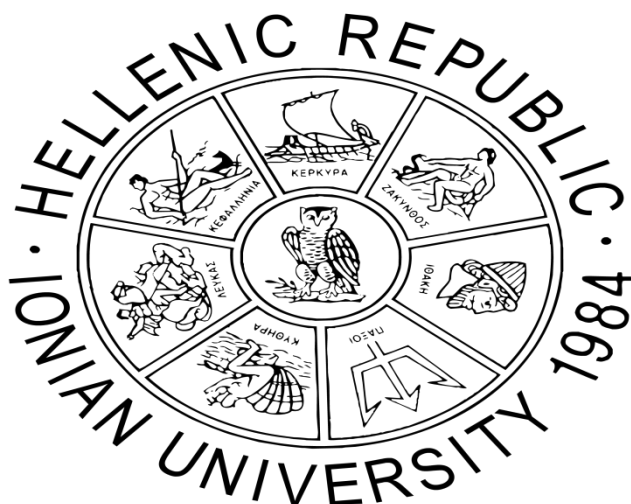


Stakeholder awareness of quality in Public Service Interpreting

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Abstract

The main objective of this research is to elucidate the awareness of stakeholders about the quality of interpreting services provided in refugee settings and to identify potential the problems that arise from poor interpreting services. In order to ensure a clear picture we adopted a mixed data integration process drawing the qualitative data from a structured interview with an employee of a non-governmental organization and the quantitative data from the statistical analysis of a questionnaire distributed to public officials working with refugees and interpreters in Greece.

Keywords: quality awareness, stakeholders, community interpreting, refugees

Introduction

The realm of community interpreting within the context of migration presents a multifaceted field where a plethora of issues may arise. One such issue constitutes the focal point of this study: to what extent are stakeholders aware of the quality of interpreting services offered to refugees? To investigate this, a mixed method approach was utilised which applied both qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques. The data was gathered over the past two years within the framework of the Erasmus+ Project, "ReTrans - Working with Interpreters in Refugee Transit Zones: Capacity Building and Awareness-Raising for Higher Education Contexts", which was carried out by the following universities: University of Vienna- Centre for Translations Studies, University of Maribor- Department of Translation Studies, University for Continuing Education Krems- Center for Applied Game Studies, Ionian University- Department of Foreign Languages Translation and Interpreting and Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje- "Blaze Koneski" Faculty of Philology (Department of Translation and Interpreting) and Faculty of Dramatic Arts (ReTrans,2023).

As part of the project, a questionnaire consisting of 33 open and closed questions was developed and distributed to officials and humanitarian aid workers from all participating countries. The questionnaire aimed at gaining insights into their experiences of working with interpreters and was available for completion online between September and November 2022. The research's quantitative data that will be presented below originate from a statistical analysis of questions answered by public service personnel in Greece. Overall, the researchers had 11 respondents. Conversely, the qualitative findings are based on an interview with a female Greek NGO employee, which took place in December 2022. During the interview, the discussion centered on the interviewee's experience with trained interpreters or individuals undertaking interpreter-related tasks, as well as her expectations of their professional activities and potential drawbacks.

Using both approaches was optimal for obtaining a wide-ranging population sample with relevant background information, such as work experience, field of work, etc. (quantitative component), supplemented with detailed and in-depth descriptions supplied by the interviewee (qualitative component). By employing this research method, only the most applicable perceptions were taken into account. Questions that cannot be answered by a single method are facilitated by a mixed method approach (Thomas, 2021). Both methods were integral to the research process and balanced each other's limitations, resulting in conclusive and certain findings. The mixed method approach is a valuable tool for scientific research, that has been broadly utilized over that past years on an interdisciplinary level and especially in the field of translation studies, while it is a frequently used method in Public Service Interpreting doctoral research (Vargas-Urpi, 2017).

1. The discourse

The qualitative data of the research came from what was said in an interview of an employee working for a Greek Non-Governmental Organization. At the time of the interview, the interviewee has been working there for 3,5 years, initially as a teacher of all age groups but mainly children aged 6-17 years old and later on as a scientific director, coordinating groups of teachers of the NGO.

She presented information that gave a general picture of her field of work in terms of the interpreting services, but also expressed her personal beliefs about the ideal behavior of a professional interpreter in such a setting, thus demonstrating her awareness of existing problems. The interview lasted 15 minutes. To ensure transparency the full transcript of the interview is provided in the Appendix.

1.1. Description of the general situation

Regarding the given information, the interviewee discussed the NGO's interpreting division, which operates its own interpreter training scheme to train interpreters and make them available for any interpreting obligation. The interpreters are selected through an open call that occurs biannually. Any individual who is proficient in the required languages, in addition to English and/or Greek, is qualified to participate. The training program lasts for approximately two to three months, during which trainees attend seminars covering the code of conduct, appropriate communication protocols, and confidentiality measures such as refraining from sharing their names with refugees. Previous experience or training in interpreting is not necessary, as stated by the interviewee.

The shortage of interpreters, which has two main causes, is another factor contributing to the current situation. Firstly, there is a surge in immigration from countries whose languages are not spoken by the available interpreters. Secondly, interpreters are faced with an overwhelming number of dialects (e.g. Tigrinya, Amharic, etc.) that they are unfamiliar with. Besides, there is a shortage of interpreters, as they may be employed by the respective NGO in a department other than education (e.g. asylum interviews) or by different organizations and therefore are spread thinner throughout various institutions. To address this issue, alternative solutions are being sought, such as telephone interpreting or even utilising other digital means, such as Google Translate. In other cases, children who speak a language often act as interpreters to help their parents or other family members who speak the same mother tongue to communicate with the authorities. According to the interviewee, this is a common phenomenon.

The third issue explored concerns the qualifications required by public service interpreters. She highlights the utmost importance of objectivity while also acknowledging the crucial role professionalism and respect, particularly when minors are involved, similarly play. The importance of adhering to protocol and appropriate interpreter behavior was emphasized repeatedly. According to the interviewee, the interpreter should strictly interpret only the words spoken without adding personal interpretations or implications, providing a literal, word-for-word interpretation instead.

1.2. Awareness revealed

Except for generally explaining and describing how the organization works, the interviewee also gave her personal opinion or made statements that proved whether or not she is aware of the quality of the interpreters and their services.

Regarding the NGO's interpreter-training program, she specifically mentions that due to the program the recruitment of the interpreters is much easier. Other than that she does not express further her thoughts on the quality of the training. However her positive comment about the convenience that is ensured by it is an indication of lack of awareness on the subject. The most alarming element of the program is its duration, since two to three months are a very short period for a trainee interpreter to acquire the necessary education, especially in such a professional field, where ethical challenges are faced daily. Moreover, the fact that it is an internal program, without any external support, control and evaluation, creates serious loopholes since what is taught and by whom remain unknown and questionable. (Vlachopoulos, 2016)

On the contrary, the comment on children taking over the role of the interpreters, demonstrates her awareness because she mentions that this tactic is only used *as a last resort*. This can be further highlighted by the fact that later on, when explaining why she considers objectivity an essential qualification for an interpreter, she talks about how difficult it is to maintain it since people of the same culture are involved, who might be distant or even close relatives. All the above show beyond doubt that she fully comprehends that people and especially children, who cannot keep an emotional distance from the other parts involved in an interpreting assignment, should not take over a professional interpreter's role, since ethical dilemmas will arise and the quality of the interpretation will drop. (Apostolou, 2015)

Another sign that indicates her awareness on the low quality of the interpreting services is her statement on telephone interpreting, during which *things get harder*. She understands that problems may come up due to communication gaps, bad signal or the fact that the interpreter has to deal with many people simultaneously. She then compares telephone interpreting to live interpreting and considers the latter a much better option since there is a direct interaction with the interpreter. All the above showcase that she is aware of the low quality of telephone interpreting, a method frequently used in the field.

A major issue for the interviewee was the interpreter's objectivity. When commenting on it, she often indicated that she is aware of what should be happening and what is really happening. Firstly, she supports that objectivity is essential because the interpreter is supposed to be a facilitator, not someone who expresses her/his own opinion. When this is not the case, discriminations may happen and as she put it *at that moment we understand that things get harder for everyone*. There are indeed situations where discrimination in favor of some parts occurred; for instance when children are involved because they require more attention or when interpreters do not follow the protocol. By mentioning that, not only she proves she knows what the protocol stipulates (interpreting only what is said, not making personal additions etc) (Pöschhacker, 2001), but also that many interpreters deviate from it, causing discrimination.

2. The numbers

The quantitative part of the research derived from the answers to some of the questions contained in the questionnaires (33 questions in total) mentioned at the outset in section 1. The criteria for choosing those specific questions were their relevance to the information that was acquired during the interview and therefore their ability to confirm or rebut the interviewees statements.

The questionnaires were distributed to 11 professionals working with refugees in Greece. The majority of the respondents (55%) has an experience in working with refugees from 1 to 5 years, while 18% has worked with refugees for over 5 years. 27% works in education, 27% in civil services and administration, while 46% in other sectors. Moreover, 37% has cooperated with interpreters in all their cases, 18% in 75% of their cases, and 18% in 25% of their cases. However, 73% has never been trained in working with interpreters. These data indicate that most of the respondents have experience in working with interpreters and their answers can provide a reliable overview on the matter.

After presenting the profile of the respondents, the research goes on to the statistical analysis of their answers regarding their opinion on the interpreters' behavior and the interpreting services provided. It is worth to mention that in 27% of the cases the interpreters are not briefed neither before nor after an assignment, another 27% are briefed beforehand and in 46% of the cases interpreters are briefed before and after. When asked about what they considered the biggest challenges for the interpreters the main answer was language challenges (72,7%), followed by ethical challenges (63,3%), communication skills and different gender of the interpreter (both with a 45,5%), different religion of the interpreter (27,3%), age of the interpreter (18,2%) and finally other issues (9%). Another question focused on the most common interpreting modes, with face to face being the leading one with 9 answers, second was via phone with 5 answers and last via video call with 4 answers. The respondents also evaluated how professional the interpreters are, saying that 54,4% of the interpreters are punctual, remain impartial, use direct speech, introduce themselves, and do not take notes while a 9% use online dictionaries. Another question concerning the professionalism of the interpreters focuses on the other tasks they may be called upon to perform, e.g. helping fill in applications in 72,2% of the cases, accompanying refugees to other appointments in 63,6% of the cases and explaining cultural differences in 45,5% of the cases. It should be pointed out that 91% of the respondents believe that there is a lack of interpreters, while only in 27% of the cases interpreters are temporarily employed at an institution. Lastly, when asked if they consider that there is a lack of trained interpreting personnel at their institution, 73% of the respondents replied positively.

2.1. The numbers speak for themselves

There is a wide range of conclusions that can be drawn from the above-mentioned data. It is of great importance that the majority of the respondents has a long-standing experience in this professional field and specifically in working with interpreters and thus their answers are to be taken thoroughly into consideration. Additionally, they come from different professional backgrounds, which provides a diverse overview on the matter. Based on their answers we understand that there are some issues that the stakeholders are aware of, without this necessarily meaning that they understand their significance, and other matters that they clearly acknowledge and assess, proving their awareness.

The former category includes the briefing strategies used. Briefing plays a notable role for interpreters especially when it takes place beforehand, as it enables them to investigate and prepare for their assignment accordingly, providing therefore the best service possible. In the 27% of the cases that this does not happen, the interpreters are exposed to challenges and possible errors and misinterpretations that otherwise could have been avoided.

Another piece of information that the respondents know about but do not assess positively or negatively is the methods used for the interpreting processes. Although it is very encouraging that the vast majority of the interpreting processes happens face to face, phone-call and video call interpretations are still a frequent phenomenon. Interpreting is a high cognitive demanding task that requires audio and visual input, as well as non linguistic communication input that is to be detected only with the physical presence of all communicating parties. It is consequently clear that, especially in the case of phone call interpreting, the available services cannot reach the highest quality possible.

The two questions about the interpreters' professionalism can also showcase that the stakeholders are aware of the situation but cannot prove whether they fully comprehend its substance or not. Having interpreters provide other services and act as intercultural mediators or advisors is quite a persistent phenomenon and should be alarming to stakeholders since such behavior could be misleading to both parties involved and does not comply with the objectivity standards that should be maintained by interpreters. When evaluating interpreters' professionalism on specific matters, the institutional representatives suggested that in slightly more than 50% of the time interpreters use direct speech, introduce themselves and take notes. These all are skills and methods that should be followed by interpreters at all times (AICC, 2022), however it is not certain if the respondents know and understand that this is the case, since 73% of them has not been trained to work with interpreters.

On the contrary the other two elements (punctuality and objectivity) are more obvious indicators of how substantially aware they may be of the quality of the interpreting services, but still does not thoroughly demonstrate their clear perception. All the above indicate that the respondents understand that the professionalism standards are half as high as they should be, since they estimate that there is almost 50% room left for improvement. However, it cannot be proven that they acknowledge the significance of interpreters maintaining a behavior that complies with AIIC's code of professional ethics. (AIIC, 2022).

An elucidated view of the issue emerges from the answers to inquiries regarding the inadequacy found in certain areas, including the education and training levels of interpreters. The responses underscore the awareness amongst public officials of the inadequate number of interpreters currently available.

Stakeholder awareness is also to be found in their answers to questions about the interpreters' main challenges. The conclusion that may emerge from these is that the top three challenges (language challenges, ethical challenges, communication skills) are directly linked to the degree of professionalism showcased by the interpreters and could therefore be controlled, improved and overcome by them (e.g. communication skills). In this case the stakeholders prove their awareness since they are able to identify and assess the significance of the interpreters' challenges and thus show to what extent they comprehend what should and should not be happening in the framework of such a professional activity.

3. Numbers and words

After examining the outcomes from each research methodology individually, it is essential to draw some collective conclusions. There are two types of conclusions that can be drawn from the data. Firstly, there are conclusions that show that the situations described in both types of data are similar, and due to this convergence it is evident that the interviewer and the respondents share a common understanding, but this does not necessarily prove their level of awareness. Secondly, there are conclusions that show complete agreement in terms of understanding of the situation described, which increases the value of the research and, most importantly, highlights the awareness of the stakeholders.

While the latter was the primary objective of this study, the former still holds significance as it illustrates the overall agreement of both groups on the occurrences taking place in refugee settings. Consequently, the deductions derived from linking both approaches are reliable.

Both sources indicate a significant shortage of interpreters, with some potentially being temporarily seconded or distributed to other organisations in need of interpreting services. Other details highlighting agreement have been shared, including the use of remote interpreting and interpreters being assigned non-interpreting tasks. This statement provides a general overview of events taking place in refugee camps, without expressing any subjective opinions or evaluations. It is important to note that this narrative is solely intended to present objective information and does not reflect the actual beliefs or attitudes of the personnel.

There are many common findings in the qualitative and quantitative data that demonstrate an awareness of the issues under investigation. The interviewee explicitly expresses disapproval of the solutions implemented to address problems stemming from the absence of interpreters. She prefers in-person interpreting to video or phone interpreting, emphasizing that remote interpreting adds additional challenges and that direct interaction is guaranteed with face-to-face interpreting. Furthermore, the interviewee asserts that employing children as interpreters should only be a last resort, implying that it should be avoided. The questionnaires also highlight the impact of the interpreter shortage, revealing that the deficiency is not only in quantity, but in the scarcity of adequately trained interpreters, demonstrating their ability to distinguish between the two issues. Additionally, the rate of interpreter professionalism is 54.4%, demonstrating a shortage not only in the number of interpreters but also in high-quality ones.

In this way, they demonstrate their awareness of appropriate interpreter behavior (such as using third person, being punctual, and taking notes), and the fact that it is not upheld in nearly half of the cases. The interviewee and the respondents demonstrate their awareness of the situation by prioritising challenges such as ethics, communication, and language. This supports the interviewee's observations regarding potential ethical issues that may arise when minors are involved or protocols are not strictly followed, resulting in a lack of neutrality. Additionally, the interviewee's concerns regarding communication obstacles caused by the use of interpreters with limited proficiency in various dialects are acknowledged. Both the interviewee and the respondents to the survey acknowledge their understanding of the proper procedure and note that the recurrence is far from ideal. It is evident that the quality of interpreting services provided to refugees in community interpreting is within their knowledge.

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Appendix

You have the choice if you want to have your face covered and your voice altered, and I would like to ask for your permission for the interview before we begin.

0:01:29-0:01:40-Interviewee: Hello, we are OK, you have my permission and we have no problem, you don't need to change my voice or cover my face we are OK.

0:01:41-0:02:04-Interviewer: Great thank you very much. So, we can begin with the questions. Firstly I would like to ask you: for which institution do you work and what is your job there.

0:02:04-0:02:26-Interviewee: Good, so for the past 3,5 years I have been working for a non-governmental organization Metadrasi, it is Greek. I began working as a teacher and right now I work as a scientific director, we basically coordinate groups of teachers.

0:02:26-0:02:30-Interviewer: And were you a teacher for children or adults?

0:02:30-0:02:37-Interviewee: For both, mainly for children aged 6-17 years old.

0:02:37-0:02:44-Interviewer: And do you know if your institution works with interpreters?

0:02:44-0:03:07-Interviewee: My institution has a separate interpreting department, which is one of the first departments that was set up by the organization and it has its own program, clearly so that we can use those interpreters either for educational purposes or for various other reasons like interviews, for the Ministry of Migration, etc.

0:03:07-0:03:11-Interviewer: Could you tell us how you find those interpreters?

0:03:11-0:03:52-Interviewee: Yes, the truth is that every year, twice a year to be precise, some training programs, some seminars take place, for which there is an open call, and anyone interested can participate in them. Some requirements have to do either with their linguistic proficiency in their native language and in English or in Greek. Based on our language needs some calls for some jobs are announced but for someone to get hired they have to go through a training program, where they will get trained on various matters.

0:03:52-0:04:01-Interviewer: Do you know if these people that are interested in that job have any previous training in interpreting?

0:04:01-0:04:26-Interviewee: To be honest I have not been involved with interpreting matters, I have just worked with many interpreters. From what I know it is not necessary. Some of them yes, they have worked for other organizations, they have some preexisting experience, but that is not necessary. Many of them have nothing to do with interpreting or have a degree in another field.

0:04:26-0:04:34-Interviewer: I see. And generally, do you face any problems with their recruitment or are the processes easier thanks to this department?

0:04:34-0:05:17-Interviewee: The truth is that everything is much easier because they go through this training program that I think lasts for 2-3 months, but I am not 100% sure about the duration. There they have discussions and are trained on a broad spectrum. From the way they should speak, some codes of conduct, on issues of working with other organizations and institutions, the confidentiality that they have, because we uphold that for example we don't share their names in front of the refugees, they have some communicative codes, there is a whole background.

0:05:18-0:05:25-Interviewer: I see. And are there any cases where you don't have any interpreters at your disposal?

0:05:26-0:05:40-Interviewee: Yes, this happens quite often, at least in the field of education this is a very common phenomenon. Most of the time asylum interviews are prioritized, so interpreters are absorbed mostly there.

0:05:41-0:05:51-Interviewer: And when you don't have any available interpreters, especially in the field of education, how do you deal with this problem?

0:05:52-0:06:35-Interviewee: To be honest, such cases are quite hard because very frequently either the kids or their parents don't know English at all, so communication is hard. If we are at the camp and there aren't any available interpreters at that moment, we try via telephone interpreting from our headquarters, where we might find someone and have a remote interpretation. If we still can't find a solution we try other means like Google Translate, something like that, with a few words that we might know in their native language, a few English words that they might know and that is how we manage to communicate.

0:06:36-0:06:41-Interviewer: Would you say that the online or telephone interpreting is of high quality?

0:06:42-0:07:19-Interviewee: The truth is that real-life interpreting is much better because there is interaction at the present moment, people directly communicate with the interpreter, who does not express their own opinion and works as a communication facilitator. On the contrary via telephone interpreting things get harder because if there is more than one person that you have to talk with at that moment there is a communicative gap that is created, you have to wait a lot because the headquarters are here and they are therefore used from other places as well, so everything is tougher. Sometimes we might also not have any signal, there are many things.

0:07:20-0:07:40-Interviewer: You mentioned the objectivity of the interpreters and I would like to ask you specifically about the cases, where minors are involved, especially in school classes, do you think that in those cases interpreters are objective, or do they discriminate in favor of the kids, as they are a sensitive group?

0:07:41-0:08:35-Interviewee: In general I would say they are objective and that is the code that we use and follow as an organization, because through education there is as I previously mentioned, and is a key part, objectivity. And generally, an interpreter is used not as a person that expresses their own opinion but as a facilitator that helps communication. That is why we try not to share the interpreter's personal information or get them involved with the refugees in any other way so that there won't be any further connection and at the same time we don't make their job harder. Therefore we try to stay objective. Of course, we have to say that there are such cases, less important but there are cases that because they are underage, because they might have needed something more, a bit more attention, yes they might have been a bit more supported.

0:08:36-0:08:54-Interviewer: If supposedly there is a family with children, where the kids know English or even Greek and the parents don't and you don't have any available interpreters, do the kids take over the role of the interpreter to help their parents?

0:08:54- 0:09:22-Interviewee: Yes, this happens very often. Especially when we are in a school environment for the kid's registration, for the parent's briefing, this happens a lot. As this can happen with a child that is not part of the family if they know the family's mother tongue or some English, they might take over the interpreter's role as a last resort.

0:09:22-0:09:33-Interviewer: I see. Okay nice, and in general for unaccompanied minors as you said you try to have an interpreter.

0:09:33-Interviewee: Yes.

0:09:34-0:09:47-Interviewer: Based on your experience, what qualifications do you think interpreters that communicate with refugees or migrants should have, in particular when minors are involved?

0:09:47-0:10:35-Interviewee: For sure objectivity. And I understand that many times this might be difficult because we talk about people of the same culture, who speak the same language, they might even be distant relatives, close relatives, we can't know that. However, for sure objectivity is something significant because when we discriminate in favor of someone, at that moment we understand that things get harder for everyone. So, for me, professionalism is also another thing, objectivity, respect, which is also very important especially when we have to do with kids, the interpreters should respect the processes, that right now we are in a school environment and they are helping us provide a specific purpose. I think that is all.

0:10:35-0:10:41-Interviewer: I see. And what would you say are the most common problems you face when working with interpreters?

0:10:41-0:11:38-Interviewee: The most common? Although it is not them to blame, there is not much availability because they work for other organizations as well, based on the needs the institutions have at that time, they are diffused to those institutions based on their needs. Availability is one problem. Other than that, what I have personally faced, cases of interpreters who deviate from the protocol that they should follow: the fact that we interpret what we are told and don't make personal additions or we just make a gist of what was said, we have to have a word-to-word interpretation. Frequently they (the interpreters) would take the initiative and wouldn't be objective so there would be cases of discrimination either involving children or adults. I think those are the most basic problems I have come across.

0:11:39-0:11:39-Interviewer: Do you think there are cases where communication could not be achieved because of the interpreter's linguistic insufficiency meaning that the interpreter didn't know Greek or the language of the refugee?

0:11:39-0:12:33-Interviewee: Yes, there are such cases. For example, we often have to deal with dialects, people that speak in some dialect, so we understand that things get more difficult there because the interpreter yes, might know the main language, but many times they might not know the dialect, so that is a difficult situation. For example if the refugee comes from a village of eg Afghanistan, this has happened to us, or a village of Ethiopia, where they speak their own dialect and doesn't know any other languages. We have faced such situations, where there is a gap, either in individual phrases or words or generally there is a total inability to understand everything that we are trying to explain to them.

0:12:33-0:12:51-Interviewer: Okay, good. I would like to ask you two more things: do any religion-, gender-related, ethical, or cultural issues come up that influence the communication? For example, women prefer women interpreters and vice versa.

0:12:52-0:13:47-Interviewee: To be honest what we have noticed is that many times we go for example to brief the parents about something and if we have a male interpreter we notice that if they call us to get inside the house, for example, he will not come in. Or if the mother of the family shows up and sees that he is a man she will wear a headscarf. There are such

cases. However, we have not dealt with something very intense because we on our part try in sensitive situations, for example, we have brought a doctor to talk about some gynecological issues, such things, we understand on our own the whole situation so we choose for example in this case a female interpreter. So we don't make room for the situation to get harder and awkward.

0:13:47-0:13:59-Interviewer: Good. And now my last question would be, other than objectivity do you have other suggestions for the improvement of the communication of the refugees and the migrants with the help of an interpreter?

0:13:60-0:14:41-Interviewee: The truth is what I have noticed lately is that there is a new migrational wave for which we don't know the languages. Let's say that lately we see many people from Ethiopia that speak dialects, from Congo, and this has as a result that there is a lack of available interpreters, and this makes things harder. For example, Tigrinya is very common lately, Amharic, there are some dialects, some languages for which we don't have any availability and, surely, we need time to find and train new interpreters and make this whole situation familiar to them. There is such a gap, meaning we don't have available interpreters for all the languages.

0:14:41-0:14:58-Interviewer: I see. These are the questions that I wanted to ask you. I would like to thank you once more that you were willing to take part in the interview and I think we are ready.

0:14:58-0:14:59-Interviewer: Great, thank you too.