THE COMMUNICATION MATRIX
BEATING BABEL: COPING WITH MULTILINGUAL SERVICE ENCOUNTERS

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Public service interpreting and translation (PSIT) provision can hardly catch up with demand. Simultaneously, the scarce availability of trained public service interpreters and translators is a fact. We need to conceive integrated solutions by coherently bringing together PSIT and other communication supporting 'tools'. Then, clear usage of the national tongue, PSI, translation, pictograms, video images and language software would be part of one communication assistance concept.

But merely ad hoc use of these tools creates more confusion than solutions for service providers and their clients.

The Junction Migration-Integration and the University College of Ghent have analyzed over seventy real public service interactions. The objective was to build a methodology to develop a service access support tool: the Communication Matrix.

Quantitative research was performed. And benchmarking sessions were organised with policy makers, service providers and language support professionals, as qualitative research.

In the paper, we will discover through the research findings whether such a communication matrix -by means of which concrete service provision can be linked to adequate communication tools through a matrix - is attainable.

Key words: *public service interpreting and translation; PSIT; public service interpreters and translators; integrated solutions; communication assistance; access; Communication Matrix; research findings.*

La oferta de la traducción e interpretación en los servicios públicos (TISP) apenas logra cubrir la demanda. A la vez, la disponibilidad escasa de intérpretes y traductores sociales capacitados es una realidad. Necesitamos concebir soluciones integradas, incorporando de forma coherente la TISP y otras "herramientas" de comunicación. Entonces, el uso claro del idioma nacional, la ISP, la traducción, los pictogramas, las imágenes de video y el software lingüístico, serían componentes de un solo concepto de asistencia a la comunicación.

Sin embargo, el uso meramente *ad hoc* de aquellas herramientas crea más confusión que soluciones para los proveedores de servicios y sus clientes.

La Intersección para la Migración y la Integración al igual que la Universidad de Gante analizaron más de setenta interacciones realizadas en un servicio público. Su objetivo consistía en construir una metodología a fin de desarrollar una herramienta de apoyo para el acceso a los diferentes servicios: la Matriz de Comunicación.

Se realizaron estudios cuantitativos. Para la vertiente del estudio cualitativo, se organizaron sesiones de evaluación comparativa con responsables políticos, proveedores de servicios y profesionales en asistencia lingüística.

En el informe, descubriremos, gracias a los resultados de la investigación si una tal matriz de comunicación – con la cual se podría vincular una provisión de servicios concreta con herramientas de comunicación adecuadas –, es alcanzable.

Palabras claves: *traducción e interpretación en los servicios públicos; intérpretes y traductores sociales; soluciones integradas; TISP; asistencia a la comunicación; acceso, Matriz de Comunicación; investigación.*

1. The Communication Matrix Research Project in a nutshell

Social and public services are facing a remarkable diversity of clients today, also linguistically. Where there is funding, public service interpreting and translation (PSIT) provision can hardly catch up with demand. Generally speaking, however, existing tools for communication assistance – including PSIT - are often not used, are not used efficiently or do not always work as they should. Too often, funding is lacking, public and social service providers do not know of their existence or are not trained in using these 'tools' effectively. Or: public and social services have no policy on how to communicate with clients that do not master the official national or local language.

To better bridge the communication gap between service providers and new speakers of Dutch (Dutch being the official language in Flanders, northern Belgium) or LALP speakers (speakers with Limited Autochthonous Language Proficiency), *Kruispunt Migratie-Integratie ('*Junction Migration-Integration'*)*, an independent organization, recognized and subsidized by the Flemish government to develop expertise on migration, integration and ethno-cultural diversity (e.g. expertise, training and test center for PSIT) and Ghent University conducted a joint exploratory research with *Kind en Gezin* ('Child & Family'), the organization that monitors childcare for the Flemish authorities in Belgium. Collaborating closely with practitioners and policymakers, we analyzed seventy-four video recorded conversations between *Kind & Gezin* service providers and mothers with a migratory background, both quantitatively and qualitatively. The ultimate purpose of the study was to develop a *communication matrix* that maps which communication tools are, can and should ideally be used in the service context, so that more cost-efficient and effective services can be provided without sacrificing service quality.

Kruispunt developed the research concept and design. The data collection was done by *Kind & Gezin*. The filmed excerpts were coded, analyzed and systematically incorporated into Nvivo10 by University of Ghent researchers. The results were delivered in a written report to *Kind & Gezin* on 31 January 2014, for further follow-up and training of the organization's staff.

But why bother? Why should we put so much effort in trying to find rational support for the communication policy or plan of public and social services? The answer is that, if we are serious about being democracies, we have to make sure there is access to those services that disclose fundamental democratic rights and the duties they entail.

2. Language and access to democracy

A democracy is not merely the final point at the end of a process that started somewhere in the past and now has reached its fulfillment. Genuine democracies are themselves continuing processes of democratization. The process of democratization unbolts society and its public facilities or 'goods' to an ever increasing number of its people. Thus, democracies are not only about free elections or freedom of speech. Through (co)organizing and (co)funding public and social service provision, democratic governments ensure access to fundamental rights. Schools, health care, employment agencies, social welfare organizations, youth care programs etc. are in that respect human rights 'in the flesh', human rights concretized and brought to the public.

Since yesterday's world has vanished in favor of a globalized, superdiverse and multilingual one, public and social services in democratic societies must also open up to the new dwellers of our increasingly complex social constellations, among them the LALP speakers. And making sure that they can communicate with *all* their clients, is the first necessary step towards apt service provision. Service provision for everyone implies communication with everyone.

3. Bridging the communication gap

In order to make 'communication with everyone' in service provision settings attainable, service providers can already today use a range of communication support professionals and tools. They can speak and write the official language clearly, avoiding complex discourse and linguistic imagery and generate shorter, active voice sentences. They can work with public service interpreters and translators. Other facilitators and facilitating instruments exist: intercultural mediators, the use of (internet, video and other) images, pictograms, icons and visualization. Other tools will no doubt further evolve into something better than they are now: *Google Translate*, for example, leaves a lot to be desired today, but is gradually upgraded. Nowadays, it already translates into sixty-four languages. *MyLanguage Free Translator* does something similar, from and to fifty-nine languages. Similar and other apps will surely increasingly find their way to our public and social service providers. Correction: they are already finding their way now. Still other 'communication bridges' are in the course of being developed: the language analyst is one example.

3.1 The language analyst ("Taalanalist")

As is the case with other service providers, speech therapists need a specific 'supporter' of their services to LALP speakers. Today, *CODE*, the expertise center on learning and (child) development of the *Thomas More University College* in Antwerp, Belgium, has developed a competency profile and training for language analysts with the support of *Kruispunt Migratie-Integratie*. For, too many children from non-official language speaking families end up in special education, due to supposed language development disorders, while mere language acquisition support would often have sufficed. Language analysts help the speech therapist assess foreign language samples that are videotaped in home settings. They analyze whether the linguistic form, content and pragmatics used are 'correct'. The speech therapist, however, bares final responsibility for the diagnosis.

These and other 'bridges' are in use today. However, they are used in a far too little structured manner. One service provider uses one or even more of the bridges. Another one in the same organization does not. Some service providing organizations in a certain region use them, while others in the vicinity do not. Today, the use of communication bridges, although it is hard not to see that we live and work in a multilingual environment, especially in our cities, leans on too many coincidences to allow us to speak of conscious access and communication policy development by service organizations.

Public and social service providers urgently need to design such thought-through and explicit policies or plans, focusing on the duty and ability to ensure clear communication with their public.

In order to do that, two conditions need to be fulfilled.

On the one hand, policy makers need a clear and comprehensive view on the communication bridges that exist in the field. This engenders the need for a *collecting activity* of the now scattered bridging tools into one '*service point*'. Through this 'point',

the bridging tools and professionals can be disclosed to the public and social service providers that need them. In doing so, clear and accessible use of the official language, interpreters, translators, non-verbal tools like pictograms, video images, language software, etc. are no longer offered as separate services, but rather as an *integrated panoply of communication support services*.

On the other hand, policy makers and their public and social service providers need to be able to '*measure*' what their communication with their specific customer groups consists in. While designing their access and communication plan or policy, they will have to find answers to this question: What communication needs do we have, taking into account our own perspective as leaders and managers and the perspective of our employees that actually encounter LALP speakers, our clients themselves and the perspective of the communication support experts they (will) work with?

There are research methods to conduct conversation analysis. Up to now, they have not been deployed to provide a choice matrix for bridging tools and professionals in service provision contexts. Nevertheless, these methods offer us the opportunity to build communication support plans that fit individual service providers like a glove and that, by building a rational base for such plans, exceed dogma on language usage and the obligation to speak the national or local official language (at once). Such an exploratory research or 'measuring' instrument is the Communication Matrix that we are now discussing.

4. The Communication Matrix: a glance at the research itself

The research consists in an analysis of verbal and non-verbal *Kind & Gezin ('*Child and Family') service interactions with LALP clients. Seventy-four interactions are filmed and observed. At the end of the day, we want to develop a tentative communication matrix, offering us *a schematic view on which communication support functions fit specific service settings*. Or: how can we find empirically sustained answers to the following questions:
1. Which tools are currently being deployed by service providers to bridge the communication gap? And which are yet to be developed?
2. What advantages and disadvantages do these bridging tools have?
3. Which bridging tools operate optimally within certain service contexts and why (success factors and constraints)?
4. Which bridging tools may not work properly in certain contexts and why (pitfalls and constraints)?
5. Which bridging tools, that are not yet used by *Kind & Gezin,* may offer a solution for gaps or obstacles in the communication between service providers and LALP clients?

5. Quantitative, descriptive research

This part of the research project allows us to map a number of correlations. Thus, we can – for example – check what bridging functions (professionals, instruments and strategies) are used in what types of service provision by means of what specific speech acts.

These are the categories that were discerned, investigated and correlated:
1. Contextual elements: four factors that stem from Hymes' (1972, 1978) S-P-E-A-K-I-N-G model: participants, type of interaction (here: service type), purpose and instrumentalities.
2. Bridging functions: bridging professionals (interpreters, mediators …), instruments (video images, pictograms, software …) and strategies (attentive and empirical listening attitude, repeating and rephrasing …).

3. Speech acts: Searle's (1969) five speech acts, completed with a sixth 'act', Jacobson's 'small talk':
- Representatives: interaction that requests or provides information.
- Directives: speech acts that are to cause the hearer to take a particular action, e.g. requests, commands and advice.
- Commissives: speech acts that commit a speaker to an action in the future, e.g. promises and oaths.
- Expressives: speech acts that express the speaker's attitudes and emotions towards the proposition, e.g. complaints, congratulations, excuses and expressions of gratitude.
- Declarations: speech acts that change the reality in accordance with the proposition of the declaration, e.g. baptisms, pronouncing someone guilty or declaring someone husband and wife, a doctor uttering that someone's safe after being vaccinated.
- Small talk: what you say to get the conversation going, to 'oil' the interaction, e.g. asking someone how they are at the start of a conversation, chatting about the weather.
4. Action progression: the way in which an action or service encounter progresses or develops, i.e. what the interacting parties actually do and the core *Kind & Gezin* service themes they deal with, e.g.:
- Setting of house call, themes tackled: nutrition, growth, development of the child, sleep, safety and security.
- Setting of a screening, themes tackled: hearing and eye sight test
- Visit to doctor's or nurse's cabinet: vaccination.

6. Qualitative, explorative analysis

Here, the objective was to discover relations between the categories that were mentioned supra and reasons for service provision failure or success. In order to achieve that, the service interactions in the seventy-four video recordings were measured against *Kind & Gezin's* explicit quality criteria insofar as service provision and communication are concerned:
1. Understand and be understood.
2. The complexity of messages (must be conveyed).
3. The safety of the child (must be guaranteed).
These were the focal questions in the qualitative analysis;
- How does the material setting influence the interaction?
- Does the physical position and posture of the participants have a bearing on their mutual contact?
- How unambiguous is the non-verbal communication used?
- What degree of conversational coherence do we observe?
- How are the conversational interactions phased?
- How complex is the information that is transmitted?
- How essential is the information?
- How unambiguous are the instructions that are given?
- Who is in charge of the interaction when more than one service provider is present?

7. Benchmarking

Two benchmarking sessions were organized, to:

- Check whether the underlying interpretation processes of and methods used by the researchers when processing the data, were coherent with the interpretations of an expert panel;
- Look for best practices in order to optimize *Kind & Gezin* services (and, which is implied: *Kind & Gezin* communication).

8. Towards a tentative Communication Matrix: facts and recommendations

The key criterion for making smart choices regarding the use of specific 'bridges' in multilingual *Kind & Gezin* service provision settings, is beyond a shadow of a doubt the language proficiency of the mother (Hymes: *instrumentalities*). The research shows us that other contextual factors (*purpose of the interaction, participants*, etc.) are relevant but secondary to the language proficiency of the mother.

1. Preparatory phase

Prior to the actual service provision with LALP clients, it is crucial to gain and list information on the linguistic reality of the family concerned. This would be tremendously significant for all service processes to come. This information is crucial:
- The language the mother uses at home.
- Is the mother illiterate?
- Common European Framework Level of the official national language mastered by the mother.
- Common European Framework Level of the official national language mastered by the father.
- Common European Framework Level of a lingua franca (English or French in Flanders) mastered by the mother.
- Common European Framework Level of a lingua franca (English or French in Flanders) mastered by the father.

In addition to the language proficiency of the mother or the father, it is also important to collect information on the accessibility of the father (can he be present or not). Can he be involved in the consultation and possibly provide language support?

2. Decision level 1. What type of verbal bridge should be used?

When the mother's language proficiency equals or is less than A1, the communication gap can only be bridged by means of a lingua franca or contact language, or through an (assistant) service provider in the same language as the mother, or through a public service interpreter. The usage of a simplified or clear version of the official language (foreign to the mother) will by no means facilitate communication.

- When both the service provider and the client speak a *contact language* at B1/B2 level, and the service providing organization does not oppose to the use of languages other than the official language, the use of a contact language to bridge the communication gap would be a good first choice. This bridge, together with non-verbal bridges as pictograms or other images and expressing empathy, will guarantee a successful service outcome.
- When a common contact language is unavailable, or if the parties involved do not sufficiently master the contact language, another solution is to use an *assistant service provider* speaking the language of the client. In advance, the service providers and/or the client will need to agree on how interaction will be managed, to avoid confusion. In combination with a positive and empathic attitude of the

service provider and his assistant him- or herself, the use of an assistant service provider sharing the same language with the mother, will prove successful.

- When there is no assistant service provider available that speaks the same 'home' language as the mother, it is recommended to use a *public service interpreter*. The service provider will preferably need to be informed in advance on how to work with an interpreter.
- When no assistant service provider mastering the mother's language, nor an interpreter is available, and only then, an *informal 'interpreter'* or family member can be used, but only if his/her level of the official language is at last B1/B2 or his/her command of a contact language is B1/B2 at the least. Be advised that the use of an informal facilitator can reduce the mother's involvement in the conversation. The use of informal language facilitators does not *guarantee* successful service provision. Service providers should be aware that the use of informal language facilitators bares significant risks: messages can get distorted, the role of the facilitator is often unclear and there are no guarantees insofar as ethics and privacy are concerned.

When the proficiency level of the mother is higher than A1, verbal bridging support by means of a contact language, an assistant service provider that shares the same language with the mother or an interpreter remains to be advised to ensure effective bridging. However, in such cases the service provider can also opt for *clear usage of the official language* as a bridging strategy. If it becomes apparent during the conversation that this does not ensure communication, the service provider must resort to verbal bridging in the mother's language or in a contact language himself or via a language support professional.

1. Decision level 2. Which non-verbal support can be used?

Non-verbal bridging strategies function in support to spoken verbal service provision and can never by themselves ensure good communication. *Pictograms* and the like are useful when they support verbal conversation and are best used in combination with the verbal bridges described under 2.

A *positive, coaching and empathic attitude* is an asset and should be transversally present in all service provision.

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