

International Journal of Language, Translation and Intercultural Communication

Vol 5 (2016)

Community Interpreting at Greek and International Level: A Step Towards Professional Autonomy



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doi: [10.12681/ijltic.10656](https://doi.org/10.12681/ijltic.10656)

To cite this article:

Jurida, S. H., & Pavlović, T. (2016). Community Interpreting in the Context of Bosnia and Herzegovina. *International Journal of Language, Translation and Intercultural Communication*, 5, 78–83. <https://doi.org/10.12681/ijltic.10656>

Community Interpreting in the Context of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

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Abstract

The present paper surveys the development and the current position of community interpreting (CI) in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), by providing an insight into the emergence of this “out of necessity” concept. The paper is a reflection of the origins and major features of the profession, from the perspective of active participants in this process. Since the research in this field practically does not exist in BiH, the paper attempts to highlight the fundamentals of the profession, fields of practice, professional organizations and training opportunities. The paper portrays the historical background of CI in the context of BiH, trying to capture the interpreting activities and the accompanying practicalities both in the conflict (1992-1995) and post-conflict periods. CI in BiH is mainly performed by semi- and non-professionals, due to the fact that education and training institutions for community interpreters are traditionally non-existent in this country. The paper brings a historical paradigm into the emergence of the interpreting profession and its inherently embedded international character in BiH. The study of CI may not have such a long tradition as other disciplines, but has immensely gained in popularity in recent decades, particularly in the context of ever-growing interest by scholars. The paper follows these recent global trends aiming at contributing to a more comprehensive research in the field in the context of BiH, highlighting the importance of CI in the evolving society challenged by the newly-emerging social phenomena.

Keywords: community interpreting, Bosnia and Herzegovina, interpreting activities

1. Introduction

Given the current status of Community Interpreting (CI) in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), in terms of both lack of its presence in scholarly research, and legally unregulated social practice, we recognised the need to address this issue by providing an overview of the emergence of this “out of necessity” concept and its development in various stages. Keeping in mind the relatively recent historical and political developments in present-day BiH, covering the period of approximately three decades (since the early 1990s), the CI concept can be seen as clearly divided in two major periods with 1992 being the clear division line. Prior to 1992, interpreting activities were present to a certain degree in rather limited contexts, while after 1992, the emerging social circumstances (the conflict) brought radical changes in the practice of interpreting in general, with the arrival of a number of international organisations responsible for peacekeeping activities. Until now, any scholarly research into CI in BiH has been related to the politics and identity-based linguistic issues. The scholars have mainly focused on interpreting activities through the prism of legal, political or economic points of view. However, rather interestingly, these scholars, coming from foreign countries, most certainly lack the native perspective in this process.

2. Literature Review

According to Gile (2004: 11), community interpreters (also called dialogue interpreters, public service interpreters, etc.) work mostly in environments where individuals from minority groups or foreigners, interact with the public authorities and medical authorities in a host-country. This ‘social’ classification of interpreting has implications for the development of research, on the one hand, and on the practice itself, on the other.

Gile (2004: 20) further argues that more research on dialogue and community interpreting is needed. While it is difficult to pinpoint the precise weight of each factor in its present evolution, it appears easy to acknowledge the social need for better provision of such interpreting services in many countries over the past decade or so, and this clear need has led to much interest on the part of public authorities in the relevant countries in research into these forms of public service interpreting. This has been reflected in both funding of and effective cooperation from such authorities in research projects (see Roberts *et al.*, 2000) and is generating more research into the relevant types of interpreting.

Cambridge (2004: 49) states that Public Service Interpreting (PSI) is an emerging professional grouping within the interpreting profession. The challenges faced by Public Service Interpreters are closely related to training issues. Furthermore, the need for Public Service Providers (PSPs) to understand the professional purposes and needs of their interpreters and to incorporate them into the multidisciplinary team on the basis of an understanding mind is often overlooked. The result can be like a dance with three participants, of whom only one knows the steps (*ibid.*).

As the results of the research by Inghilleri (2004: 72) indicate, the close textual analysis of interpreting processes has importantly called attention to the constraints found within specific interpreting contexts linked to issues of power and ideology manifested in the encounter.

In her 2007 study, Tryuk aims at identifying the problems connected with community interpreting in Poland on the eve of Poland’s accession to the European Union. It presents the results of an investigation carried out in a sample group of different types of community interpreters in Poland and discusses a questionnaire conducted among sworn translators rendering this kind of service. Her article ends with proposals for community oriented education of interpreters and the perspectives for the emergence and professionalization of this kind of interpreting in Poland.

Other authors observed the general lack of interest in CI as both the practical activity on the part of the state administration, and research topic with great potential, relatively under-investigated by the academic community. This was particularly described at Critical Link conferences by Dubslaff & Martinsen (2003) and Angelelli (2003).

In spite of the fact that research in the area of community interpreting has been conducted worldwide for decades now (see e.g. Roberts 1997, Niska 2002), what lacks is the systematic observation or analysis of CI in newly emerging markets (see Mizuno 2007), with the focus on the settings in which an interpreter is a participant or the attitudes and perceptions of interpreters across settings. This is deemed crucial in understanding the interpreters’ perceptions of their own roles, their beliefs, and their behavior in practice. The studies addressing these issues for the Yugoslav successor states mainly focused on the employment of international organizations, peacekeeping forces and other humanitarian organizations (see Stahuljak 2000, Baker 2014). This clearly creates a gap that needs to be properly addressed by

the academic community in order to provide more comprehensive research into CI, thus yielding a sound basis for creating an effective system to cope with this multi-faceted social phenomenon.

3. Community Interpreting in Bosnia and Herzegovina

This paper examines the historical evolution and current status of CI in BiH, while also highlighting the legal frameworks, fields of practice, training opportunities and future directions for this area of interpreting. It is a reflection of the origins and major features of the profession, from the perspective of authors as active participants in this process.

As Baker (2014) states, referring to the 1992-1995 conflict period, these active participants (usually locally recruited language intermediaries and project workers working in the international organisation sector Yugoslav successor states), do not appear in the literature as the protagonists, but rather as supporting characters whose narrative is out of the focus. This is precisely what we provide by bringing in the personal perspective of the period when CI emerged as a concept in BiH, continuing with the description of its treatment, development and status in the years that followed, through the lens of legal framework and regulations, as well as of the real needs in the society.

As already noted, rather limited contexts of interpreting activities in BiH were largely conditioned by the position of BiH as an independent republic within the former Yugoslavia. This position directly affected rather self-sufficient BiH economy towards a limited number of countries and international markets. For example, a well-known fact regarding interpreting activities meant that banking institutions had to hire interpreters if they wanted to do proper business internationally.

3.1 The 1992-1995 Interpreting Context

The new interpreting context appeared in 1992, with the outbreak of the conflict. It can be divided into two main stages (1992-1995, and 1995 onwards, respectively).

Stage 1 covers the period of the actual armed conflict from 1992 to 1995 in BiH. Over these years, interpreting activities primarily related to the conflict itself and the consequences of it, in all of its aspects, ranging from high-level meetings and negotiations with national authorities to meetings with local authorities, discussing a variety of topics. International organisations arriving in BiH, mandated with their peacekeeping mission, were in dire need of a large number of interpreters or language intermediaries. However, in doing so, they faced multiple obstacles primarily due to the fact that, at the time, there was no professional tool of interpreters to hire from. In practice, this meant going out to the community itself in an organised manner and seeking individuals with the minimum language skills required by means of testing prospective candidates in writing and speaking English.

Most locally recruited language intermediaries were, in fact, English teachers with no or minimum interpreting experience. They left their teaching positions pursuing completely new careers as interpreters, which was most certainly quite a challenging task since they had not received any institutional or formal training in interpreting before. Some of the major international organisations that vastly recruited language intermediaries (often assigned the position of language assistants) were the European Community Monitoring Mission (ECMM), and the United Nations Protection Force (UNPROFOR). On a much smaller scale,

local interpreters were hired by various non-governmental organisations (NGOs), providing humanitarian aid to the population in all parts of the country.

Community interpreters in-the-making at the time were caught in a situation where they found themselves in between two opposite ends. On one end were the employers, chiefly international organizations including both native and non-native English speakers. On the other end was a highly diverse and wide range of communities represented by members of local authorities, individuals, often not well-educated people, various socially vulnerable groups and individuals, and in general, conflict-affected population which by default was frightened and not accustomed to interpreting settings as such. This made grounds for interpreters becoming a distinctive social group both having to keep its invisibility whilst at the same time taking direct part in the ongoing interpreting activities.

Depending on which international organization they were hired by, such interpreters were exposed to various interpreting settings and experienced numerous dangers in their jobs. This required them to be more than just interpreters as they had to struggle not to get emotionally attached or engaged in discussions, negotiations and meetings of all sorts at all levels.

As the end of the conflict was approaching, and the country moved towards signing the Dayton Peace Agreement, the tasks of the locally recruited language intermediaries saw a radical shift.

3.2 The 1995-onwards Interpreting Context

With the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement in December 1995, the international community replaced its peacekeeping mission with the implementation and stabilization missions (referring to the Peace Agreement). This meant moving the focus away from the armed conflict to implementing the Annexes of the Peace Agreement, of which each regulated a specific segment of the society (the Constitution of BiH, repatriation, human rights etc.)¹

In turn, this led to the diversification in scope of the interpreting needs and activities, whereby interpreters were pooled into international organisations respectively responsible for the implementation of a particular annex or a group of Annexes. For example, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was responsible for issues relating to repatriation (return of refugees and displaced persons, in all of its aspects), the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) was primarily responsible for the organisation of the first post-conflict elections in BiH, while the Office of the High Representative acted as the umbrella international organisation, making sure that all aspects of legislation are complied with, to mention just a few. In linguistic terms, this meant the interpreters' being exposed to a register specific to the activities of the given organisation, and resulted in their specific skill development.

Recent developments and efforts invested by the BiH authorities towards European integration, meaning becoming a signatory party to a range of relevant international instruments and agreements² and the country's road to the European Union (EU) brought a completely different perspective into CI, shifting the focus again into more economy and legislation centred interpreting practices. Under such circumstances, CI becomes restricted to the activities implemented by the police, health care institutions, tourist offices, and those

¹ For more, see: <http://www.nato.int/ifor/gfa/gfa-home.htm>

² For more, see <http://www.cefta.int/>

local service providers which lack their own interpreters (e.g. municipal bodies, social welfare centres, free legal aid centres etc.).

When we compare BiH to other countries where CI is a full-fledged and rather common variety of interpreting, what becomes evident is the lack of interest in this kind of activity on behalf of the BiH state administration, as well as of the professional groups that use CI services quite regularly. Such situation resulted in the so-called grey zone and is certainly further conditioned by the structure of the legal framework which does not regulate CI as a profession. According to the BiH Agency for Statistics, the only relevant professional title or qualification listed is *prevodilac (translator-interpreter)*, which is quite vague in terms of its definition. Namely, the term itself can refer to both translation and interpreting activities, with the words ‘community’ or ‘court’ completely left out³.

At the same time, the increase of BiH’s contacts with other countries, liberalization of the visa regime and the opening of the frontiers, and a possible wave of immigrants and refugees result in growing need for community interpreting that is overlooked by the administration. Another BiH peculiarity is the lack of community-oriented training of interpreters and the lack of generally accepted and recognized qualitative standards of community interpreting.

Furthermore, there are no translator/interpreting education or training institutions as such in BiH (see the study by Hadžiahmetović Jurida and Pavlović, forthcoming 2016). Most people who engage in translation/interpreting hold a degree in modern languages and many do translation/interpreting part time. Companies which offer translation or interpreting services are very rarely found in BiH. The only professional association of translators/interpreters in Bosnia and Herzegovina is the Association of Translators of BiH (*Udruženje prevodilaca Bosne i Hercegovine*). It has an active role in the field of professional translation and it offers the services provided by their members. Some of their members are also court interpreters appointed by the Federal Ministry of Justice.

Conclusion

This paper attempts to outline some of the CI issues, advance discussion of, and encourage research into such matters as client education and improved interdisciplinary understanding and collaboration. This does not seem possible without finding a common ground for all key actors in this complex endeavour. All relevant factors such as proper legal framework, academic support and involvement, and in particular the support by the state administration are needed for a successful operation in the CI field.

This is precisely what needs to remain in the focus of researchers and practitioners so that prospective community interpreters are equipped with a broad range of skills that are specific to this profession. In that way, they will be better prepared for the demanding world arena that is language industry.

Further studies have yet to capture the CI activities in our country, in order to help establish the professional field and its regulation overall. These studies should target CI practitioners and at the same time link the findings with the academic setting so as to help institutionalise CI and award it the proper position it occupies in the professional community.

³ See BiH Agency for Statistics, alphabetical list of professions, available at http://dissemination.bhas.ba/classifications/kzbih/KZBIH-08_abecedni_popis_h.pdf

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