interviewees and their experience with interpreters.

After collecting feedback from all project partners, the interview questions were translated into the national languages. The researchers involved in the project conducted the interviews in English or in the respective national languages of the project partners. Since ReTrans is an Erasmus+ project and student participation is of strategic importance, the researchers also involved their students in the administration of the interviews. Students received helpful recommendations through the guidelines. Additionally, the lead partner organised an online briefing for students titled "Briefing and Brainstorming: Going into the Field". To familiarise themselves with the subject matter, they were also provided with a publication containing a guide for ethnographic interviews (Blommaert & Dong 2010).

Table 1 is based on Ciribuco (2020: 185)[5] and summarises the relevant information concerning the interviews with trained and untrained interpreters.

Participant	**Country of origin**	**Linguistic Repertoire**	**Trained/ untrained**	**Duration**
I_S1[6]	Slovenia	Slovenian	trained interpreter	34:59

[5] In her paper, Ciribuco (2020: 185) presents a table summarising the most important data from the interviews and about the interview participants. In the table, participants were identified using acronyms.

[6] In both tables acronyms are used for the interviewed participants which consist of the letter I for each interpreter, and the letters S, A, NM, or G for the project countries Slovenia, Austria, Republic of North Macedonia, and Greece.

I_S2	Iran	Farsi, Dari	untrained interpreter	28:39
I_S3	Palestine	Arabic	untrained interpreter	29:54
I_A1	Russia	Ukrainian, Russian, German, Croatian, English, Italian	untrained interpreter	30:46
I_A2	Syria	Arab, English, German	untrained interpreter	2 parts: 43:17 3:46
I_A3	Russia	Russian, German, English	student volunteer	36:45
I_A4	Ukraine	Ukrainian, Russian, German	student interpreter	25:23
I_A5	Serbia	Russian, BCS, English	trained interpreter	58:59
I_G1	Greece	English, French	trained interpreter	13:52
I_NM1	Iraq	Arabic, English, Macedonian	untrained interpreter	37:03
I_NM2	Iran	Not known	untrained interpreter	9:18
I_NM3	Macedonia	Arabic, English (sometimes)	untrained interpreter	9:07
I_NM4	Iran	Macedonian, Farsi, English	untrained interpreter	12:54

Table 1: Interpreters interviewed

Data from the interviews reveal a distinct profile among untrained interpreters, primarily originating from the countries corresponding to the language demand. Despite pursuing diverse professions such as architecture, dentistry, business ownership, commerce, agricultural engineering, archaeology,

translation studies (student volunteer), and even academic linguistics, these individuals unexpectedly assumed the role of interpreters following the migrant crisis in 2015. This means they had either already worked with an NGO, or they were simply approached as native speakers by authorities amid the migration crisis (e.g., the police or customs officers). Trained interpreters, on the other hand, typically had prior formal training, often culminating in degrees in translation and interpreting studies, specialising in languages such as English, French, Russian, Serbian, and Croatian. What sets some of the trained interpreters apart is their early bilingual upbringing, laying the foundation for their subsequent pursuit of advanced language studies.

Table 2, also based on Ciribuco (2020: 185; see footnote 5), summarises the relevant information concerning the interviews with NGOs, public or governmental institutions:

Participant	**NGO/public or governmental institution**	**Country of origin**	**Duration**
S_S1	public institution	Slovenia	30:45
S_S2	public institution	Slovenia	21:03
S_A1	governmental institution	Austria	19:29
S_G1	NGO	Greece	21:54
S_G2	governmental institution	Greece	22:24
S_NM1	NGO	the Republic of North Macedonia	2 parts: 15:15 6:45
S_NM2	NGO	the Republic of North Macedonia	14:02
S_NM3	NGO	the Republic of North Macedonia	15:40

S_NM4	governmental institution	the Republic of North Macedonia	21:01
S_NM5	governmental institution	the Republic of North Macedonia	19:03
S_NM6	governmental institution	the Republic of North Macedonia	5:12

Table 2: NGO, public and governmental representatives interviewed

The group of public and governmental institution representatives (see Table 2) encompasses educators specialising in national languages at local educational institutions, along with officials from ministries (e.g., Crisis Management Centers, Sector for Migration, Integration of Refugees and Foreigners, and Humanitarian Aid, Ministry of Immigration and Asylum and the Service for the Protection of Unaccompanied Minors contribute to this diverse spectrum). The profile of NGO representatives, on the other hand, encompasses individuals engaged in various roles across a wide spectrum of organisations. Among them are dedicated professionals working diligently within refugee camps, and protection officers collaborating with UNHCR. Administrators at regional centres specialising in remote interpreting also contribute significantly to this diverse group, alongside representatives from organisations such as the Red Cross. These individuals, actively involved in the frontlines of humanitarian efforts, yield an invaluable perspective shaped by their experiences in providing aid and assistance to marginalised communities. Following the interviews, transcription was conducted. In cases where the transcripts were in languages other than English, machine translation was employed, and subsequently, the translated content was edited in English to assess the suitability of the interview material.

The data analysis process began with a meticulous examination of the interview transcripts, aimed at discerning recurring patterns within the responses. Subsequently, these identified patterns underwent a theory-based and data-driven coding process (Kuckartz 2018), wherein they were systematically assigned to pertinent categories. For the theory-based categories, we used literature on humanitarian interpreting (see Section 3). Data-driven categories were built up during the coding process. This qualitative analytical approach ensured a nuanced exploration of the collected data, facilitating the extraction of meaningful insights from the rich and diverse information gathered during the interviews.

5. Analysis and discussion

This section addresses the categories detected in the coding process: operational challenges faced by humanitarian interpreters which encompass lack of training, additional tasks and working hours as well as role-related challenges and expectations.

5.1. Lack of training

Most of the research shows that humanitarian interpreting often involves the use of untrained interpreters. According to Hale (2015: 68), this is due to "a lack of a universal requirement for all community interpreters[7] to undergo compulsory pre-service training, even in countries where certification systems have been in place". Still, mostly this has been due to the general lack of training programmes in the required languages. Untrained interpreters often use interpreting as a part-time job during their studies in other academic disciplines. These interpreters also often think that their bilingualism makes them suitable as interpreters, which is a view shared by their clients (Hale 2015: 68).

I_A3 mentioned that their master's studies greatly benefited their work as an interpreter, particularly because they specialised in dialogue interpreting. During their bachelor's studies, which focused primarily on conference interpreting and technical translation, they felt that they were unable to acquire relevant knowledge for their role as a community interpreter.

I_A4 believed that their studies in Ukraine provided them with a solid foundation in translation and interpreting, allowing them to specialise later in the field of community interpreting. On the other hand, I_NM1 highlighted the disparity between training programmes, which predominantly focus on theoretical knowledge, and the actual, real-life situations, which proved to be entirely different. I_NM4 highlights the changing language needs for community interpreting and the challenges this poses. For instance, at the start of the 2015 migrant crisis, there was a significant demand for Arabic language interpreters. Nowadays refugees are arriving from all over the world. No interpreters are currently available in the Republic of North Macedonia for Urdu, Punjabi, Turkish, or Hindu. They further mention the extensive knowledge necessary in

[7] Humanitarian interpreting can be ascribed to the broader field of community interpreting. Undoubtedly, both can be carried out in humanitarian crisis situations. Still, the broader term community interpreting is mostly used when discussing interpreting in institutional settings (Fuchshuber 2021: 104), where community interpreters interpret between minority language speakers and the service providing or other relevant institutions (Hale 2015: 66). For a detailed discussion of humanitarian interpreting, see Section 3.

this setting. Interpreters who have only acquired language proficiency should also receive cultural and traditional knowledge related to the languages they interpret. Furthermore, training in other fields is deemed essential. In many cases, psychologists from the Red Cross are unavailable, and interpreters and cultural mediators step in to provide support. Equipping them with basic tools would be beneficial in assisting their handling of specific situations. In emergency situations, individuals without formal interpreter training were enlisted for assistance. I_S3, who has resided in Slovenia for many years and operates an Arabic restaurant, shared that authorities reached out to them for assistance mainly because of their linguistic skills.

NGO representatives and public service officials also hold distinct perspectives regarding interpreter training. The NGO representative S_G1 thinks that the interpreters should have a university degree. The untrained interpreters are valuable because they speak the languages the NGO needs; however, most of them fall behind in some areas in terms of professionalism or the interventions they may make. S_G1 briefly mentioned that the NGO where they work offers interpreter seminars a few times a year. At the end of the course, there are exams, and those who pass can receive additional training and potentially a job opportunity. In addition to that, some organisations provide interpreter seminars. Since there are no university-level interpreting programmes available for needed languages like Farsi, Dari, Somali, and Urdu, S_G2 collaborates with a civil society organisation called METAdrasi. METAdrasi has a substantial pool of interpreters and offers a comprehensive interpreting course.

S_NM3, an NGO representative, emphasises the significance of linguistic competence, asserting: "(...) linguistic competence is important, because unfortunately, the language used in the asylum procedure is very specific. (...) one word translated, interpreted wrongly can make an enormous difference in the way you are looking at the case." Indeed, mistranslations or misinterpretations of specific words can significantly impact how a case is perceived. Conversely, another representative advocates for comprehensive training beyond linguistic skills for interpreters who have chosen this profession. This broader training should encompass aspects such as psychosocial support, effective communication methods, body language as a form of visual communication, and precise interpretation to prevent errors that could lead to misunderstandings, thus underscoring the seriousness of the interpreter's role, and emphasising the need for meticulous and accurate interpreting to avoid potential mistakes with far-reaching consequences: "(...) when the person has chosen to be an interpreter, there should be additional training like psychosocial support, way of communicating, body language as visual communication with people, and

adequate interpreting without mistakes that could result in us making mistakes, so I would say that it is a very serious job."

S_S1 discusses the brief, 96-hour training programmes offered at their organisation, the Adult Education Centre, as part of the Migrant Mentorship Model. Initially, mentors were trained and later took on roles as teachers and interpreters, subsequently training their respective groups. S_S1 also suggests that systematic training should be extended not only to interpreters for various settings but also to public authority representatives. In a similar vein, S-A1 also emphasised the significance of training institutional representatives. At their institution, training modules for intercultural and transcultural language facilitators were developed. These modules include specific training for institutional representatives, referred to as language mediators, who frequently interpret for clients. This specialised training helps them perform their role as neutral interpreters more effectively. In some institutions, interpreters receive focused training and ongoing education. On the other hand, S_A1 noted that interpreters involved with their target group, which presents unique needs and challenges, also benefit from specialised training and ongoing education.

Of the thirteen interpreters interviewed, three had completed interpreter training, two respondents were interpreting students, and seven were untrained interpreters. This corresponds with most studies, which showed that untrained interpreters are often used in the setting of humanitarian interpreting (see, for example, Todorova 2020: 157; Fitchett 2019: 193). As is often the case in crisis situations, the main reason according to Čemerin (2020) is that there is no other choice because trained interpreters with knowledge of the languages in question are unavailable on the market (see also Fitchett 2019: 193). During the refugee crisis in Croatia in 2015, for example, it was mainly untrained interpreters, called language mediators, who worked there, mostly immigrants from Iraq, Iran or Syria who were already living in Croatia, but who had no training in languages or interpreting. Owing to the lack of language mediators, other volunteers were also hired who mainly used Google Translate or Google Images to help migrants express what they needed (Čemerin 2020: 47-49). The usage of untrained interpreters is a facet of the humanitarian interpreting setting for which Moser-Mercer *et al.* (2014) make the following interesting comparison:

High-level experts in other fields, such as air traffic controllers or pianists, would take years to hone their skills before using them professionally. Not so casual interpreters who are flung into a communication scenario without any possibility of developing even the most rudimentary skill set (Moser-Mercer *et al.* 2014: 147). Additionally, the above cited researchers argue that interpreting requires skills that are paramount for the successful completion of an interpreted

encounter. Untrained interpreters are often unable to meet the needs of a multilingual communication scenario (Moser-Mercer *et al.* 2014: 146). In their opinion, quality interpreting services require an in-depth understanding of at least two languages and cultures and a good grasp of the subject matter at hand, and/or the diplomatic/legal/humanitarian context. Communication serves a purpose; language acts as the conduit for transmitting messages. Furthermore, ideas extend beyond the mere accumulation of the words used to articulate them. The meaning of a word surpasses its definition in the dictionary, and finding equivalent expressions in different languages can prove challenging, particularly when languages and cultures are vastly distinct (Moser-Mercer *et al.* 2014: 145).

The difference in languages and cultures indicated by Moser-Mercer *et al.* (2014) calls for a broader approach in training that should entail many other relevant aspects besides language and interpreting skills. In their case study conducted in Jordan and Kenya, Moser-Mercer *et al.* (2021) criticise the fact that training for humanitarian interpreters is frequently developed in regions outside the conflict-affected areas, typically in North or West regions. Interestingly, they make the case for training programmes that are "designed in, and for, that country/region, and embedded in a larger and more ambitious national strategy that aims to create a pool of trained interpreters and associations that support ongoing professional development and the sustainability of that capacity" (Moser-Mercer *et al.* 2021: 21). The curriculum should concentrate primarily on the humanitarian context. On the other hand, it needs to be broad enough to enable the participants to take on other assignments in the local and/or regional market (Moser-Mercer *et al.* 2021: 21-22). In terms of training, Fitchett (2019: 193) believes that even short training programmes lasting only a few hours or days can be highly beneficial, a perspective largely supported by statements from NGO representatives and public service officials (S_S1, S-S2, S_A1, S_G1, and S_G2). This aligns with the earlier assertion that systematic training should be extended not only to interpreters across different settings but also to public authority representatives. This objective is also central to the ReTrans project, which seeks to develop training materials for all stakeholders.

5.2. Additional tasks

The expectations regarding the roles of humanitarian interpreters vary significantly, with some perspectives acknowledging and supporting their diverse responsibilities, while others do not. The primary task of interpreters is to facilitate communication between participants who do not speak the same language and do not belong to the same culture. Interpreters may be asked to help asylum seekers and to be available to them even after the interviews in the

asylum procedure (Pöllabauer 2021: 54-57). Moser-Mercer (2015: 311) states that the tasks of interpreters in humanitarian crises cover a wide range of activities besides interpreting. Interpreters help mediate between aid workers and the recipients of humanitarian aid; they may also be involved in food distribution or even help convoys passing through checkpoints.

The tasks of community interpreters often go beyond interpreting because, as Hale points out, "those who require the services of interpreters rely on them to access or to deliver the most fundamental community services" (Hale 2015: 66). The interviews also confirm this expanded role of interpreters. In some cases, performing other tasks is inherent in the very motivation to work as an interpreter in reception centres or other counselling centres. For example, I-A4 said that she mainly wanted to help her compatriots from Ukraine to settle in their new country of residence. In addition to interpreting, she also collected all kinds of information about where refugees from Ukraine could get financial support or find accommodation. The nonprofessional interpreter I_S3 stated that there were many jobs at the border beyond interpreting, i.e., helping the police with registration, helping the migrants with camping, or bringing them food. The interpreter also helped with paperwork, documentation, and phone calls (communication with the family). Even when migrants needed a SIM card, I_S3 helped and accompanied migrants several times to different services and/or offices. Even interpreting included a range of different settings, as I_S3 was also assisting during medical consultations. Additional tasks were also performed by I_NM1. Over a period of six or seven months, he intensively helped a family with the reunification procedure. Interestingly, what I_NM2 finds most rewarding is that she can explain to the migrants what they can do and what opportunities they have in the new country, especially because no one else does. The concept of agency, which was briefly mentioned in 3.1., is described by I_NM3. The willingness to act seems to exist among the interpreters at the Red Cross: we […] aren't just translators or interpreters. We are also medical personnel, psychologists, and logisticians; therefore, we constantly help each other. We really are a team. If someone needs help, I always come to their aid, I don't just sit idly knowing that I am a translator and that's it, that's my only job. […] I am very happy to be able to help someone who is in need.

Service users and providers often expect an interpreter to perform duties beyond their scope as an interpreter. This can include non-interpreting services such as filling out forms, explaining concepts or sharing one's opinions (Bancroft *et al.* 2015: 93). The participating institutional representative S_A1 expresses a different opinion in her interview. She states that it is a challenge to maintain the balance between empathy and dissociation. In an interpreted encounter, they do

not expect the interpreters to give any well-intentioned advice or assistance; they should not express their private opinions or views. But often when the counsellors or interpreters already know the client, it is not at all easy to assume one role and then shed it again afterward.

As previously discussed, interpreters frequently take on additional tasks in emergency situations, either voluntarily or as an assignment, whether out of volunteerism or as part of their assigned duties. This aligns with the observations made by Hale (2015), who noted that interpreters were often called upon to fulfil supplementary roles. Among the interpreters interviewed for this study, the undertaking of additional tasks was predominantly a voluntary endeavour. Interpreters also had other tasks during the Croatian migrant crisis in 2015. These mainly involved translation of brochures, posters, or information boards. However, these did not prove to be effective because the migrants did not want to read the written information. Instead, they insisted that it be conveyed to them orally by the staff on-site, which had a calming effect on them and gave them a feeling of emotional support. Sometimes the interpreters were also encouraged to look for family members of the refugees. The reason given was their language skills, which enabled them to correctly pronounce the names of the people they were seeking (Čemerin 2020: 49-51). Radicioni describes the expectations of the Italian NGO clinic studied (Emergency ONG Onlus) in the context of healthcare interpretation, which include even proposing treatment options and provision of healthcare education (in agreement with a doctor, if present), offering assistance with reception and admission procedures, and carrying out health and social services orientation activities (Radicioni 2021: 239).

5.3. Working hours

Harkensee (2021: 285) emphasises that organisations collaborating with humanitarian interpreters bear a moral responsibility to ensure interpreters' well-being. This obligation should mean establishing suitable working conditions, including appropriate work hours, breaks, and time off, while also aiding interpreters in upholding ethical standards. Given that interpreters often encounter distressing discussions, regular debriefings and mental health assistance should also be provided.

Several participating interpreters made a statement regarding working hours. I_A3 stated that these could be very unsociable especially if you are the only interpreter at an arrival centre. Long working hours are also result from interpreters often being asked to do something constantly, so they are unable to take a break. In these situations, an interpreter must set boundaries. An untrained interpreter, I_S3, recounted that they would receive calls at 4 a.m., urgently

requesting interpreters at the border during the initial stages of the refugee crisis. They added, "you have to be ready to respond as soon as they call. However, once we arrived, we often found ourselves working for at least ten to twelve hours, sometimes even longer because the duration was uncertain." Similarly, an untrained interpreter, I_S2, shared that interpreting sessions frequently occurred during the evenings. They explained, "we would wait for the migrants to arrive, often starting around 11 or 12 at night and continuing until the morning". The duration of these interpretation sessions varied, ranging from as short as 10 minutes to as long as 5 hours.

Working hours are briefly addressed in the literature. For instance, Čemerin (2020) reports that in Croatia in 2015, interpreters worked 12-hour shifts. In some cases, one shift could last for an entire week at the camp, after which interpreters were replaced by others. While this shift model applied to the Red Cross as a whole, it posed significant demands on the staff, both psychologically and physically (Čemerin 2020: 49). Socarrás-Estrada (2015: 119) briefly mentions the length of the interpreted session as something an interpreter should clarify before accepting an assignment. In her opinion, it is necessary that interpreters be clear about their time schedules especially if it is not possible to stay as long as needed.

5.4. Role-related challenges and expectations

This section presents a review of the discussion regarding role-related challenges commonly mentioned by a large number of interviewed interpreters, as well as authors in the literature and which have been partly broached in the previous sections.

Role limitations in community interpreting are a challenging task (García-Beyaert 2015: 369-370). In this regard, interpreters are in the same position as therapists, civil servants, social workers etc. As she observes, community interpreters as professionals are in a special position. Not only do they provide interpretation services but at the same time they also "become an integral part of another service delivery, even though you are most often not trained in how that service is provided" (García-Beyaert 2015: 370).

I_A5 says that role expectations may exist in relation to transfer-related tasks. For instance, I_NM4 describes situations where the person requesting translation may have unrealistic expectations, such as expecting rapid translation or asking new questions before the interpretation is complete or may take advantage of

their communicative autonomy[8]. I_A5 provides a specific example from psychotherapy where a client, during a brief absence by the psychotherapist, shares confidential information with the interpreter but requests that it not be shared with the therapist. This establishes a unilateral alliance between the client and the interpreter.

While the client addressed I_A5 as an individual rather than in their role as an interpreter, this situation raises ethical questions about loyalty. Such role conflicts can also emerge during the interpreting process, such as when the client criticises the therapist. This dilemma poses the question of whether the interpreter's loyalty should lie with the client or the therapist, creating a conflict of loyalties. Interestingly, the interpreter admits that she remains uncertain about the answer to this ethical dilemma despite considerable contemplation.

Subsequently in the interview, I_A5 described their concept of loyalty as loyalty to the spoken word and not to a position or an aspiration. They also refer to the concept of neutrality, which to them means moving away from one's ideas to some extent, but not to the point of self-denial: "but just to know that okay, as an interpreter I am there so that things can be said, even if they are unpleasant for me." Some interpreters glossed over their role in regard to cultural specifics. Only one interpreter, I_NM2, thinks that it is unnecessary to point out potential cultural misunderstandings to the NGO representatives. I_G1 clearly stated that interpreters should be familiar with the religion, habits, and customs of the refugees because these affect their everyday lives. Especially when it comes to migrants who are in a vulnerable emotional situation, it is crucial to respect them. An interpreter should not insult them, even if unintentionally. Interpreters should become acquainted with issues that concern refugees before an interpreted encounter, to have clarity on what they consider more important than interpreters do. Such an approach makes it easier for the migrants to feel more comfortable in difficult circumstances. I_G1 was guided to highlight cultural misunderstandings to the NGO representative. I_NM4 mentions that institutional representatives often lack knowledge of migrants' culture and traditions, requiring interpreters to explain how to behave and accept these traditions to prevent unpleasant situations. Further advantages to having knowledge of cultural specifics were described by I_NM1, who said that migrants are more likely to connect with interpreters if they come from the same cultural background, have lived in the same environment, and know exactly what their habits and customs are. On the other hand, such interpreters know better what

[8] Communicative autonomy is "the capacity of each party in an encounter to be responsible for and in control of his or her own communication" (Allen & Bancroft 2015: 75).

the migrants need and how they can adapt to the new social environment. I_NM3 points out that the knowledge of cultural aspects is important not only for the migrants but also for the interpreter. For her, it is easier to communicate with women migrants or children, whereas male interpreters might find it difficult to communicate with female migrants. I_A4 specifically points out the area of knowledge regarding the education systems, describing situations in which children in Austria should be enrolled in the same class they previously attended in Ukraine. The question arose as to which school in Austria the child should be enrolled in, and the Austrian education system had to be explained to the migrant. The same applies to the concept of the "Matura" (secondary school leaving exams), which does not exist in Ukraine in the same sense but only as a different kind of examination. Role expectations are frequently associated with ethical considerations, as highlighted by the interviewed institutional representatives. S_A1 briefly touches upon role expectations, emphasising the importance of a clear understanding of roles, along with discretion and confidentiality as crucial ethical principles. Additionally, precise information reproduction is deemed highly significant for their professional staff, particularly in medical and psychological contexts.

S_G1, a representative of an NGO, advocates for a well-defined understanding of roles. In their view, interpreters should be aware of the boundaries of their interpretation role and refrain from taking initiatives that do not originate from the person requiring interpretation. For instance, when S_G1 wishes to communicate with a parent, the interpreter should faithfully convey the exact words spoken, without adding, omitting, or assuming meanings. Cultural nuances were also frequently observed, notably by S_S1, who noticed variations in the length and content of questions during interpretation. Occasionally, questions transformed into conversations, with interpreters adding explanations or information, leaving S_S1 uncertain about whether the interpreter was suggesting an answer. S_G1 relates the conveyance of cultural specifics with the naming of the interpreters. At the outset of the migration crisis, they were engaged not only as interpreters but as cultural mediators. In addition to their interpreting duties, they were tasked with assisting their colleagues in comprehending the cultural backgrounds of the individuals they interacted with.

As evident from the insights provided by our interviewed partners, numerous challenges can arise during an interpreted session, particularly in terms of the interpreter's role. Hale's study (2015: 329-330) further underscores the significant differences that can exist in user expectations and role perceptions. Regarding role typologies, Pöllabauer (2015: 356) observes that "interpreter role constructions oscillate on a continuum between non-involvement and active

agency (even intrusiveness)", a concept that also emerges from our interviews. In the role of a conduit, the interpreter is seen primarily as a message receiver, "having minimal impact on the production of the message and its understanding" (Aguirre Fernández Bravo 2019: 65). According to Hsieh (2008: 1371), this role encompasses two primary goals: to strengthen the relationship between the institutional representative and the migrant and to convey comprehensive information. The significance of the second goal is evident not only to institutional representatives but also as mentioned by I_NM4 above. In conflict situations, as noted by Hoedemaekers & Soeters (2009: 341), interpreters may take on two additional roles. The first is the author role, where interpreters add individual words to the interpretation in addition to the verbatim in the target language or give the listener some advice or rephrase what is being said to make it easier to understand. The second role is the principal role, where interpreters independently intervene in the conversation, such as by asking follow-up questions or providing autonomous answers. These roles, which grant interpreters greater agency, are categorised by Hsieh (2008: 1375-1379) as the manager role, highlighting the interpreter's active participation in influencing the communication process.

Assuming this role is not considered desirable, according to the institutional representative S-G1. Another aspect of the interpreter's role, mentioned by I_A5, is outlined in the "Do's and Don'ts" of the Guide to humanitarian interpreting. The guide suggests that requests not to interpret everything, as discussed earlier, are not acceptable. Instead, it emphasises the importance of interpreting "accurately and in full" (Translators Without Borders & Save the Children, nn.: 8). However, existing research may not necessarily align with this perspective. For instance, in Croatia in 2015, interpreters served not only as language mediators but also as cultural mediators for other on-site volunteers. They provided guidance on body language, non-verbal communication, cultural aspects of different ethnic groups, behaviours, traditions, and more.

Both the Red Cross and the coordinator of the Jesuit Refugee Service Centre supported this approach (Čemerin 2020: 51). An Italian intercultural mediator, active as an interpreter during peak migrant arrivals from 2009 to 2014, highlighted the knowledge gap between migrants and institutions. This gap was particularly significant when Italian institutions interacted with migrants unfamiliar with the Italian state, its laws, rules, and culture. In such situations, it was not useful to interpret just words (Filmer and Federici 2018: 247).

The advisory role also holds importance in conflict situations. Tălpaş (2016: 248) portrays interpreters for foreign troops in Afghanistan primarily as cultural mediators who advise their unit on organisational matters. Interpreting becomes

a secondary task, often blurring the line between interpreting and counselling. Todorova's findings (2020: 156-157) suggest that interpreter ethics training guides them "as they seek a right course of action, and they navigate between their roles as conduits, clarifiers, cultural brokers, and advocates. Decisions are made swiftly, and adjustments are made based on moment-to-moment dynamics".

Conclusion

This study has shed light on operational as well as role-related challenges and expectations several challenges faced by humanitarian interpreters within the partner countries of Austria, Slovenia, the Republic of North Macedonia, and Greece, i.e., lack of training, additional tasks and working hours as well as role-related challenges and expectations.

With respect to the lack of training, divergent perspectives emerged, with some interpreters expressing the inadequacy of their education in community interpreting during their formal studies, while others found a solid foundation in translation and interpreting beneficial for later specialisation. The importance of basic knowledge in psychosocial support and effective communication methods was stressed, given interpreters' roles in providing support. It is evident that humanitarian interpreting frequently involves the participation of untrained interpreters. This is primarily due to the absence of comprehensive training programmes in the required languages at university level. It is therefore not surprising that untrained interpreters were recognized for their linguistic skills, especially by NGOs. However, additional training, particularly in professionalism (e.g., neutrality) and appropriate intervention strategies were mentioned as necessary for untrained interpreters. Public institution representatives, on the other hand, stressed the need for systematic training, extending beyond humanitarian interpreters to include public authority representatives, thus highlighting the diverse training requirements within the humanitarian interpreting landscape.

The findings further show that in addition to their core interpreting responsibilities, humanitarian interpreters frequently find themselves engaged in various tasks that extend well beyond language mediation. These tasks, as reported by interpreters in the interviews, include assisting migrants in securing financial support, finding accommodation, aiding the police in registration processes, facilitating camping logistics, providing food, guiding migrants through reunification procedures, assisting with paperwork, making necessary calls, and supporting during medical consultations, among other responsibilities. This diversified role illustrates the vital and dynamic nature of humanitarian

interpreting, where interpreters often function as key support figures for migrants navigating stressful and unfamiliar circumstances. There is, however, no unanimous consensus on whether interpreters should in fact take on these additional tasks, and perspectives on the matter may differ among practitioners and scholars. Simultaneously, service users and providers often expect interpreters to take on roles that transcend their traditional scope. However, it is crucial to note that, according to them, interpreters are not anticipated to provide well-intentioned advice or assistance or express private opinions or views. This distinction reinforces the delicate balance humanitarian interpreters must maintain between their interpretative roles and the diverse tasks they may undertake in their commitment to aiding those in need.

With respect to working hours, the findings have shown that interpreters often grapple with demanding working hours. The nature of their responsibilities may lead to extended working hours, sometimes without the opportunity to take breaks. The challenges may intensify when interpreters receive urgent calls, even in the early hours of the morning, or are urgently requested at a specific location. During the time of crisis, interpreting sessions were frequently scheduled during the evenings. As a result, the unpredictable and strenuous working hours may demand of humanitarian interpreters to set boundaries.

The findings regarding the role expectations have shown fuzzy boundaries and, in some cases, roles even being negotiated during the interpreted interactions. In the perspectives of the interpreters examined in this study, the theme of neutrality emerges prominently. For the interpreters, neutrality involves a delicate balance, requiring a departure from personal biases while maintaining a sense of self-authenticity. This nuanced understanding entails acknowledging that the conveyed messages may sometimes be unpleasant, yet it emphasises the interpreter's commitment to impartiality without compromising their own identity. As a result, interpreters often find themselves inadequately prepared to meet the multifaceted demands of the field. The findings also highlight the essential role played by cultural knowledge in humanitarian interpreting. Contrary to the opinion of Tryuk (2017: 191, see Section 3), who points out that the same cultural background or nationality of migrants and interpreters is problematic, the findings have shown that some interviewees seem to consider it as a mitigating factor. Beyond language proficiency, interpreters should continuously acquire cultural knowledge related to the languages they interpret.

Another significant finding of this study revolves around the complex and, at times, unrealistic role expectations placed on humanitarian interpreters. For instance, there is an expectation for interpreters to deliver rapid translations and accommodate new questions before completing the interpretation. Some

individuals may even share confidential information exclusively with the interpreter, leading to ethical dilemmas surrounding loyalty.

This study has explored various aspects of the work carried out by humanitarian interpreters, a role that holds immense significance in the process of "welcoming migrants to EU countries" (Tavanio 2020: 24, emphasis in the original). Bancroft *et al.* (2015) aptly describe interpreters in this context as individuals who provide a voice, dignity, and humanity to countless individuals worldwide. The insights gathered from interviews with interpreters participating in the ReTrans project reveal that their role extends far beyond mere interpretation, as interpreters, in these specific situations, not only facilitate communication but also actively engage as partners with humanitarian personnel in advocating for vulnerable individuals like refugees (see, also, Todorova, 2020). Our findings are also in line with those by Jiang and Feng (2018) who recognise the interpreters' active role as challenging, given their need to be both flexible and invisible.

Finally, our exploration has unveiled intriguing distinctions not only between trained and untrained interpreters but also among those affiliated with organisations, like NGOs, versus freelance interpreters. The dynamic nature of responsibilities, extending beyond traditional language mediation, resonates with similar findings in fields such as medicine (see Leanza 2005). This indicates that humanitarian interpreting shares significant parallels with interpreting in diverse contexts. Rather than accentuating disparities based on settings, researchers are encouraged to address commonalities. As Downie (2020) rightly states, "interpreting is interpreting", and variations may frequently stem from the interpreter's employment status —whether employed, freelance, or volunteering. Recognizing these shared elements enriches our understanding of humanitarian interpreting and promotes a unified perspective that goes beyond the divisions imposed by differences in interpreting settings.

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