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To the organizers of the 5TH International Conference and 1ST National Conference on Interpreting & Translating in Public Services in Alcalà:

Please find enclosed my contribution “Cross-Cultural Aspects of Community Interpreting in Italy” to the conference (in Microsoft Word, ca. 2700 words)

I would like to take the opportunity to wish you a Happy New Year, and look forward to meeting with you and participating in what promises to be a highly stimulating conference in February.

Best regards,

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CROSS-CULTURAL ASPECTS OF COMMUNITY INTERPRETING IN ITALY

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Italy's long coast makes it an ideal target for immigration from many directions. Although Italy was until a few decades a country of emigration rather than immigration, its relatively recent economic development into what has made it one of the wealthier European countries has reversed this trend. Unlike some of the other European countries who have had a more gradual flow of immigration over the last 2-3 decades, and now have a large 2nd and 3rd generation 'immigrant' population that is well integrated into the majority culture, Italy is having trouble - politically, culturally and materially - coping with a large, sudden and fast influx of immigrants. Not only does it lack the infrastructure necessary to absorb these groups, but it still has not been through a process of self-analysis and discussion about the pros and cons of assimilation/integration policies etc. that were the norm in Scandinavia and the UK for example, for decades, allowing the majority population to come to terms with a new, multicultural form of society. The political situation, with the rise of federalism in the Northern League phenomenon, for example, is hardly conducive to a smooth transition to a multicultural society. In terms of community interpreting¹, where the onus of providing services has so far has been with local authorities and NGO's – and who are generally doing an excellent job of this given the meagre resources available – the advantage is of course that they can learn from other countries with longer experience, without committing the same mistakes. Political and popular good will is of course a pre-requirement for this to happen.

With the rapid increase of immigration in Italy, however, ethnic minorities who do not speak Italian are finding it increasingly difficult to make their voice heard. Unlike a number of other EU and non-EU countries² who are providing facilities and services to cater to the new

¹ I have chosen to use the Anglo-Saxon form "community interpreting" rather than "interpreting for public services" only because it is slightly broader, but the distinction, for the purposes of this paper, is negligible.

² Notably Scandinavia, Canada, Australia but also the UK, Germany, France, the US to mention only a few.

citizens, Italy still lacks not only the infrastructure to manage this situation but lacks the political and popular will to implement systematic integration policies. Complicating the situation even further is the general lack of awareness among service providers of the importance and difficulties of cross-cultural communication - and language in particular - which does not bode well for the growth of community interpreting services. Not only are service providers reluctant to consider the problems inherent in cross-cultural dynamics and to adopt a democratic approach to these dynamics, they are generally not willing (with some exceptions) to invest the time and money and effort necessary to recruit and train quality interpreters. More often than not, untrained interpreters, especially for the non-European languages, are recruited on the understanding that 'knowing the language' is sufficient. If speaking in and being understood in one's own language is a fundamental prerequisite for civil rights, this situation does not guarantee equal access to statutory services. Data from a survey on community interpreting at our faculty (SSLiMIT, University of Bologna³) has shown that there are fortunately a number of exceptions to this rule among the hospitals in towns or cities with large immigrant populations⁴. However, the author's experience as a community interpreter at the city court in Bologna has demonstrated a miserable lack of professionalism in their recruiting policies, quality checks and pay scales of the interpreting service, symptomatic of the low status of this service⁵. If the onus of 'successful communication', both at a linguistic and cultural level now lies with the interpreter (as it largely does in the Italian situation, the present author argues), this puts an enormous responsibility on the interpreter's shoulder.

1. POWER ISSUES AFFECTING THE COMMUNICATION PROCESS AND THE INTERLOCUTORS' COMMUNICATIVE STRATEGIES

Italy is, historically, a deeply hierarchical country and this is reflected in its institutions. It comes even more strongly to the fore, I believe, in the meeting between the majority and

³ Elena Tomassini, has reported on some of the preliminary results of this survey in another paper presented at this conference.

⁴ For example in the Emilia Romagna area and in Palermo, as Stefania Putignano describes her contribution to the present conference

⁵ My own experience was that I was recruited to this service on the basis of a casual conversation with a police officer. I have never been asked to show credentials nor have my language abilities or translation/interpreting skills ever been tested or quality checked. The pay is so low that it is hardly worth the bother of collecting it. The 'feeling' I get from communicating with administrative, clerical and legal staff is that the interpreters' status is about as high as that of the cleaning personnel.

minority cultures, especially in institutionalized settings and above all in the legal system⁶. Below are listed, rather schematically, some of the factors the author believes impinges on, indeed often govern, cross-cultural encounters between host country institution and client.

- *host country representative vs. immigrant*, the host country is empowered both as a representative or symbol of the country in which the client is sojourning, perhaps applying for residence status and therefore in a position of seeking favour, and as a representative of an authoritative institution within the host country, especially when dealing with legal institutions.
- *class hierarchies* represent the empowered versus disempowered on an ‘intrinsic’ scale: in most countries a judge/doctor/bureaucrat will be a member of the middle/upper middle classes frequently - but of course not always - the defendant or applicant for social services will more often than not belong to the numerically larger ‘lower’ classes; furthermore, the strict hierarchical nature of Italian society and specifically of its legal institutions renders it extremely difficult for the interpreter, let alone the client, to challenge or question the magistrate/judge’s authority and not follow his/her instructions⁷, especially if the interpreter him/herself comes from a marginalized and low-status ethnic group as many community interpreters (for non-European languages) do in Italy.
- *historical (colonial) issues* also come into play here in a 1st-3rd world perspective: if the client is a national of an ex-European colony, which makes up for a large part of the globe, the historical relationship between colonized-colonizer will still, I would argue, influence the relationship between them, placing the client at a disadvantage.
- *different institutional-rhetorical traditions (courtroom, immigration authorities etc.)*: Western linguistic and supra-linguistic communication forms for example in the courtroom vs. other, possibly ‘traditional’ linguistic modes and rhetorical behaviour forms, especially in the context of a hierarchical relationship (courtesy codes and politeness markers, mastery of bureaucratic language, supra-linguistic behavioural codes). This may appear as threatening to the judge, as Sabine Fenton remarks: “The use of an interpreter in the courtroom increases the complexity of communication and adds an element of unpredictability, hence the attempt to

⁶ Which of course is hierarchical in a monolingual situation too, but profoundly exacerbated in cross-cultural encounters.

⁷Elio Ballardini argues that, although formally outdated, in the current legal system the judge still considers the interpreter to be his/her helper. In an interview with a magistrate in the context of the above-mentioned survey, this attitude was quite explicitly adopted.

regulate and constrain the interpreter's role to that of a machine with no surprises" (Fenton 1995: 31).

- *different linguistic forms* The different uses of metaphor can have disastrous consequences both for comprehension/clarity and for 'truth value' of metaphor versus 'fact'. The use of metaphor by a client in a hospital room or in the courtroom could create problems (for example a witness using roundabout expressions or paraphrases during cross-examination may be seen as 'inaccurate' –or a traditional patient may be used to describing her symptoms through metaphorical expressions or images, for example pain being 'hot' or 'cold' - should the interpreter render this metaphorical linguistic tradition more 'precisely'?)
- *Western versus non-Western general communication and politeness forms*: for example culture-specific title/names which may be so strong that they are virtually taboo-laden and this may be breached in the Western interpreter-mediated rhetoric; the very act of addressing a superior directly may be breaching a social norm (see e.g. Rahman 1991 and E. Adegbiya); in some cultures the act of saying no to a superior is considered a gross breach of politeness and has strict sanctions (and if a 'no' socially means yes, is the judge to interpret that as 'lying' and what are the legal implications of that?). A client in a socially inferior position, might actually feel obliged - due to courtesy rules (avoidance of direct language/communication, eye contact, etc.) to say something that she doesn't 'think' or more likely, not say something about important issues because it would break the courtesy (avoidance, i.e. social distance as a form of politeness) rule; the client might in fact expect to be understood on the premises of such behaviour and expect the interlocutor (therapist, judge, doctor) to read between the lines, as it were. The situation often arises where neither interlocutor is aware of the fact that they are adopting distinct communication forms and believe, erroneously, that they are adopting similar strategies (when they are in effect speaking at cross-purposes); if the client believes that his courtesy codes and status negotiating with his/her interlocutor is conducive to winning favour when in fact the opposite is happening, this could have disastrous consequences.
- *supra-linguistic or 'kinesic' behavioural norms*: for example modulation of tone of voice and avoidance of interruption can also be culture specific. Interesting data emerged during the interview phase (with a judge) of the survey mentioned above to the effect that the interpreter should not neutralize or ameliorate the hostile voice/gesturing/question mode of the judge in questioning a defendant or a witness because the fear it would arise in his/her interlocutor was

believed to be conducive to producing a more truthful response⁸. This attitude, I would argue, is not only symptomatic of a profoundly hierarchical approach, but also of a universalist, hegemonic view of modes of communication: i.e. the judge did not even take into consideration that the response fear may elicit is culture-bound; indeed ‘truth-telling’ and ‘truth-value’ is far from an absolute or uniform communication form (see Foley 1989). Fear may elicit a ‘pleasing the interlocutor’ response rather than ‘facts’ or indeed an aggressive or isolationist response (preferring to not say anything), especially given the hierarchical relationship. A number of factors may complicate the picture here in terms of the relationship between defendant/witness and judge that may impede communication and lead to communication breaches or misunderstandings – but not necessarily because the person in question is lying. Fear, I believe, only aggravates these conditions: rather than aiming at a mutual comprehension and understanding of the host country’s socio-cultural norms and communicative patterns, the client will instinctively fall back on his/her own most deep-rooted behavioural patterns also in order not to risk sanctions from his/her own peer group (that risk is obviously minimal in a closed courtroom situation, the grave risk is that by instinctively using one’s own behavioural norms, one jeopardises one’s own legal position in the host society) and the judge may interpret all these hesitations and uncertainties in the same light that he would interpret the same behaviour in a mono-lingual situation: as a sign of being untruthful.

1.1 CULTURAL CODES CHANGE OVER TIME

It is very often difficult for second language speakers to successfully emulate complex linguistic norms such as politeness markers and therefore, when clients are criticized for choosing an interpreter ‘when they know Italian perfectly well’ (which in my experience happens frequently), it’s probably a wise choice before they are actually able to master the full range of communication skills; it also means that both parties are relying on the interpreter to be able to form, perfectly, that bridge between the two language communities.

⁸ Adegbija notes how a gentle voice is frequently considered a marker of politeness, often synonymous with humility (Adegbija 69).

In the course of the encounter itself, and even more over the course of time as the new groups begin to familiarize themselves with, if not assimilate, the majority culture's communication modes, they may tend to emulate the majority culture communication norms in order to create a communication channel or in order to 'please' and thereby obtain a particular goal. As Tariq Rahman says

When a powerful culture comes in contact with a less powerful one, it 'invades' the latter in the sense that its norms and values start replacing indigenous ones. [...] When the dominated start devaluing things indigenous, including their language, they make the more powerful group's cultural norms and language dominant. (Rahman 1991: 193)

This may cause even further confusion when the client no longer adheres to either his/her own communication norms or fully to the host culture norms. It is likely, however, given the hegemonic nature of the host-'guest' relationship, that over time the 'guest' will adapt to the predominant cultural codes.

1.2 THE IMPORTANCE OF GREETINGS AND POLITENESS

If politeness can only be interpreted and acted upon with the context of a pragmatic situation, of course complicates profoundly the cross-cultural meeting between strangers in an institutionalized setting where politeness is pivotal in negotiating role, rank and status. Referring to the "tension between universal politeness strategies on the one hand and culture and language-specific means of marking politeness on the other" Adegbiya notes that for "for effective and fruitful cross-cultural and interlanguage communication to occur, such tension must not only be borne in mind and understood by co-participants in an interaction, but also diffused in one way or the other" (Adegbiya 1989: 56).

A crucial form of positive politeness (often through the use of professional, religious and cultural or social titles), greetings, is one form of defining and affirming identity and rank (Adegbiya 1989: 68 and 56 following Goody) and if this, in a hierarchical cross-cultural

situation is not given the ‘space’ it needs to be played out, it will inevitable act to the detriment of the weaker party; denying the rank-negotiation process removes the conditions for that party not just to fulfil his role-playing and identity responsibilities, but throws him/her off track and may hamper his/her own successive communicative ability. Susan Berk-Seligson’s study which examines among other things the crucial role of politeness in the jury’s evaluation of the client (defendant, witness) is telling in this regard. The emphasis in this paper has so far been on the diadic relationship between service-provider – client in an arguably hierarchical relationship, but it must not be forgotten that the interpreter too is negotiating those very same relations bi-directionally in order to form a working relationship and to allow communication.

Each of these factors will almost inevitably lead to a profoundly hierarchical relationship between user/service provider that may seriously hamper not just the means and forms of communication but even the very possibility of creating an open channel of exchange. Such hierarchical relationships are naturally formed in monocultural situations too, but in those cases each party is aware of the social and communicative rules governing the exchange and is aware of the differences between them in status/class etc. and how this impinges on the communicative patterns. In a cross-cultural exchange the situation is aggravated by the fact that, although both parties are clearly aware of differences, they may not be aware of how those differences are constituted and more importantly how those differences in practice impinge on communication modes.

If our current theoretical models, paradigms and axioms could be developed to accommodate the “real-world” needs and demands of interpreters and their clients, rather than continuing endlessly the fruitless discussion (fruitless because it can never be generalized or universalized) of attempting a once-and-for-all solution delimiting the interpreter’s task and role it might be more useful to see the construction of communication in this triadic process⁹ as a co-construction of meaning individual to each context and situation and individual to each actor and each individual combination of actors. Rather than providing an all-embracing

⁹ As argued by the present author at the UMIST conference *Research Models in Translation Studies* (Manchester April 2000) in “Community Interpreting in the Area of Mental Health: Psycho-Social Implications of Interpreting Strategies”.

top-down code of ethics that community interpreters feel compelled to be governed by, new cultural and institutional parameters are needed, not to delimit, define, prescribe, but to provide a holistic network that promotes and encourages cross-cultural communication and comprehension by way of a dialogue-based approach between service providers, interpreters and clients, not necessarily at an individual level (briefing and debriefing solve some of these issues on a smaller scale) but an institutional level of information exchange and negotiation of tasks and responsibilities in multicultural communities. It is obvious that training, or at the very least sensitization, of service providers as well as the interpreters is a crucial link in this process.

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