



Interpreters' Experiences of Asylum Interviews in Sweden. Working Conditions and Interpreting Literacy

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ABSTRACT

This article seeks to investigate interpreters' experiences of interpreting in asylum interviews. The empirical basis of the paper is ethnographic interviews with nine public service interpreters in Sweden, collected as part of a larger study during the period 2019–2022. The analysis is guided by theories of interpreting and mediation in professional encounters and literacy. Two main themes are presented; the first concerns interpreters' working conditions and a widespread mistrust in their skills, both of which undermine access to high-quality interpreting services and interpreters' professional discretion in asylum interviews, while the second discusses the fine line between interpreting and mediating, which depends on expectations, skills and relationships with other key actors in the interview. The present analysis shows that interpreting involves navigating a highly complex and sensitive situation and interacting with other key actors to ensure that trust is established. Based on this, the article concludes that asylum interviews are complex multilingual settings in which all key actors engage in interpreting the asylum-seeker's narrative in a hermeneutic sense. This process calls for greater language awareness and interpreting literacy amongst interpreting users at the Migration Agency.

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I was finally able to focus on the language, which I love. The more I work, though, I've come to love to meet people. And I meet people when they are in very vulnerable situations, before they go into courtrooms, before surgery or when they are at the Migration Agency. Then they are nervous, and you know in an asylum interview it is sensitive, people talk about horrible things. I think it's very important to remain stable and continue reassuring them that it is okay to express everything they want to say. All the horrible things that have happened to them, no one is offended, they don't have to protect the case officer, they don't have to protect me or the legal representative. Because people sometimes hold back because it's just too horrific. Often, they don't want to share all the details, so I try to ensure they feel comfortable unloading their thoughts and that it's important for them to bring everything up. To help people feel at ease, you must build trust quickly; sometimes, you only have a few seconds before you begin (Lisa).

In this quote, a legal interpreter describes why she enjoys her work. At the same time, it captures several aspects of interpreting in asylum interviews. It is not merely a matter of transferring meanings and messages from one language to another, but rather one of engaging in a highly complex and sensitive situation, where the interpreter interacts with other participants in the interview to help establish trust (UNHCR 2017; UNHCR 2019). In this sense, she positions herself as one of several key actors involved in supporting individuals in the vulnerable situation of an asylum interview.

In this paper, we focus on the insider perspective of the role of interpreting as expressed in the above quote. This is a perspective that is rarely directly addressed in the interdisciplinary research on asylum interviews. Two examples, however, are the work of Dahlgvist (2018) and Gibb and Good (2014). Furthermore, within the field of Translation and Interpreting Studies, there is a strand of research that focusses on interpreter competences and training for public service interpreters working in asylum interviews (Barsky 1996; Inghilleri 2005; Keselman, Cederborg & Linell 2010; Lee 2013; Maryns 2013; Pöllabauer 2004; Valero-Garcés 2017; Wadensjö, Rhenberg & Nikolaidou 2022). These studies focus on training, skills and the possibilities and shortcomings of interpreting, rather than on interpreters' lived experiences of their profession. Having conducted research on public service interpreters in various areas of public welfare for almost two decades, we aim to contribute to both of these research fields. Consequently, this article seeks to describe and analyse the experiences of interpreting in asylum interviews. The main research questions are:

- What are interpreters' experiences of interpreting in the complex situation of asylum interviews?
- How do they explain and perceive their role and responsibilities?

The empirical basis of this paper is ethnographic interviews with nine public service interpreters in Sweden, collected as part of a larger study during the period 2019–2022. The analysis is guided by theories of interpreting and mediating in professional encounters (Hale 2007; Skaaden 2019), and the discussion connects to theory on literacy (Barton & Hamilton 1998) by introducing the concept of interpreting literacy.

The article begins with a description of the setting, the asylum interview in general and the context of interpreting services in Sweden. This is followed by sections on previous research, theoretical framework and methods. The analysis is organised

around two themes that capture the research questions in different ways: the first concerns interpreters' experiences of their working conditions at the Swedish Migration Agency; the second focusses on interpreters' experiences of professional interpreting practices in asylum interview settings. The article ends with a discussion of the main findings and possible implications for the future development of interpreting in asylum interviews.

THE ASYLUM INTERVIEW AND SWEDISH INTERPRETING SERVICES

In countries adhering to the 1951 Geneva Convention and the 1967 Protocol, individual interviews are central to assessing asylum claims ([United Nations 1951](#)). The main participants are the asylum-seeker and the state official, with interpreters involved when they do not share a language. Legal guardians and representatives may also play key roles. The interview seeks to establish identity and assess whether the applicant has a 'well-founded fear of persecution' ([Fassin 2013](#); [Goodwin-Gill & McAdams 2007](#); [Hathaway 2005](#)). The oral account is typically turned into a written record during the interview, as the official writes the report simultaneously ([Veglio 2024](#)). The decision-making process relies mainly on this record, supported by additional information ([Bohmer & Schuman 2018](#); [Schuster 2020](#); [Sweeney 2007](#)). These sources may include country information, linguistic tests, age assessments for minors, medical records for evidence of torture and abuse and guidelines for assessing claims related to sexual orientation and gender identity ([Elsrud & Lalander 2022](#); [Fassin 2013](#); [Liodden 2022](#); [Maryns 2013](#); [Wikström & Johansson 2013](#)). If accepted, an asylum-seeker may be granted refugee status or other statuses under national law, such as subsidiary protection. Different outcomes confer different legal rights related to residence, citizenship and family reunification ([Gibney 2004](#); [Gill & Good 2019](#); [Hedlund 2017](#)). Sweden follows these asylum procedures as outlined by the [UNHCR Handbook \(2017\)](#) and [the Swedish Alien Act \(2005:716/2025:225\)](#).

Sweden has long-standing experience with public service interpreting and strong legislation ensuring access to interpreting and translation for those who do not speak the majority language ([The Administrative Procedure Act 2017:900](#); [The Language Act 2009:600](#)).

Training for public service interpreters in Sweden began in the 1970s, driven by increased immigration and the resulting needs at the National Immigration Board (the predecessor of the current Migration Agency). Interpreter training courses and interpreting agency structures were initially developed by municipalities that received migrants and refugees. In 1982, procedures for state-regulated authorisation of public service interpreters were introduced.

In the 1990s, the interpreting sector was deregulated, and private operators took over much of the municipal training and services. Today, most interpreters in Sweden work freelance via agencies that provide services to public institutions through public procurement ([The Public Procurement Act 2016:1145](#)).

There are approximately 6,000 active interpreters in Sweden working in more than 200 languages. However, only about one-third are authorised (authorisation is available in about 50 languages) and/or have received adequate training ([SOU 2018:83](#)). All interpreters working through agencies must follow professional ethics, i.e., good interpreting practice ([Kammarkollegiet 2019](#)). Similar codes exist in most countries

(Hale 2007). Core principles include first-person speech, impartiality, neutrality and confidentiality, which the interpreter must state in both languages before the meeting. These are key markers of professionalism.

RESEARCH ON INTERPRETING IN ASYLUM INTERVIEWS

I feel they [caseworkers] have to understand one thing, that interpreters are not obstacles. I don't know about other interpreters; I speak for myself. Maybe there are interpreters who have done a bad job. I can't say that there aren't. But, if one is bad, then people shouldn't suspect that everyone is bad and doesn't know their job (Ania).

The interpreter's complaint about mistrust in interpreting services is echoed in research, which often frames interpreting as a barrier or problem (Angu & Gustafsson 2022; Dahlvik 2018; Gibb & Good 2014; Määttä, Puumala & Ylikomi 2021; Nikolaidou, Rhenberg & Wadensjö 2023; Puumala, Ylikomi & Ristimäki 2017; Veglio 2024). This perspective is based on research showing poor and precarious interpreting services in many countries and individual cases. These studies confirm interpreters' lack of competence in the majority and/or target language, as well as in professional ethics. Research shows that interpreters sometimes fail to interpret fully, add personal perspectives or mistranslate (Barsky 1996; Inghelleri 2005; Keselman, Cederborg & Linell 2010; Lee 2013; Maryns 2013; Ottosson, Angu & Gustafsson 2024; Pöllabauer 2004; Valero-Garcés 2017; Wadensjö, Rhenberg & Nikolaidou 2022). These professional shortcomings are compounded by the cultural, social and psychological challenges of translation (Blommaert 2001). This includes linguistic hierarchies shaped by historical, social and legal conditions, such as the dominance of majority languages, the marginalisation of minority languages and the lack of multilingual legislation (May 2017; Piller 2016).

As the interpreter states above, negative attitudes toward interpreting reflect interpreters' lived reality, despite interpreting being essential to most asylum interviews. The reviewed research highlights critical aspects that can help improve legal security and trust in asylum interviews. Nevertheless, this research also tends to reinforce a dominant assumption: that dialogues, conversations, interviews or any form of communication are more effective in monolingual settings, and that multilingualism leads to problems and barriers. In contrast, Hall and Valdiviezo (2020) argue that professional encounters like asylum interviews should be seen as multilingual settings, where linguistic diversity is inherent and must be actively addressed. In these contexts, all kinds of language are used – national languages, professional terminology and individual vernaculars – both in spoken and written forms. All these modes of language use should be viewed as resources and rights, rather than as problems or barriers (Gustafsson et al. 2023; Ottosson, Angu & Gustafsson 2024; Piller 2016).

Furthermore, research has investigated how asylum interviews and the production of asylum narratives involve interactions between all key actors (Ottosson, Angu & Gustafsson 2024; Puumala, Ylikomi & Ristimäki 2017; Wadensjö, Rhenberg & Nikolaidou 2022). Studies have shown that understanding asylum narratives requires awareness of memory, trauma and cultural perceptions and taboos (Herlihy & Turner 2007; Kjelsvik 2014); linguistic and narrative conventions (Blommaert 2001; Maryns 2013);

fear of authorities and illiteracy (Keselman, Cederborg & Linell 2010); and the legal rationale and imperialistic framework of asylum procedures (Fassin 2013).

Research also shows that, globally, asylum interviews are often conducted with the assistance of laypersons and ad hoc interpreters without adequate training and professional ethics (see, for example, Blommaert 2001; Dahlvik 2018; Gibb & Good 2014; Johnson 2015; Herlihy & Turner 2007; Keselman, Cederborg & Linell 2010; Kjelsvik 2014; Lee 2013; Määttä, Puumula & Ylikomi 2021; Maryns 2013; Nikolaidou, Rhenberg & Wadensjö 2023; Ottosson, Angu & Gustafsson 2024; Pöllabauer 2004; Puumula, Ylikomi & Ristimäki 2017; Tipton 2008; Veglio 2024). This creates a highly problematic situation where lack of access to interpreters, or awareness of their incompetence, can undermine the asylum interview's foundation: accuracy, trust and confidentiality.

Also, research in Sweden shows that neglect of interpreting services stems from a lack of legislation and from discriminatory structures affecting interpreters, many of whom have migrant or refugee backgrounds (Norström, Fioretos & Gustafsson 2012). Migration patterns also shift constantly, and countries are often unprepared for which languages are needed (Dahlvik 2018; Gibb & Good 2014; Ottosson, Angu & Gustafsson 2024).

As if these complexities were not enough, interpreting adds further layers of difficulty. Veglio (2024) highlights ethnocentric assumptions about valid knowledge and acceptable ways of narrating life events (see also Blommaert 2001). For example, asylum narratives are often seen as more credible when presented coherently, chronologically and in detail (Craig & Zwaan 2019). This shows how interpreting is complicated by culturally specific ways of making sense of the world, which often don't align across languages and social contexts.

Finally, as noted in the introduction, while many studies on asylum interpreting exist, mainly within translation and interpreting studies, few examine interpreters' own experiences.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND CONCEPTS

INTERPRETING AND TRANSLATION

The terms 'interpreting' and 'translation' are not always easy to define. According to the field of Translation and Interpreting Studies, interpreting refers to the transfer of spoken or signed language, while translation refers to the transfer of written language (Hale 2007). In other contexts, such as legal settings, interpreting is sometimes described as a more hermeneutic and subjective transfer of meaning, in contrast to a literal or verbatim rendering of words (Gibb & Good 2014). This distinction, however, does not align with how interpreting and translation are understood within the field of Translation and Interpreting Studies. Literal translation – that is, word-for-word translation between languages – is only possible to a limited extent, because languages do not correspond directly. The role of the interpreter is to convey the meaning of the message as accurately and equivalently as possible, rather than translating each word literally. A literal translation may result in misunderstandings, and the interviewer must be able to rely on the interpreter's ability to communicate the intended meaning rather than a direct translation of the words.

INTERPRETING VERSUS MEDIATING

In relation to these different viewpoints on interpreting as equivalent transfer of message and meaning or literal translation, the delineation of the professional

role of the interpreter is also debated. In her book on community interpreting, [Hale \(2007\)](#) provides a constructive overview of the main points of contention regarding the interpreter's role and exercise of discretion. She argues that dichotomies such as visible/invisible, involved/uninvolved and human/machine do not adequately capture the complexity of interpreting. Drawing on Bolden's work (2000), Hale suggests that the concepts of *directly interpreted interaction* (forward on labelled as interpreting) and *mediated interaction* (forward on labelled as mediating) are more appropriate approaches. When *interpreting*, the interpreter interprets at every turn, and public service providers and clients address each other through the interpreter. When *mediating*, the interpreter also becomes a direct conversation partner, for example by explaining things to the public service provider or client.

The latter position can leave interpreter users, both service providers and clients, with uncertain expectations that undermine their trust in the interpreting profession. Therefore, mediated interaction should be avoided according to some researchers (cf. [Skaaden 2019](#)).

However, other researchers argue that the boundaries of the interpreter's discretion may vary depending on the setting ([Angelelli 2004](#)). In medical contexts, it can be beneficial for interpreters to act as mediators, helping health professionals gather crucial information for diagnosis and treatment, which may require cultural understanding and sensitivity as outlined in ethical codes for medical interpreting ([Gustafsson, Norström & Fioretos 2013](#)). Conversely, in legal settings, interpreters are expected to maintain strict impartiality in their message transfer ([Hale 2007](#)). These debates are reflected in the literature on interpreting in asylum interviews and are further explored in the analysis below (cf. [Gustafsson, Norström & Fioretos 2013](#); [Gustafsson, Åberg & Norström 2024](#)).

LITERACY

Moreover, to analyse the broader meaning of interpreters' experiences of interpreting in asylum interviews at the Swedish Migration Agency, we use the concept of literacy. Literacy traditionally refers to the ability to read and write. Through these capacities, those who are literate are understood to be more able to participate fully in society and to exercise greater control over their daily lives ([Nutbeam 2008](#)). In New Literacy Studies, however, literacy is not seen as a transferable skill but rather as a group of situated practices embedded in people's everyday contexts ([Barton & Hamilton 1998](#)). From this perspective, all individuals develop strategies to manage literacy demands in different domains.

In this article, we introduce the concept of *interpreting literacy* to capture how the working conditions and perceptions described by interpreters reflect the skills of the Migration Agency and other key actors in using interpreting services, along with their capacity to understand interpreting as an integrated part of their daily work.

METHODS AND MATERIAL

The empirical material used for this article is part of a larger project, *Asylum interviews in South Africa and Sweden: Experiences, interpreting and decisions*, conducted in 2019–2021. The project included interviews with a total of 41 key actors, 11 asylum-seekers, 11 state officials and 14 interpreters in both countries, along with five legal representatives in Sweden. The aim of the project was to investigate and

compare how the complexities, fragilities and difficulties of the asylum interview are experienced, interpreted and negotiated by key actors in South Africa and Sweden (Angu & Gustafsson 2022; Ottosson, Angu & Gustafsson 2024).

For the purpose of this article, we focus on interviews with interpreters in Sweden. The sample can be described as a convenience sample. The main inclusion criterion was that participants had experience of interpreting in asylum interviews. Furthermore, we aimed to include interpreters with diverse backgrounds, levels of training and authorisation. Participants were recruited through contacts with the Swedish Association of Legal Interpreters, an interpreter agency in Western Sweden and an interpreter education program at Stockholm University.

Of the nine interpreters interviewed, eight were women and one was a man. All except one, who started in 1994, started working as interpreters after 2010. Two interpreters had a Swedish background, while the others came from Spanish, German, American, Kurdish, Afghan, Iranian and Uzbek backgrounds. The Kurdish interpreted in Arabic and Sorani, while four of the others primarily interpreted into English and one interpreted into Spanish. The remaining three had Dari and various local dialects as target languages. Five of the interpreters held advanced degrees and had prior experience in language-related fields such as translation or teaching. All five were certified in legal interpreting, which is the highest level of public service interpreting in Sweden. Amongst the other four interpreters, only the male participant held authorisation, but all had completed formal interpreter training through a university or adult vocational program at some point during their career.

The interviews were conducted from December 2019 to December 2020. Due to the coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic, four interviews were conducted online, while five were held face-to-face. The interviews were 55–130 minutes in length, and all were recorded and transcribed. The informed consent and handling of sensitive personal data were approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Agency (Dnr 2020:02101).

Our previous research shows that interpreters have valuable insights about how public services work but are rarely consulted or interviewed in official settings, media or public investigations (Gustafsson, Åberg & Norström 2024).¹ Based on previous research, we decided to use an open-ended interview guide with three main questions: ‘Tell us about your professional background as an interpreter’; ‘Describe a typical asylum interview, how is it planned and performed and who takes part’; and ‘Describe at least one asylum interview situation that you found extra memorable, challenging or difficult’. The questions were distributed in advance to give the interpreters the opportunity to prepare. Most of the interpreters had given thought to these questions and talked rather freely on the topics. Therefore, there is an ethnographic dimension to the interviews (Davies 2008; Gustafsson 2023). The interpreters give detailed accounts about specific situations, a sort of ‘thick description’ where they were the first-hand participant observers.

The interviews were analysed through close reading and iterative coding. By engaging with the material several times, recurring patterns and tensions were identified and developed into thematic categories, following an interpretive approach to qualitative analysis (Rapley 2011). Two overarching themes are presented below: one concerning working conditions and one addressing the act of interpreting and mediating. Thematic subcategories are reflected in the headings and subheadings of the following sections.

THEME 1. INTERPRETERS' WORKING CONDITIONS IN ASYLUM INTERVIEWS

PRECARIOUS WORK

The reason I don't take assignments from the Swedish Migration Agency [anymore] is that I don't work for the interpreting agency that has an agreement with them. They never consider how an interpreter feels – someone who has spent time studying and working hard to learn the language. They don't care about the interpreters; they just want to win contracts and make money. This is a real shame, as it lowers the status of interpreters in society (Daniel).

As described above, most interpreters in Sweden work on a freelance basis and are contracted by agencies that provide interpreting services to public service institutions under procured agreements ([the Public Procurement Act 2016:1145](#)). These agreements last for two years, with the option to extend for another two. As the agencies are contracted and the interpreters are freelancers, they face an unstable, often precarious work situation, with no long-term employment and daily assignments in constant competition with other interpreters. Salaries and working conditions frequently change. Some, including the interpreter quoted above, have chosen not to take assignments at the Migration Agency due to a new agreement that significantly reduced pay. This has resulted in a shortage of qualified interpreters at the Migration Agency, as many choose to take assignments with other authorities instead ([Wadensjö, Rehnberg & Nikolaidou 2021](#)). As a result, the Migration Agency often hires less-qualified interpreters, undermining legal certainty in the asylum process ([Keselman, Cederborg & Linell 2010](#); [Lee 2013](#)). The ongoing competition also negatively impacts the social working environment and shapes the way interpreters relate to one another.

COMPETITION AND CONNECTING

Interpreting is a very lonely job, and there hasn't been the best cohesion between interpreters because there is so much competition. And I think it's really sad. I have often wished that we could also be a group, you know like the lawyers... (Somaya).

The interpreter explains that contract insecurity and competition for assignments undermine collegial relationships, and most interpreters interact with agencies only through booking systems or text messages. Still, one recurring social resource is mentioned in all nine interviews: the interpreters' waiting rooms at the Migration Agency. These exist for security reasons, as interpreters are not allowed to wait in client areas.

Upon arrival, interpreters check in with guards before entering the waiting room. One interpreter describes it as cosy and welcoming, with coffee machines and opportunities to meet colleagues:

You meet your colleagues, who are friendly... You usually arrive 15 minutes before the asylum interview, allowing time to greet colleagues and enjoy a cup of coffee (Sofia).

Another interpreter reflects on how this brief social contact makes a difference:

I miss it very much, this thing of being able to talk to a colleague... I feel very good, I'm happy (Daniel).

At the same time, some interpreters describe the waiting rooms as cramped and unpleasant, with no windows and smelly toilets. For them, the setting symbolises low professional status and marginalisation.

The waiting room, while offering brief moments of connection, also reflects interpreters' structural position as outsiders. While its official purpose is to meet security requirements by separating interpreters from clients, it also symbolises the principle of impartiality by limiting contact with other participants before the interview. In this way, it materialises a desired distance from both clients and staff, as well as from any active mediation (Angellelli 2004). Though some collegial contact is possible, the setting offers little room for deeper support or shared reflection on the emotional burden of the work. The waiting room thus becomes both a rare social space and a reminder of the lack of structural support.

PREPARATION, EMOTIONAL STRAIN AND ETHICAL BOUNDARIES

And you accept it if you can, and then you prepare yourself for an asylum investigation. So, yes, you prepare both in terms of knowledge and psychologically too, I would say (Daniel).

Ways of preparing in terms of knowledge include reading about the situation in the countries the asylum-seekers come from; becoming familiar with different kinds of dialects and styles; and preparing specific terminology related to, for example, religious environments, military vernacular, human trafficking and LGBTQ issues. However, a key issue is that interpreters receive little or no information about the assignment in advance.

I never get any information. I always have to call and ask, 'Where are the applicants from?' And a few times I've heard, 'Is it important? It's just interpreting' (Cristina).

As with the case of the waiting room, interpreters' need to actively ask for basic information in order to prepare for an assignment reflects the system's emphasis on ethical principles such as neutrality and impartiality and on the idea of interpreting as separate from mediating (Hale 2007). In the quote above, this is displayed in the caseworker's unwise expectation that interpreters should 'just interpret', ignoring the fact that interpreting is both a highly skilled profession and emotionally demanding work.

As highlighted in the opening quote, interpreters must be prepared to listen to horrific experiences of persecution, violence and oppression. This might cause interpreters ethical dilemmas related to interpreting or mediating (Hale 2007). Interpreters' ethical guidelines are based on four guiding rules that do not recognise normative values and rights in the same way as the caseworkers at the agency (Gustafsson 2023; Young 2000), whose status as civil servants are directly guided by normative values in Swedish constitutional law, human rights and the right to asylum. Interpreters share that, over

the years, they have developed the coping strategy of reminding themselves they are not responsible for addressing people's needs or making case decisions. If these two things are handled by the responsible party, the caseworker or professionals in other settings, the interpreter can leave people's problems behind, as in the following case:

A man shared various things he had been subjected to and became very upset, starting to cry. I looked at the caseworker, hoping she would comfort him, as it's difficult for an interpreter to show partiality. The legal representative made no effort to comfort him, and the young caseworker sat quietly for a while. I almost intervened to show empathy, but then she knelt in front of him, held his hand and said some comforting words. That was probably the only time I've seen someone genuinely touch and comfort an applicant like that. I felt it was needed from a human perspective (Maria).

However, when the professional does not take on this responsibility, the experience often stays with the interpreter. In such cases, even a brief chat with a colleague in the waiting room can offer relief.

Furthermore, although the caseworker in the example above comforts the asylum-seeker, the interpreter expresses a lack of trust in the competence and roles of other key actors. The same interpreter explains:

There are all kinds of legal representatives, just as there are different interpreters and caseworkers. If you're unlucky, some may not be very good people. For me, this can be frustrating and annoying, and I worry it won't end well. However, for the applicant, it can be disastrous to have a disinterested legal representative and a caseworker who refuses to think outside the box. If you combine that with an interpreter who is not very skilled, it could be a disaster for the individual. It really feels like a lottery (Maria).

The interpreter expresses how a lack of trust in key actors and blurred professional boundaries contribute to the emotional strain she experiences, both in relation to the asylum-seekers' vulnerability and her own limited discretion (Skaaden 2019). The latter is linked to a pattern described in previous research: the mistrust that other key actors often show toward interpreters (Keselman, Cederborg & Linell 2010; Lee 2013; Ottosson, Angu & Gustafsson 2024; Wadensjö, Rhenberg & Nikolaidou 2022).

MISTRUST AND PROFESSIONAL LEGITIMACY

The interpreter describes the asylum interview as a lottery, citing uncertainties about the competence and commitment of the various key actors involved. As discussed above, there is a high risk of having an unprofessional interpreter due to unfavourable contracts for interpreters. Taken together, there is a system in place in Sweden to provide adequate interpreting services and to meet the needs of asylum interviews in a formal sense. However, from a qualitative perspective, there are many factors that undermine the quality and legal certainty of the system. The position of the interpreter is precarious because of the low expectations they encounter on a daily basis. One interpreter describes:

One more thing I want to add is that nobody trusts interpreters. For example, an asylum-seeker may say the interpreter is interpreting

incorrectly or expresses dislike for the interpreter's appearance, voice or presence, and then they can request a replacement. This is something I find undesirable and is not the case with other authorities. In courts, police and amongst lawyers, interpreters are respected. That's why I not really want to work with the Migration Agency (Ania).

All nine interviewees provide accounts about being neglectfully treated. The combination of being met with mistrust and unfavourable contracts drives away highly skilled interpreters, undermining the legal security of asylum-seekers as well as the quality of the work of the other key actors.

Legal representatives can sometimes interfere too much. I understand they must advocate for their client's rights, but this can make interpreters unsure of their roles and what they can do. While representatives can share their thoughts, it shouldn't reach the point of overlapping roles. I've even told a representative that if they're so interested in my job, we should switch roles, as I know many laws and regulations. It can be challenging to feel scrutinised, and if you're not an experienced interpreter, it can lead to a loss of confidence (Maria).

To be interrupted and criticised about their professional skills while in action is perceived as unfair. The interpreters explain that the fact that the ethical principles are made clear at the beginning of the meeting is proof that things will be done in a certain way; for example, that the interpreter will not add anything or take sides. If the interpreter breaks the rules, the other actors have the right to complain. This reliance on ethical principles as a form of professional protection highlights a deeper tension: while these rules offer interpreters a safeguard against criticism, they may simultaneously limit the interpreter's ability to exercise discretion in practice.

Because of their professional role and responsibility, interpreters occupy a position that allows for discretionary judgment, not only within the act of interpreting but also in mediating meaning between parties. This discretion stems from their expertise in achieving equivalence and transferring meaning based on their skills and competence (Gibb & Good, 2014; Gustafsson, Norström & Fioretos, 2013; Veglio 2024).

However, research has shown that interpreters often avoid exercising this discretion due to fears that doing so might violate the fragile trust in an already mistrusted profession. As a result, many interpreters, often with the backing of interpreting agencies, adhere to a rigid, almost archaic interpretation of professional ethical guidelines, motivated by a strong desire not to do anything wrong (Gustafsson, Åberg & Norström 2024).

This discussion leads into the second theme: a closer analysis of the act of interpreting and/or mediating, and the negotiation of discretion within asylum interviews.

THEME 2. INTERPRETING AND MEDIATING IN ASYLUM INTERVIEWS

THE COMPLEXITY OF INTERPRETING

Equally important as understanding the interpreter's role both in their working context and from an ethical perspective is recognising their professional competences and skills. Their task involves managing interpretation by transferring both verbal

and non-verbal communication into another language while also coordinating the dialogue (Wadensjö 2018). Though this may sound simple, it is, as described above, a highly complex process that often pushes the fine line between interpreting and mediating (Hale 2007; Pokorn & Južnič 2020; Skaaden 2019).

All nine interviewees provide examples of how this line between roles must be negotiated both inside and outside the interview situation. They also highlight that miscommunication often stems from the caseworker's failure to communicate clearly, which can lead to the perception that the interpreter made an error or caused a misunderstanding. Overall, the interviews are filled with reflections on the complexity of language.

Languages. That's a very big area. Are we talking about language or communication? Are we talking about words or meaning? So, this is already so incredibly difficult to manage. But I also feel responsible when there are idioms that cannot be translated or certain references to children's films that a Swedish person would not understand. Then, I actually try to explain a little. Or certain jokes that cannot be translated; then, I try to help this communication. So, I take responsibility and try to explain a little more than just interpret what is said. But I keep it that way, as little as possible. I'm not there to explain things, and if it's important and if they don't understand, then the parties can ask each other. It is not for me to explain to them (Kim).

The interpreter's knowledge of languages and the act of interpreting often leads to situations in which the interpreter has to negotiate their neutrality and impartiality (Gustafsson, Norström & Fioretos 2013; Gustafsson 2023; Hale 2007; Pokorn & Južnič 2020). In this quote, the interpreter admits that a certain amount of mediation is often necessary to keep the conversation going. However, in the end, she prefers to leave the misunderstandings and miscommunications for the other parties to resolve themselves by showing curiosity and asking questions.

This balancing act between staying impartial and adhering to strict interpreting or mediating in order to facilitate understanding becomes even more complex as interpreters must respond to the expectations of both caseworkers and clients simultaneously (Skaaden 2013).

NEGOTIATING ROLES

Again, there is a delicate balance between taking on the tasks of interpreting and mediating (Hale 2007). In most cases, these different positions are clear to the caseworkers, who do not expect the interpreters to intervene but simply to follow the ethical principles. However, this is not the case for asylum-seekers. They often ask the interpreter to answer for them, as they feel that the interpreter is better equipped to give appropriate answers to certain questions. This is also a matter of constant negotiation. One interpreter describes feeling ashamed in some cases when she follows her professional ethics rather than granting the asylum-seeker's request.

The rule is that I will interpret everything you say. If you don't want something translated, don't say it. However, in the beginning, I felt ashamed, especially when older individuals – who should be respected – would say things like, 'Dear daughter, you know, answer yourself'. When I interpreted this exactly, I worried they might think, 'What kind of girl are

you for repeating everything I say?' Over time, I learned that it's okay to interpret everything. You become stronger, firmer and more decisive; what matters is doing my job correctly, without exceptions. It wasn't easy at first, though (Sofia).

The interviews reveal a strong sense of solidarity with asylum-seekers, though one interpreter explains that, when they ask him to answer for them or elaborate on their narrative, he emphasises that the best he can do is translate their own words. He stresses that he doesn't know what they want to say or what they have experienced. However, he faces a dilemma, as he is the only one who understands the asylum-seeker, and his responsibility is to convey their message as accurately as possible without altering or losing its meaning.

This tension between following the ethical rules in a strict (and archaic) way and using the space of discretion discussed in theme one is heightened when cultural misunderstandings or ambiguous terminology enter the conversation.

CULTURAL AND CONCEPTUAL GAPS

As explained in the section on previous research, interpreting is always influenced by discrepancies between languages and meanings. It is primarily the responsibility of the caseworker who is using the term to explain it. They are also responsible for clarifying the complexity of the bureaucratic system tied to specific terminology and shaped by distinct cultural and social contexts, which can make it difficult to understand for those unfamiliar with it. This can lead to misunderstandings and miscommunication.

Another recurring issue raised by the interpreters is the mismatch between caseworkers' questions and asylum-seekers' responses. Caseworkers often ask forward-looking questions about future risks of persecution, while asylum-seekers focus on past risks and fears that led them to flee their home countries. A related dilemma is that caseworkers are not always clear about what information they are seeking, often phrasing their questions vaguely. A common example mentioned in the interviews is when caseworkers enquire about the risk of persecution related to sexual orientation.

It is very common for people to apply for asylum due to their homosexuality, often coming from countries where it is forbidden, sometimes punishable by death or leading to exclusion from society. Even if imprisonment is not formally legislated, individuals can be completely ostracised. At the Migration Agency, a typical question is, 'Can you tell me when you discovered that you were homosexual?' They often ask for a description of feelings and reasoning, emphasising that they don't want answers about the sexual act but rather emotional insights. However, responses can be confusing, like, 'Yes, but it felt so good'. This leads to many misconceptions, and caseworkers may become frustrated if they lack the experience to understand this context. While it's not necessarily an interpreting problem, I, as a human being, can feel very frustrated when the conversation veers off-topic, especially when there is underlying irritation (Maria).

In the interviews, interpreters express a desire to advise caseworkers to clarify their questions, explain the meaning of specific terms and ensure that the asylum-seeker

both understands and is understood correctly. Whenever such situations arise, interpreters face the challenge of deciding whether to intervene and provide explanations. Some prefer to step in to facilitate smoother communication, taking on a mediating role (Angellelli 2004) rather than sticking strictly to direct interpretation (Hale 2007; Skaaden 2019). When they decide not to interfere, they leave the other parties, especially the asylum-seeker, in vulnerable situations.

One thing the interpreter can do, without transcending their ethical principles, is to make it clear that they are interfering. They can say, for example: 'This is the interpreter's perception of the situation: the question asked is too vague, and the asylum-seeker does not understand what you want to know', and then resume interpreting. Previous research has shown that this is something professionals often want interpreters to do (Pokorn & Južnič 2020). However, in situations like asylum interviews, where interpreters are often mistrusted and met with suspicion, it is a delicate endeavour to interrupt and interfere in this way (Nikolaidou, Rehnberg & Wadensjö 2023). Again, they worry about the low expectations and status of interpreters, which previous research has shown to be widespread in society. These moments of uncertainty are further complicated when interpreters struggle with language itself, whether due to terminology, memory or incoherent speech.

PROFESSIONAL SHORTCOMINGS AND DILEMMAS IN PRACTICE

The interpreters also discuss the impact of their own shortcomings regarding proficiency in the target languages, as well as different styles, jargon, terminology and vernacular. In the previous theme regarding working conditions, the interpreters described how psychological stress often arose from being repeatedly exposed to traumatic stories shared by asylum-seekers. However, several previous studies have shown that the stress caused by the inability to provide equivalent and accurate interpreting is a much more prevalent issue amongst interpreters (Gustafsson, Norström & Fioretos 2013; Gustafsson 2023; Norström, Fioretos & Gustafsson 2012). One interpreter remembers a particular asylum interview from this perspective:

Once, I interpreted for a politician. I was sweaty at the end, my brain had worked so hard, and luckily, I had just studied for authorisation and knew all the special legal terms very well, but still it was so difficult. Because you can understand a language, you understand it, you hear and understand, but to interpret you have to find exactly and in a few seconds, this is the Swedish term and this is the Spanish term, and you have to build those bridges to find the right word. And, most of the time you learn from Swedish to Spanish. You have worked with them, so they come to you directly. But then when you hear them in Spanish and you just know that you know the term in Swedish but you can't find it because you haven't built this link, [it can be challenging] (Cristina).

Another interpreter gives an example of the difficulties of interpreting something that she does not understand herself. In this case, it was an asylum-seeker who talked in an incoherent way.

As an interpreter, I have to reproduce fragments, fragments and fragments. And then I see the caseworker getting impatient with me and 'she can't express a whole sentence' and 'what kind of interpreter is that', but I'm not

allowed to add or take away. And interpreting fragments is actually much more difficult than interpreting one argument that we perceive as logical (Kim)

The dilemma, once again, is whether to reproduce the way the asylum-seeker speaks or to 'fix it', as one interpreter expressed a desire to do. This is particularly relevant because she knows that caseworkers prefer coherent narratives, and therefore it could benefit the asylum-seeker if she intervened. However, returning to [Hale \(2007\)](#) and [Skaaden \(2019\)](#), the ethical principle of interpreters' impartiality at all stages is crucial for building trust and ensuring legal security. Yet, both themes, the one about working conditions and the one in this section about the act of interpreting and mediating, highlight the complexity and contested nature of the role of interpreters in the asylum interview. This provides a foundation for the following discussion on the importance of listening to, and learning from, interpreters' experiences in order to develop interpreting literacy.

DISCUSSION: MULTILINGUAL SETTINGS AND INTERPRETING LITERACY

The two themes explored above capture interpreters' experiences in asylum interviews and highlight challenges they encounter, stemming both from their working conditions and from how their professional skills and expertise are constrained or undervalued in practice. By understanding more about this and about the interpreter's role and discretion both within and outside their professional ethical rules, we can learn things of value for developing interpreting skills amongst interpreters and improve the skills in using interpreters as well as broaden the notion of how the asylum interview takes shape.

First, as discussed by the interpreters and in the section on previous research, asylum interviews are *multilingual settings* where language is used in different styles and modes ([Piller 2016](#)). For example, the interpreters described how misunderstandings are often associated with the interpreter making mistakes, while, in practice, it might be the caseworker or the asylum-seeker who is unclear in the way they ask questions or respond.

Second, the interpreters in this study provide insights into the complexities of language and communication, revealing nuances that could enhance linguistic awareness amongst the other key actors ([Hall & Valdiviezo 2020](#)). Such awareness includes understanding the differences between direct and mediated interpreting; recognising cultural, gender and social variations; and considering the link between terminology and practice. For instance, a term might be translated verbatim but lose its intended meaning if its bureaucratic implications aren't clarified.

Third, another issue is that, while interpreting can sometimes be excellent, it is often just 'good enough', and this fact has to be taken into account by the interpreter users. Interpreters reveal that they occasionally lack specific terminology, requiring them to consult lexicons, or that they struggle when asylum-seekers use complex language that they understand but cannot fully convey in the target language (e.g., Swedish). In other cases, they struggle to interpret due to cultural differences in expression or because asylum-seekers may speak in fragmented phrases rather than a coherent narrative.

Fourth, interpreting should be understood hermeneutically – not only as the task of transferring meaning between languages but as a collaborative interpretive process amongst all interview participants that shape the asylum narrative. Therefore, although

the interpreter holds the main responsibility for interpreting, all other professional actors involved also need a certain level of linguistic awareness and competence (Hall & Valdiviezo 2020).

These four factors collectively impact the interpretation of the asylum narrative and the final report produced from the interview. Here, applying the ‘benefit of the doubt’, Craig and Zwaan (2019) suggest that caseworkers must consider both the possibilities and challenges in interpreting. When combined with the understanding that professional encounters, at the Migration Agency or other official institutions, are inherently multilingual, this perspective shifts the responsibility for navigating linguistic diversity from interpreters alone to all participants involved.

Hence, interpreting refers to the hermeneutic act at stake when all key actors are involved in interpreting the asylum-seeker’s experiences; how these are narrated and enacted during the interview; and how asylum-seekers interpret the setting, the rationale for the interview and the questions asked by state officials (Blommaert 2001; Bohmer & Shuman 2018; Maryns 2013). This hermeneutic understanding in combination with recognition of the asylum interview as a multilingual setting and the need of language awareness can be framed as *interpreting literacy* – that is, situated literacy practice that takes into account certain awareness and skills in using interpreting in asylum interviews (Barton & Hamilton 1998).

To conclude, interpreting literacy refers to a competence amongst interpreter users (e.g., caseworkers) in recognising interpreters’ professional skills and including them in interprofessional exchange and collaboration. While this cannot occur in individual cases due to ethical principles of impartiality, it can be achieved on a meta level through dialogues, higher education and training for caseworkers, legal representatives and other public service professionals. This approach would enrich theories about asylum interviews and other professional encounters by highlighting the interpreter’s impartial role in balancing power asymmetries between (professional) caseworkers and (private) asylum-seekers. Depending on their engagement, interpreters can either reinforce or mitigate these unequal power relations.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

NOTE

- 1 From 2008 to 2012, the first author and her team conducted two joint research projects, *The Interpreter as Cultural Broker* and *Behind Closed Doors*, which examined the impacts of interpreting on legal certainty and integration, focusing on unaccompanied asylum-seeking minors. The projects included 70+ interviews with 24 interpreters and several minors, and observations of ten asylum interviews at the Swedish Migration Agency. In 2020–2022, a third project, *Cultural Dialogue via Interpreter*, continued this work, including further interviews with interpreters experienced in asylum investigations.

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