

THE DEVELOPMENT OF PRISON INTERPRETING ROLES: A PROFESSIONAL ECOLOGICAL MODEL*

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores prison interpreting from the perspective of professional role, understood as a socially, institutionally, ethically and culturally determined function. As a consequence of the growing need for language access services in most industrialized nations, ad hoc and professional interpreting solutions are provided routinely; but interpreters, currently lacking an established position of power in public service contexts, face numerous sources of tension. The purposes of this qualitative research are: first, to describe the professional function of PSI in penitentiaries adapting an existing ecological model with different nested environments or systems (individual, micro, meso, exo, macro, topo and chrono); second, to identify facilitating and hampering factors for an appropriate role development and, third, to offer a broad theoretical model that helps conceptualize the multiple interacting elements that shape the interpreter roles in penitentiary contexts.

KEYWORDS: prison interpreting, public service interpreting, interpreter role, professional role, ecological model.

RESUMEN

Este artículo examina la interpretación penitenciaria desde la perspectiva del papel profesional, concebido como una función determinada social, institucional, ética y culturalmente. Como consecuencia de la creciente necesidad de servicios lingüísticos en la mayoría de sociedades industrializadas, habitualmente se ofrecen soluciones de interpretación tanto ad hoc como profesionales, aunque los intérpretes, al no gozar en estos momentos de una posición de poder en los servicios públicos, se enfrentan a diferentes fuentes de tensión. Los objetivos de este estudio de corte cualitativo son: describir la función profesional de la interpretación en los servicios públicos (ISP) en prisiones adaptando un modelo ecológico ya existente con distintos ambientes o sistemas concéntricos (individual, micro, meso, exo, macro, topo y crono), identificar factores que aporten o resten equilibrio para un desarrollo del papel profesional adecuado, y ofrecer un modelo teórico que facilite la conceptualización de los múltiples elementos que interactúan y dan forma a los papeles de los intérpretes en contextos penitenciarios.

PALABRAS CLAVE: interpretación penitenciaria, interpretación en los servicios públicos, papel del intérprete, papel profesional, modelo ecológico.



1. INTRODUCTION

Immigrant-receiving states often face challenges in providing services that arise from linguistic and cultural differences. These difficulties are even more acute in institutional settings like correctional facilities, where access is restricted and controlled. This, coupled with the lack of an established position of status or power, places a series of special tensions and constraints on interpreters when delivering their services in the prison context.

In general, all professions are expected to offer an array of functions in order to fulfil a historically and culturally determined set of changing social needs. Moreover, in the context of PSI, in one single encounter, all participants adopt different roles at different times in the communication, and these roles lend themselves to specific discursive and communicative practices. In the case of interpreting, the changing institutional nature and interpersonal factors impacting on interpreting work adds an additional dimension of phenomenal depth and complexity to the notion of professional role.

In light of this, we set out to answer the following research questions: What is the role of prison interpreters? How may it be described? What kind of factors shape the expected role? Do interpreters resist or yield to external pressures? If it is found to exist, how is this resistance developed?

This contribution aims to describe the notion of professional role, understood as an individually and socially defined construct that it is sensitive to environment and constantly evolving, by identifying levels and dimensions, and factors and variables, in which identity operates. Professionals in all domains take on multiple “roles,” depending on both personal, environmental, institutional, political and cultural factors. We hope to explain how these different layers interact and exert pressure on each other and, most centrally, on the individual interpreter; we will also try to show how these tensions and forces are resisted or succumbed to in order for the interpreter to strike a contextually and ecologically balanced professional role.

Among the primary rationales for this study is the researcher’s own feelings and perceptions when attempting to conceptualize the professional role of ISPs. When working on a previous study (Baixauli-Olmos “La interpretació als serveis públics des d’una perspectiva ètica”) on the characterization of prison interpreting from an ethical perspective, we often found ourselves puzzled by the myriad approaches to professional role, although central issues like interpreter’s agency did not seem to be addressed. We posit that what appears as a lack of clarity in our common understanding of role may stem from the fact that existing models are fragmentary,

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and they do not necessarily account for the complexity and variety of factors that impact role. And we consider that there was a dire need for clear depictions of role for both the academic, professional, and educational communities.

This article is structured in four main sections. The first explores existing theories and conceptual frameworks used to define professional role. The second offers some methodological context for this research. The third section describes and discusses the results, and the fourth section summarizes and reviews this research.

2. BACKGROUND

Historically, the role of the interpreter has been one of the main focuses of PSI since the beginning of the subdiscipline. The attention that role and identity have attracted in PSI has paralleled the general research interest among the social sciences, beginning in the 1990s (Bothma *et al.* 24).

2.1. DEFINING “ROLE” IN INTERPRETING STUDIES

The concept of role has been the focal point of discussion in the PSI subdiscipline. As evidence, a cursory search in our institution’s (University of Louisville) library catalogue with the keywords “role” and “public service interpreting” or “community interpreting” yields 565 results. Although a full literature review of this concept is impossible, in our examination of role in PSI we have identified several themes and subthemes that summarize some of the most important debates: interventionism, institutional and psychosocial situatedness, vague definition and sociological approaches. These are explained in the paragraphs below.

Historically, the conceptualizations of role have evolved from less to more interventionist approaches. In the beginning, the interpreter was considered a language conduit, an invisible and neutral message converter, a kind of a “ghost” participant. Later, some authors began to understand interpreters as co-participants (Krystallidou 174) in an interaction where conflicts may arise, and where they are or should become active agents in the communicative encounter and act either as intercultural mediator (Barsky), advocate or representative (Cairncross 7, as cited in Pöchlacker 51), or a coordinator (Wadensjö), because “interpreters, as well as the norms generating their communicative practices, do not come from nowhere. They too are socially and politically situated, actively participating in the production and reproduction of macro-discursive practices.” (Inghilleri 58).

The context where interpreters perform their tasks bears on the expectations of them, as their functions operate in a situated (Angelelli 29-30) institution-driven (Ozolins) environment. We may find an example the varying scope or degree of intervention in different settings; intervention being less preferred in court vs. more acceptable in healthcare.

PSI is a vulnerable professional community, because it is not fully established and is considered to be “particularly ill-defined” (Inghilleri 59), and also because



interpreters' services are most often required "in situations of unbalanced power relationships and high emotional tension" (Smirnov 215), where a professional's impartiality may be more prone to being compromised.

These tensions have a psychological impact on interpreters. Some work has been done to understand the professional role and the emotional and potentially pathological outcomes (Wiegand, Valero-Garcés) of different sources and intensities of pressure on interpreters; as invaluable as this approach is, it does not explain how or why certain conducts emerge and identities are formed in some contexts, in spite of the fact that that individuals are "The key role-players in the identity formation process." (Bothma *et al.* 25).

Sociological approaches have enriched the debate about the status of PSI as a profession —e.g., processes of professionalization (Tseng)— and in terms of role with relation to discourse (Jiang *et al.*). In spite of the potential that social and institutional models may have for PSI research, not much attention has been given to this dimension (Pöchhacker 88; Inghilleri 58). Most conceptualizations of role focus on the rather stable collective dimension of role (PSI as a professional community of practice), which is relevant to comprehend a profession, but not necessarily applicable to the highly variable set of factors that may explain individual actions.

At the same time, not many contributions in PSI have looked at the notion of role from the perspective of social sciences and sociology whence it originates. Current approaches in the humanities regard identity "as a constructed artefact, fluid and in a recursive relationship with its environment, rather than a 'predetermined' and essentially stable 'given'" (Rudvin 435); a similar trend can be observed in Interpreting Studies (IS) where some authors (Rudvin; Jiang *et al.* 274) have transcended the binomial intervention/non-intervention paradigm and have refined the notion of role to account for its complexity by considering the changing factors in an interaction that motivate certain role and behavioural decisions. Some authors (like Krystallidou, Martínez-Gómez "Facing face" or Rudvin) stress the need to gain a more psychosocial insight into the interdependent nature of the interaction between interpreters and their environment, because according to Krystallidou "the study of the interpreter's function should benefit significantly from an approach that [...] looks at a wider range of intricacies inherent in the interpreter's behaviour." (174).

Despite the abundant work done to date, interpreters' role remains somewhat elusive. In our opinion, part of the struggle over this concept stems from a sociological understanding of role as concerning the profession (i.e., the professional function as a static attribute; e.g., an interpreter *always* operates as a language conduit), and not the professional (professional functions are dynamic; e.g., an interpreter is *currently* operating as a language conduit) ignoring the fact that both external (behavioural, environmental) and internal (psychocognitive) factors may activate certain aspects of one's individual or collective identity.

Regarding methodology, some of the most prominent literature in the field of Interpreting Studies use discourse analysis methodologies. Although these methods provide useful insight into the way interpreters respond to source language utterances, they do not necessarily look at the bigger picture to explain behaviours, as "micro-level discourse analytical approaches to interpreting research tell us more



about the particular realizations of discourse processes within interpreted interactions than about interpreters as active agents in wider social and political processes” and lack “an adequate conceptualization of how norms emerge and are sustained simultaneously at the conscious and unconscious level” (Inghilleri 58).

2.2. PRISON INTERPRETING: INSTITUTIONAL SETTING, INTERPRETING SETTING AND PROFESSIONAL ROLE

Prisons have been considered “total institutions,” understood “as a place of residence and work where a large number of like-situated individuals, cut off from the wider society for an appreciable period of time, together lead an enclosed, formally administered round of life. Prisons serve as a clear example, providing we appreciate that what is prison-like about prisons is found in institutions whose members have broken no laws.” Penitentiary institutions are one of five types of total institutions, and are described in these terms: “A third type of total institution is organized to protect the community against what are felt to be intentional dangers to it, with the welfare of the persons thus sequestered not the immediate issue: jails, penitentiaries, POW camps, and concentration camps” (Goffman 15).

The topic of interpreting or interpreter role does not seem to have gathered momentum in the domain of prison studies; we have only been able to find two references, in the *Encyclopedia of prisons & correctional facilities* (Bosworth) in the context of language needs and services provided (“[...] ESL instruction is being supplemented, or replaced, with electronic translation [sic] technologies”) (Wilkinson and Mentor) and in the Hispanic/Latino(a) Prisoners entry, where lack of public services interpreters is a source of discontent for inmates (Anthony B. Guevara). In addition, a search of the term ‘interpreter’ in the renowned International Center for Prison Studies website www.prisonstudies.org yielded no results.

Few studies focus on interpreting services in correctional facilities. Within Interpreting Studies, the likely first historical reference to the duties of interpreters that explicitly refers to prisons is found in Giambruno (39), where, quoting a 1563 Ordinance in Spanish colonies, it is stipulated that “Interpreters must be present at all proceedings, hearings and prison visits,” although this reference seems rather tangential. Only a handful of contributions touch upon the topic in a deliberate manner. Two PhDs dissertations: Martínez-Gómez (“La interpretación en instituciones penitenciarias”) focuses on quality and interpersonal factors in prison interpreting as performed by non-professionals, and Baixauli-Olmos (“La interpretació als serveis públics des d’una perspectiva ètica”) deals with professional ethics and a description of the prison setting through an ethical prism. (These results were summarized in a chapter by Baixauli-Olmos “A Description of Interpreting in Prisons.”). A brief explanation of the nature of the setting may be found in an encyclopedia entry by Martínez-Gómez (“Prison settings”). Two articles present an international overview of language services in prisons (Martínez-Gómez “La integración lingüística” and “Interpreting in Prison Settings”). Finally, we identified two more specific contributions that concentrate on norm-shaping vs. norm-breaking on the part of



prisoner-interpreters (Martínez-Gómez “Criminals Interpreting for Criminals”) and on face-keeping in mental health interpreting (Martínez-Gómez “Facing Face”). It must be noted in this respect that this bibliographic search has mostly focused on spoken-language interpreting.

In order to briefly describe the prison interpreting setting from a communication facilitation perspective we will summarize the description in Baixauli-Olmos (“La interpretació als serveis públics des d’una perspectiva ètica” 385-386), based on Alexieva’s multiparametric model and a subsequent adaptation proposed by Abril Martí (38-39):

1. Participants in the communicative situation: *Main*: a public service representative (usually a lawyer, but also other professionals, like a social worker or doctor) and a “user” [our emphasis] (an inmate); *Secondary*: A professional interpreter (when it is a legal-type meeting) and an *ad hoc* interpreter, i.e., another inmate (when non-legal).
2. Format: Triadic but dialogic, facilitated by language transfer in consecutive (spoken languages) or simultaneous (signed) mode. Strong interpersonal dimension. Security is fundamental, and it impacts the channel and physical layout of the encounter.
3. Contextual configuration: Communication takes place in the prison setting, which may hamper the interpreting process due to security and space (poor lighting and acoustics) factors.
4. Text type and text creation strategies: Text creation is asymmetric: the service provider often produces semi-spontaneous and specialized text, whereas the user tends to produce spontaneous and unspecialized text. Text type varies during the interview, a consensual (Zimányi 257) social part where the provider asks about life and well-being, and another more conflictual part where provider asks about the case; however, this changes depending on whether the meeting happens pre- or post-trial. The interpreter is used by participants so they can either elicit or retain information.
5. Goals of communicative situation: Goals on the part of main participants are sometimes opposed (getting vs. retaining information).
6. Relationship between participants: Power is asymmetrical between main participants and the interpreter is considered to align with the service provider and perceived to have greater power than the service “user.” Cultural differences may be smaller or greater depending on the system in question and the service “user” culture.
7. Participants’ role: Main participants alternate as speaker/recipient and often use the interpreter to fulfill their communicative goals. The interpreter receives pressure from main participants in terms of communicative strategies and inaccurate expectations.

It is relevant to underline that the study from which this description was taken uses the same dataset as the present contribution.



As is apparent from the last section in the description above, it seems that prison interpreters' role is subject to the pressure of managing the discursive practices of main participants, resisting the fulfillment of unreasonable expectations and demands on the part of the main participants, and also the ethical dilemmas arising from other professionals' malpractice.

2.3. DEFINING "ROLE" IN SOCIOLOGY AND SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

The fact that social roles are such a focal point of the human experience may justify the heightened concern this topic elicits. The following paragraphs focus on defining "role" from the perspective of sociology and social psychology. "(...) [I]n the field of sociology, this concept relates to the social role that an individual plays within a given society. Role, therefore, can be viewed as a model of behaviour which arises concerning a certain social function and which refers to the set of expectations that the society has on the actions of an individual occupying a particular social position." (Brandle, in Ritzar and Ryan 507). In spite of this basic definition, "role" is a polysemic term, as "A role can be defined as a social position, behaviour associated with a social position, or a typical behaviour; [...] [as] expectations about how an individual ought to behave; [...] [as] how individuals actually behave in a given social position; [...] [as] a characteristic behavior or expected behavior, a part to be played, or a script for social conduct." (Hindin in Ritzar and Ryan 508).

Now, even though there is no unified conceptualization of "role," as is apparent from the previous quotation, it seems that the concepts of identity and social function, as expressed through behaviors and expectations, are central to the notion of "role."

But there is a missing link in this sociological framework. The processes of identity formation in terms of how the various levels impact a social function to be developed by an individual have not been studied. The question of identity is extremely complex because it encompasses both a summation of experiences, beliefs and thoughts that may explain behaviours, and the process of formation of a relatively stable, though changing and dynamic, set of characteristics in a constant interaction with its surroundings. In spite of this variety of usages of the term, there is some basic agreement regarding identity formation processes: they are developed in three stages (prototype formation, identity activation and behavioural outcome) through the interaction between individuals and the different environments where they operate. These environments may be grouped into three categories or levels: life spheres (culture, politics or family), life roles (position within a family or a community) and work contexts (occupation, career stage, organization or team role) (Bothma *et al.* 24-27).

Two main theoretical strands explore identity formation processes from a social science perspective. Social identity theories consider identity as mainly derived from the social category or group to which the individual belongs or self-identifies with; norms, beliefs and behaviours will tend to be similar to those held by other members of the same group, but they are likely to be different than out-groups. Role



identity theory conceptualizes Identity as mainly derived from individual roles, which are reflected in performing expected behaviours, controlling the respective resources or services and managing relationships.

In the professional context, identity formation has been described as “A multi-identity, multi-faceted and multi-layered construction of the self (in which the self-concept fulfils a core, integrative function) that shapes the roles that individuals are involved in, in their employment context.” (Bothma *et al.* 25). This “multi” attribute makes identity and role formation difficult to grasp unless it is assimilated into a greater structure onto which the multiplicity of identities, facets and layers may be affixed.

Looking at the broader environment is useful to understanding social roles. Bronfenbrenner proposed a social ecological model that explained how children develop their identities interacting with different layers of their environment. Role was defined in this contribution as “a set of activities and relations expected of a person occupying a particular position in society, and of others in relation to that person” (Bronfenbrenner 85). At its time, this definition offered a novel interactionist approach to role, as being applied both by others to the child and by the child onto others.

This concentric circle model enjoys widespread acceptance as a useful representation of the various components that interact in the shaping of identity during childhood. It starts at the individual system (made up of attributes like sex, age or health), then moves up to microsystems (direct interactions with others: family, friends, teachers or neighbours), mesosystems (interaction among microsystems: between parents and teachers), exosystems (larger systems that indirectly impact on a child: school policies, parents’ workplace), macrosystem (beliefs systems: culture, ideology surrounding children’s education) and chronosystem (time system, transitions in life that impact other systems: transition to primary school). Below is a graphic illustration of the model (Figure 1).

Although for reasons of space we will not be able to discuss this model in detail, in the Results and Discussion section we will expand on how we adapted this model in an attempt to integrate the environmental factors that condition the role of prison interpreters.

A final notion that is relevant to our subsequent analysis is that of stress as a shaping force in professional identity formation and evolution. This concept has been investigated in the field of interpreting in terms of physiological (Kurz 197) and emotional or psychological stress (Valero-Garcés).

The forces that interact in work identity and practice have been studied in depth in both interpreting and sociology (Rudvin 435) and there seems to be consensus on the fact that these happen at different levels. For example, Kurz identifies at a physiological level three types of sources of stress (mental, social and environmental). In terms of hampering factors that go against the flow of interpreters’ professional identity formation, two main levels have been identified (Rudvin 438): in relation to society (trust and exclusivity, jurisdiction and motivation) and dynamics internal to the profession (systematized training for interpreters, reward and positive impact on society). It has been posited as well that interpreters’ role functions like gatekeeping



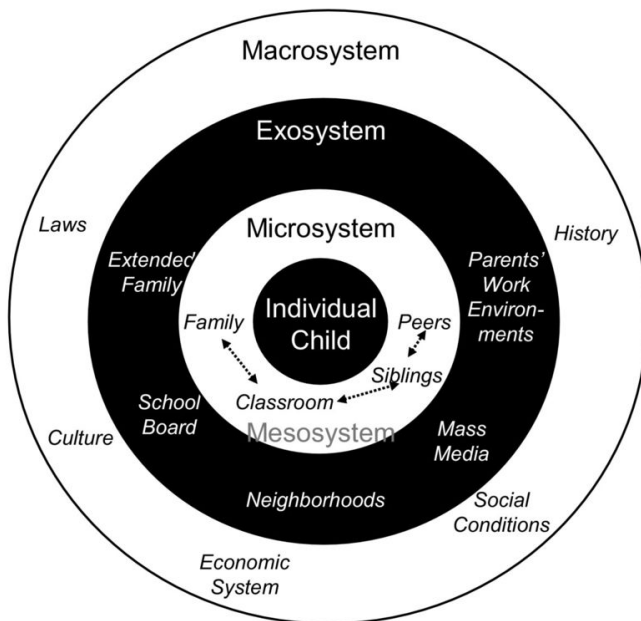


Figure 1. Bronfenbrenner's social ecological model (Eisenmann *et al.*).

at various levels (individual, communication routines, organization, institution and social system) (Pöllabauer building on Shoemaker and Vos).

All this work helps us zoom in or out to better grasp smaller details or greater trends in this interpreting work social map. Although most of the conceptualizations of identity we have reviewed do account for the fluidity and complexity of personal and professional identity, contributions describing how professional, personal and environmental factors interact to shape the identity and behaviours of the individual practitioner are relatively scarce. We will try to incorporate different models and notions to explain the gathered data and draw more general conclusions in order to add to the discussion on prison interpreters' role and identity.

3. METHODS

3.1. STUDY DESIGN

This observational qualitative retrospective study relies on several sets of data collected in the framework of our PhD dissertation (Baixauli-Olmos "*La interpretació als serveis públics des d'una perspectiva ètica*"). The data was gathered through the following instruments: participant observation, semistructured face-to-face interviews and online questionnaires. Three main areas were covered in



each of these instruments: demographics, opinion about and experience in prison interpreting, and the ethical dimension of prison interpreting. The subjects in this study were: professional prison interpreters, inmates and prison workers of different seniority levels. However, in this contribution we have only focused on interpreters.

3.2. DATA COLLECTION

Data collection took place between 2009 and 2011 at different research sites: a prison in Castelló (Centre Penitenciari Castelló I), the north-western England (United Kingdom) area and the virtual space. Although we collected data from different types of respondents, this research only focuses on the data provided by interpreters. Total sample size is N= 50, made up of two sub-sets: 47 questionnaires (filled in online by professional interpreters from the USA, UK, Australia and Argentina) and 3 in-depth semi-structured face-to-face interviews with professional interpreters in Manchester and Lancashire. As a brief demographic sketch, our sample is mostly made up of university-trained (96%) SpanishEnglish (67%) women (78%) interpreters of 41-50 years of age (36%) from the USA (64%) and with an experience of more than 20 interpreting encounters in prison settings (64%). A more thorough explanation of data collection procedures and sampling may be found in Baixauli Olmos (*“La interpretació als serveis públics des d’una perspectiva ètica”* 163-187).

3.3. DATA ANALYSIS

The present research analyses the gathered data through the prism of professional role. Even though the original study was designed to characterize the prison interpreting setting by enquiring about expectations, common practices, environmental factors and ethical principles and dilemmas, it did not address this central issue at length.

The collected primary information was analysed using grounded theory (Glaser and Straus) with the support of a qualitative data analysis software tool (Atlas ti). Grounded theory uses two important notions to gauge the relevance or usefulness (“validity” probably is not a practicable methodological notion in qualitative studies): groundedness (based on the number of quotations that are tagged with the code in question) and density (how deeply populated a code is, i.e., how many children—subordinate—codes are contained within that parent, or superordinate, code, and how many connections this code has with other codes. Even though we do not refer to these methodological concepts in the analysis, they have been used to decide what conceptual entities are more prominent and frequent.

In order to conduct an analysis of the gathered information, we proceeded as follows. First, we prepared the data so it could be analysed: questionnaire responses were transferred onto a spreadsheet, recordings were transcribed and observation journals were compiled. Second, demographic and close-ended questions were statistically described. Third, open-ended questions, interview transcripts and journals



were analysed and coded. Although these three steps relied on previous work, we re-coded the whole dataset in order to gain a fresher look at it. We enriched our theorization with existing notions, theories and models, as explained in the Background section.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We have decided to combine results and discussion of results so we can justify the groundedness or significance of the described theoretical categories with relation to the collected data.

In presenting the results of this study, we will categorize the factors raised by subjects using an adaptation to prison interpreting of Bronfenbrenner's social ecological model. We have adapted this model into five nested systems (individual, micro, meso, exo and macro) and two transversal systems (chrono and topo), which will be explained below. The overall goal of this framework is to be used as a tool to explain (external/behavioural or internal/psycho-cognitive) behaviours a professional may engage in. This classification is just an approximation; the limits are not clear-cut and differentiations are not airtight; also, there is of course a complex web of relations that we hope to be able to capture between systems, levels and factors.

We have also used a balancing vs. unbalancing dialectical relationship between different factors to try to incorporate the often divergent view of respondents, for example, in terms of security (cumbersome vs. comforting). These forces, tensions or stressors will be used to explain how a specific component of the model (e.g., acoustics—a part of the physical environment, which is a part of the mesosystem.) impacts actual professional role and practice (in this example, an unbalancing or negative effect).

4.1. INDIVIDUAL SYSTEM

In this proposal, the individual system refers to the self, understood as a dynamic compendium of both professional and personal attributes.

The personal level includes notions like demographics (age, gender, place of origin, native language and so on), personal history and experiences, general ideology and personal beliefs systems (religion, philosophy), and states of being or mind (including emotional responses to professional environment).

Although demographic variables are not statistically significant in our sample, references to variables like gender (“I cannot go through the metal detector machine because of the small pieces of metal hardware on my clothing”) or language pair (“Sometimes the jailer refuses to uncuff a deaf prisoner”) tend to establish a relationship of tension between those variables and security, which illustrates two main points. First, prison interpreters function in an institutional environment which imposes certain limits and restrictions especially for security reasons, and interpreters need to be aware of those constraints in order to implement strategies



and role types to better navigate them; this highlights the institutionally situated nature of the prison interpreter role and connects the micro-, meso- and exo-systems. Second, sample subjects frequently reiterated that when those barriers make communication-facilitation virtually impossible, professionals are required to speak up in order to fulfil their main role. In terms of beliefs, one of our subjects reported that deeply held religious beliefs were a moral compass that guided them in the direction of social justice; in this sense, personal beliefs are also key elements when explaining decision-making processes.

As for psychological or emotional states of mind, some of the most recurrent comments are “daunting,” “overwhelming,” “traumatic,” “difficult” or “unpleasant,” and these feelings seem to be triggered by the venue’s condition (bad smell, poor lighting and minimally furnished) and the general atmosphere (“never comfortable [or] pleasant”). Our most salient emotion as observers is “fear”; we felt insecure and scared because we did not know why the inmates we interacted with were imprisoned and the setting was intimidating; this may be explained at the individual system by our lack of experience or training in this setting. However, a few respondents portrayed the setting more positively (“The environment has always been good, very secure and the staff polite and helpful. I’ve felt safe and at ease”). These reflections seem to reinforce our proposal that different levels at various systems (the venue, other workers, security) impact the individual differently.

Another relevant component when trying to understand the emotional response to the setting is experience. In our sample, more experienced prison interpreters tend to depict the setting as less threatening, describing it in a more nuanced light (“Experiences are very individual and range from easy to difficult, pleasant to unpleasant”). They explain their experiences as dependent on the level of security of the facility, jurisdiction (federal prison vs. county jail in the United States) or type of population (juveniles vs. female vs. male). It seems that the negative emotional power of the environment diminishes over time. This evokes the temporal evolution of individual experiences, which in a way connects individual and toposystems. Again, this reflection points to the interdependent nature of the development of a professional activity and identity in such an institutionalized context; if the facility (mesosystem) is classified as one thing or another (exosystem; with the different types of funding allocated to each kind) by legislators (macrosystem), the actual psycho-social experience varies (individual and micro system).

At the professional level, we find factors like training, professional history and experience, professional affiliation, type of contract, expectations about own role and job, professional ideology and ethical dilemmas.

In terms of training, a large majority of our respondents (96%) had received formal training in interpreting, although only three had ever heard of specific training for interpreting in a prison setting. One of the respondents collaborated in the development of the UK Diploma of Public Service Interpreting Prison Service Add-on (HM Prison service *et al.*) and had received formal legal interpreting training in Germany. She reported that practicing interpreters would often complain that they were not able to train due to their very low pay (“The interpreters say ‘Listen, I’m sometimes getting paid 12 pounds an hour. Why would I do a course



that costs several hundred and then the exam, that costs me 500?"). This exemplifies how macro- (laws and policies) and exosystemic (training, pay) factors impose constraints on the kind of professional attributes (training) practitioners are able to acquire, thus also limiting the types of socialization processes that would facilitate the attainment of a strong sense of identity, trust and legitimacy. Another participant commented on how training helps professionals to better manage emotionally loaded situations ("So, I know about how to speak or keep out of any kind of emotions being involved.").

One of the questions we posed was whether interpreters had been faced with a complex dilemma. The dilemmatic situations identified by our subjects arose from their privileged position of cultural and linguistic knowledge and also from tasks unfulfilled others. One of them reported that a prisoner was "apparently from a given nationality but it was clear from the accent and general background that this was incorrect and may not have been explored earlier," and explained that it was a difficult decision because it was critical (as it may affect country of deportation) but was not considered by the interpreter to be their responsibility. A similar comment is made regarding poor interpreting during trial and the unawareness on the part of attorneys that language issues may be good reasons for appeal. These quotations imply that someone in the meso- and exosystem should have done something about this earlier, but did not.

A final factor we have considered is the actions and utterances proactively undertaken by interpreters to modify the environment. In one instance, an interpreter "mentioned [...] to the attorney that certified interpreters can study language problems, and now all the attorneys in that office look for ways to appeal on language issues." Another participant reported officers for taking children from their families after failing to use qualified interpreters. We find another example in a psychiatrist-prisoner interview, where the interpreter felt uncomfortable and asked to speak to the service provider privately to address that discomfort. These three powerful examples show us that individual interpreters are subjected to different forces, pressures and tensions, but they are also active agents who shape their environment (proposing legal strategies, reporting malpractice, expressing discomfort), from their immediate microsystem to higher systems.

4.2. MICROSYSTEMS

Microsystems are made up by the constellation of relationships and interactions that take place during an interpreting assignment, mainly during the interpreted interview. In is in this system that interpreters are actually facilitating communication. At this microsystem level, the feedback between individual and environment is at its strongest, as the forces exerted by both on one another are often tangible and have an almost instant impact. A chief consideration in this system is obviously the nature of communication, including sources of stress and interpreting difficulty. We have also included here expectations by main participants and interpreters' responses to them.



As we will explain in the next section, the most common type of encounter is a meeting between an inmate and a lawyer, and it tends to follow a pattern based on the trial stage. Pre-trial encounters tend to involve a little social chatting and a good deal of organizational and factual information exchange, and they often become confrontational. Main participants engage in discursive practices to either elicit or refuse to give information. It is sometimes also the case that prisoners may not be willing or able to engage in communication, or that they may be going through withdrawal symptoms, which may cause communicative difficulties (“Prisoners are often in pretty bad shape, especially if they’re newly incarcerated. Overwhelmed or depressed, sleep deprived, suffering from withdrawal from drugs or alcohol.”). After the trial has ended, communication is more consensual, usually with an emphasis on social interaction, maybe exchanging information about the case, but with less tension and fewer communicative barriers.

Communication is also determined by stress, tension and difficulty. In terms of communicative stressors, subjects indicated that unrecorded encounters are less stressful than, for example, court interpretations, and that less intimidating questioning strategies than those used in police stations reduce interpersonal friction. Respondents also signalled the interpreting mode as a key communicative factor, as consecutive interpreting, the most common mode in spoken language prison interpreting, is said to make the task harder than in courts, where the most common mode is simultaneous for all language pairs.

The “tension” between lawyer and inmate is often reflected back onto interpreters, as they may be perceived as being aligned with the service provider (“I was perceived to be sort of on the barrister’s side. And they were quite aggressive in their tone towards me, you know, even in the general chit-chat stages and I had to make it very clear, you know.”). The tone of “aggression” toward interpreters triggers behaviours on their part, here in terms of specific utterances (“I’m just in my chair, I’m in the middle here. I’ve got no knowledge of the case other than what’s going on here.”). In this example, we see an unbalancing source of stress (feeling attacked) at the microsystem level (directly experienced with participants in the assignment), probably originating from experiences or beliefs developing in the meso- (interactions with other inmates or lawyers) or macrolevel (feeling of loneliness or abandonment by the system). The interpreter’s own voice may be construed as an attempt to balance or push the tension back. This shows how the different systems interact upon one another, and how interpreters forge their identity and stand their ground.

The nature of communication shapes and limits the expectations that main participants in an interpreting assignment have about the interpreter’s role. One of the most frequently reported instances of expectations happens on the part of the lawyer, who asks the interpreter (not) to perform a certain task: leaving the interpreter alone with the inmate to sight translate a document, asking the interpreter to give their number to the inmate to later discuss the case or to refrain from interpreting a message.

Interpreters are often expected to provide services that they feel are outside their scope of practice. These services may entail offering cultural and socio-political information about a country, giving their own general perception about inmates



(their intelligence, truthfulness or repentance), or more interpersonal functions (like comforting or calming) in situations where the end-user's needs become prominent (like self-harm, which are not uncommon in penal facilities).

As in the previous system, we found that interactions with main participants trigger actions and own-voice utterances on the part of interpreters, mostly related to role clarification ("I'm only the interpreter," "It's not my job," "I cannot advise you on the truthfulness of a message," "I can't advise you about legal matters," "No, you have to calm them down and I will interpret," "I am not allowed to speak with you," "If you want to know about the history, because here there is a cultural difference and I'm trying to fill in the gap, but I am not here to tell you the whole history about what exactly happened in that country") and ethical duties ("I explain that the code of ethics does not permit this," "I just explain that the interpreter must interpret everything that is said and I also interpret my explanation to the prisoner. It works."). As this shows, the push-and-pull among primary participants, and among participants and interpreter are two-way; interpreters are not passive forces, and they implement different strategies to dodge pressures.

At the same time, the interpreter's employment status (individual system) and contractual nature of their job (determined at external, meso-, exo- or even macrosystems) has a bearing on the type and form of the interpreter's agency (resisting or giving in to external pressures), because "it's a private business as well, so you have to keep, you know, the bookings coming in, you have to say this politely, to make sure they're not upset."

This illustrates that the individual's standing as a professional is a key explanatory variable; this kind of reasoning would probably be different in court settings, where interpreters are often publicly hired. This, in turn, expresses the moral and psychological tug-of-war between agreeing to do tasks one believes to be outside of their role and the attributes conferred onto interpreters in meso- (type of contract offered), exo- (public vs. private interpreters in the sector in question) and macrosystems (language access rights in prisons vs. courts).

4.3. MESOSYSTEM

The mesosystem does not involve direct interactions, but rather connections between microsystems. In the case under study, the mesosystem is made up of the physical space where interpreting takes place (i.e., correctional facilities) and by the interpreter's constellation of professional relationships outside the specific interaction.

From an institutional setting perspective, since correctional facilities are spaces used to cut off prisoners from the wider community, all kinds of services are provided, including education, social work, security, counselling, health care, and law. Only one of our respondents has interpreted in prison outside legal encounters, and that is the reason we have focused on the inmate-lawyer encounter in this contribution. It seems that although these services are provided, they are performed by other prisoners who may (claim to) know the languages in question; this points to different standards in terms of language access of the inmate vs. general population.



This may be explained at an exo- and macrosystem level, in terms of the financial cost these services incur and the lack of political will to satisfy a need that does not rank high in general interest.

Concerning the space, the physical environment where interpreting occurs has an intensely negative effect on both the task and the general work atmosphere. With respect to the basic function of communication facilitation, the fact that interaction often happens through a glass and via a screen or a telephone in a cubicle that is designed for two main participants complicates the interpreter's task. In a similar vein, poor acoustics resulting from the simultaneous conversations in the same room, makes it difficult to hear or be heard. This hinders the interpreter's ability to fulfil their main task. With relation to the emotional environment, most respondents label the setting as "difficult," "vile," "daunting" or "overwhelming," while a few characterise it as "good," "okay," "easy and smooth" or "secure." Some factors that reinforce negative emotions are security constraints and the architectural layout of the building, unpleasant smell and the difficult life situations end users are facing. Also being in close proximity to felons may also be overwhelming at first; one subject also cited the outbreaks of contagious diseases and complained that "we often aren't informed ahead of time that a certain disease is rampant so that we can take precautions or refuse the job."

Security procedures are obviously fundamental in penal institutions. A few respondents mentioned how the time spent going through security and the non-negotiable time limits placed on visits and interviews often makes it almost impossible to comply with basic professional obligations, especially because consecutive interpreting (the most common mode in spoken language interpreting in prisons) slows communication down. This adds tension to the relationship between meso- and exosystems, and ultimately crucially questions the effectiveness or even viability of the profession in this setting, unless special arrangements are put in place. All of this increases the psychological pressures on interpreters.

With regards to professional relationships and expectations, we have identified two types of interactant forces: inter-professional relations of interpreters with professionals they may work with, but not in the situation in question, such as prison staff and other lawyers (they may be "polite and helpful," "not always the most helpful and polite people to deal with" or "very unpleasant and humiliating"); and intraprofessional relations of interpreters with other interpreters, interpreting service providers or supervisors.

4.4. EXOSYSTEM

The exosystem refers to the network of agents, rules, spaces and interactions that lay outside the interpreter's experience but have an impact on their professional activity; this would include factors such as job satisfaction of service provider, living conditions of inmates, past experiences with interpreters, interactions between inmates or lawyers or prison regulations.



There are very few instances about this system in our sample. One that is relevant may be found in the expectations created by other interpreters (quoting a lawyer, “So, such and such interpreter did it [offering cultural information]”). Another that in our opinion is very revealing are the misconceptions held by other professionals within the environment; one of our interviewees organized a prison interpreting course together with prison staff, and in the preparation stages it was found that prison officers thought interpreters were the ones who should comfort inmates (this example has been discussed above), as they possess the cultural sensitivity to do so. This misconception about what other practitioners should do is frequent with underdeveloped professions, like PSI is, at least in prisons. In countering preconceived expectations, one informant also mentioned the need to stress that “maybe he or she did, but that is not what I do” to rectify those perceptions.

When asked about dilemmas, one respondent mentioned a tragic incident: they felt the inmate was psychologically unstable, and reported this to their supervisor. The supervisor decided not to take any action, and the prisoner later committed suicide. Although it is clear this interpreter did follow reasonable steps and what happened was beyond their ability to prevent, it still has an impact on their role, their emotional wellbeing, and their personal and professional history (“I’m still grappling with this.”).

4.5. MACROSYSTEM

In the macrosystem, we find general beliefs, ethical values, laws and policies of a society or culture; this would also include semiotic and social psychology factors such as how prisons are imagined, defined or portrayed (for example, in media). This is the external ring in the concentric circles model, and it has an indirect, but very clear, impact on the prison interpreter. General laws and regulations about language access, public services and non-discriminatory policies also fall under this macrosystem.

With regards to the interpreting industry, for example, hiring procedures and contractual relationships tend to be dictated by macrosystemic factors. According to the data collected in this study, in the USA, certified court interpreters may be publicly hired by the judge to facilitate official communications between inmate and lawyer, although the most common type of contract is as (certified or not) freelance interpreters working with attorneys, possibly via an agency. In the UK, if the interpreter is publicly hired, they must be listed in the National Register of Public Service Interpreters (which requires some credentials, like training, an exam or some experience), from which the office in question (Barristers’ Chambers) picks an interpreter. However, all 13 of our British respondents agreed that the working conditions had worsened significantly as a result of the privatization of the market and the need by agencies to lower the costs.



4.6. TOPOSYSTEM/TOPOLOGICAL DIMENSION

The topo-system (another level in the system) or topological dimension (a transversal dimension that cuts through the other lower systems) delineates the changing nature of role according to space factors, within or among different macrosystems. These space differences involve variations within the same institution (e.g., higher vs. lower security levels in different modules), from institution to institution (e.g., jail vs. prison) and from region to region (e.g., systems focusing more on punishment vs. reintegration).

In terms of regional differences, as macrosystems diverge from culture to culture, ecological factors shaping role expectations also differ. Even if we have gathered data from various countries (USA, UK, Argentina and Spain), we have not found reflections of this kind in our sample. However, we presume that it is possible that different criminal justice systems and philosophies allocate resources and structure penal systems differently, both in terms of space, security, atmosphere, language access policies (including the contractual nature of interpreting work) and conduciveness to communication. This diversity of underlying philosophical approaches to imprisonment and their evolution through time permeates whole macrosystems and trickles down to smaller (exo, meso, micro and individual) systems.

4.7. CHRONOSYSTEM/CHRONOLOGICAL DIMENSION

The chronosystem or chronological dimension (this distinction has been addressed above) denotes the effect of time and history on the ecological model. This time frame of reference can refer to changes that take place in a person's life or in a culture.

At an individual level, interpreters depict the setting differently according to their history. In our dataset, those with more experience describe it in less negative terms. At the same time, repeated exposure to a difficult situation may increase the chance for vicarious trauma or burn-out syndrome to occur for some individuals (three respondents mentioned the words "traumatic," "grappling with memories" and "tragedies").

At a collective level, it is evident that socio-historical or political changes impact interpreting. Examples of this may be found in laws to regulate or deregulate the market (as our British respondents highlighted) or to privatise or deprivatise prison services. The presence of interpreters has increased dramatically since the 1980s (although, as mentioned above, they are mentioned in documents as far back as 16th century), at least in industrialized nations.



5. CONCLUSIONS

This study has found that differently scaled sources of pressure and tension shape the interpreter's role in prison settings. These positive and negative forces operate within several nested systems. An illustrative example may be found in the problematic acoustics found in prisons as reported in this study. The architecture of correctional facilities (mesosystem), as it concerns acoustics, is different across territories and even within one institution (toposystem), and it changes over time (chronosystem); the design of these buildings depends on the amount of funding allocated, which in turn is the result of legislation, political will and general interest (macrosystem), in the sense that lack of funding may compromise the quality of materials or even the consideration of acoustics as a factor. The ability of professional interpreting institutions to exert pressure on the legislature and the administration of penal institutions (exosystem) will determine the power to ensure proper working conditions. These conditions will either facilitate or complicate the interpreting interaction (microsystem), which will help increase or reduce the amount of stress and satisfaction (individual system) on the part of interpreters. A difficult acoustic environment may elicit a greater or lesser degree of intervention (e.g., asking for repetitions or managing turns), impacting both the main participants' perception of the interpreter and the interpreter's perception of him or herself.

Even though the system we have tried to develop does not attempt to provide a thorough list of descriptors or predictors of professional role for prison interpreters, we consider this theorization provides a broad thought framework that accounts for the extremely complex and highly interactive set of variables that bear on professional role. We also hope that this proposal has the hermeneutic potential to explain expectations and behaviours of interpreters in other settings in an integrative manner, considering the whole ecological system, and to move the discussion beyond a fragmentary understanding (individual or situated vs. collective role) of interpreters' professional role.

In summary, penal facilities represent very tense tightropes for interpreters to walk, given the numerous destabilizing forces at play, both environmental and otherwise, as expressed by the interpreters who participated in this study. Nevertheless, they also delineate techniques, strategies and factors that help them be grounded. As we have illustrated, the individual remains at the centre of the cumulative forces that different levels and systems impose on interpreting in prison settings, and is an active player in this force system.

One of the main limitations of this study in terms of methodology is the lack of direct or indirect observations of interpreted encounters. Although we repeatedly attempted to gain permission to record, due to security restrictions we were explicitly barred from recording anything within prison premises.

A second potential theoretical-methodological shortcoming that we considered during this study, especially regarding data analysis (coding), was our lack of professional experience as prison interpreters. In light of this, we actively sought questioning strategies to avoid leading responses toward less positive attributes. Nevertheless, we would like to expressly contemplate the possibility that our description



of the available data could be skewed by our own feelings. Even though we spent some time in the prison where indirect data collection field work was conducted, our journals of the experience always left a negative and rather unsettling aftertaste, and this sensation seems to have permeated the whole study. Be this as it may, one can only hope that working conditions and environmental factors (and researchers' perceptions of them) will be better in the future, as they have been improving in most industrialized nations (as attested by the increasing presence of interpreters in many courtrooms, for example).

A third, closely associated limitation pertains to theory-building. The grounded theory methodology, at least its original premises (which have been questioned repeatedly), encourages researchers "literally to ignore the literature of theory and fact on the area under study, in order to assure that the emergence of categories will not be contaminated" (Glaser and Strauss 1967: 45). We did not follow this recommendation in this research and, in fact, it is possible that earlier literature findings have shaped our making sense of the codes we had generated in order for them to fit in earlier conceptualizations of professional identity. Although this is not necessarily a negative, we had reflected on this in our analysis memos and thought it was worth making explicit here.

Finally, a route worth exploring to further the understanding of professional role in PSI from an ecological perspective, as presented in this study, involves quantifying the strength, potency or salience of each factor relative to other factors, systems or the overall ecological model. Salience is a useful conceptual tool to account for the weight of each force —i.e., to explain how strong a specific (balancing or unbalancing) force is, and thus how powerful its "shaping force" is in a given situation or context. Salience, understood in the semiotic sense of prominence, of a component in an interaction might thus help to explain behaviours that may appear difficult to justify from a theoretical point of view, or to correlate with other instances of professional practice and decision-making by the same professional or by others. Even though an interpreter may comply with most expectations in general, under specific circumstances, situations of crisis, deeply held moral or political beliefs or intense past experiences may trigger certain actions and thoughts, either consciously or subconsciously. In other words, the importance attributed by the participant or observer (be it the very agent —i.e. the interpreter— or a researcher, a colleague, etc.) to a stimulus or a factor at a given time may help to understand why other factors impacting professional identity, ethics and role might be overridden. Although during our analysis we have started to see trends in terms of salience of the analytical codes we generated, that portion of the study requires further work.

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