

SEM52. Communicating with migrants: Languages, policies and (human) ethics

12 September h 16:30-19:00, S6 Moro

Convenors

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Abstract

In the last four decades, Italy has gone from a country of origin to a destination for migrants. As of October 2024, 55,049 migrants arrived in Italy, most of them coming from Africa and the Middle East (Ministero dell'Interno, 2024). The process of refugee status determination for asylum seekers, and of reception and inclusion of migrants in general, involves a large number of people and is fraught with drawbacks. There is an intra-personal variability in assuming (or being given) roles, which highlights the need for more in-depth knowledge of communication mechanisms and dynamics for all participants (Barsky 1994). The same applies to awareness about sociocultural differences, which should not be emphasized nor minimized, but rather drawn near to create a common background for mutual understanding and knowledge (the basis for integration). In particular, cultural differences are seen as barriers to more humane participation in the asylum proceedings, and therefore raise important questions of fair legal outcomes for members of vulnerable groups such as asylum seekers (Blommaert 2001; Maryns, 2006; Pöllabauer, 2004; Sorgoni, 2013; Veglio, 2024).

This seminar aims to explore the issues of cross-cultural and cross-language communication needs of migrants, in their efforts to establish themselves as deserving of protection and well-integrated into society. In particular, we welcome contributions that discuss:

- discourse and representation, such as asylum narratives during the status determination procedure; issues of applicants' agency in interpreter-mediated asylum hearings; ethics, empathy and compassion in public service settings involving migrants
- structural and institutional challenges, such as new forms of enslavements in Italy and in transit countries (including human trafficking, forced labour, debt bondage, exploitation and servitude); activism and new forms of agency of migrants as crisis managers.

Doing justice to language and culture may ultimately lead to social justice, and small actions taken by properly informed and empowered stakeholders may redress the deep-seated imbalances in power relations in this setting.

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SEM52. Papers

12 September h 16:30-19:00, S6 Moro

- *Interpreting and ethics in asylum hearings: Pragmatic implications of mediated communication in Italy* (Amalia Amato, Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna / Fabrizio Gallai, Università IULM)
- *Dialogist interpretation: A new approach to interpreter-mediated communication in asylum procedures* (Hassan Mizori, University of Leeds, UK)

- *Interpreters and cultural mediators as humanitarian bridges: Navigating migration, agency, and activism* (Maura Radicioni, Independent scholar)
- *The role of cultural(ist) assumptions in asylum hearings* (Barbara Sorgoni, Università di Torino)
- *Shadowed by bureaucracy: The latest Italian way to asylum* (Maurizio Veglio, International University College of Turin)

SEM52. Abstracts

Interpreting and ethics in asylum hearings: Pragmatic implications of mediated communication in Italy

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The outcome of refugee status determination (RSD) often hinges on whether asylum seekers can convincingly articulate a well-founded fear of persecution. Yet, this process is far from straightforward. Psychological, linguistic, and cultural dynamics deeply shape how credibility is constructed and assessed (Barsky 1994). This paper explores the pragmatic effects of interpreter-mediated communication in asylum hearings conducted at an Italian Territorial Commission, with a focus on the ethical and communicative challenges embedded in this high-stakes institutional setting.

Drawing on observation and transcription of hearings involving applicants speaking Nigerian Standard or Pidgin English, Italian-speaking officials, and professional interpreters, we conduct a turn-by-turn, discourse-oriented analysis to examine how interpretation practices influence interactional dynamics. Particular attention is paid to the interpreter's role in shaping participant positioning (Mason 2010), managing intercultural nuances, and either mitigating or exacerbating communicative misunderstandings (Jacobsen 2002, 2009).

Our findings suggest that systemic cultural and linguistic asymmetries can undermine mutual understanding, often to the detriment of the asylum seeker. Comparative analysis with studies by Pöllabauer (2004) and Sorgoni (2013) further highlights persistent socio-cultural gaps between applicants, interpreters, and decision-makers. These gaps raise pressing questions about the ethics of communication, interpreter agency, and the fairness of the procedures. We argue that improving interpreter training and institutional protocols is crucial not only for more accurate interpretation, but also for fostering more humane, ethical, and equitable asylum practices.

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Dialogist interpretation: A new approach to interpreter-mediated communication in asylum procedures

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This paper introduces Dialogist Interpretation, a theoretical and ethical framework for interpreter-mediated communication in asylum contexts, as developed in my forthcoming monograph “Interpreting in Asylum Procedures: Dialogist Interpretation” (Mizori, 2025). Grounded in dialogism (Bakhtin, 1981; Linell, 2009), the approach foregrounds the internal, often unspoken cognitive dialogues through which asylum applicants navigate legal discourse under conditions of institutional and linguistic asymmetry. These internal dialogues—shaped by power dynamics, ambiguity, and emotional intensity—can critically influence both the perception of legal information and the applicant’s decision-making during pivotal procedural moments.

The study draws on a Dutch asylum case, combining interactional analysis with reflective post-IME interviews. In one instance, a lawyer communicates that the immigration authority (IND) believes the applicant has “no interest” in lodging an appeal. The interpreter renders this as “it is not in your interest”—a phrase which, in Arabic, pragmatically implies a caution or veiled warning. In a subsequent interview, the applicant recounted that he had understood this as discouragement from appealing, evidenced by his response “correct,” despite the lawyer merely referencing the IND’s stance. The interpreter later reflected that it was simply “what he was able to think of at the moment.” This lexical nuance, though subtle, had a profound impact on the applicant’s grasp of his legal options—an interpretive layer illuminated through the lens of Dialogist Interpretation and its commitment to meaning-in-context.

Expanding on interactionist models (e.g. Wadensjö, 1998), Dialogist Interpretation probes not only misalignments in interaction but also the silent, subjective work of meaning-making. It challenges institutional monologism (Maryns, 2013) and argues for a reconceptualisation of interpreters as reflexive, dialogically attuned co-participants. The paper concludes by offering practical recommendations for legal professionals and policymakers to promote communicative practices that account for the ethical and epistemic complexities of asylum interviewing.

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Interpreters and cultural mediators as humanitarian bridges: Navigating migration, agency, and activism

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This contribution builds on a recent PhD project examining cultural mediators working for the Italian NGO Emergency ONG Onlus (Emergency), which provides humanitarian aid in complex migration settings like the Castel Volturno outpatient clinic near Naples, Southern Italy. This qualitative study draws from semi-structured video interviews and ethnographic observations of interpreting and cultural mediation practices at the clinic. Most patients are Nigerian or Ghanaian migrants who fled war-torn African countries, now working in low-paid agricultural or sex work and belonging to the most vulnerable populations.

Emergency’s cultural mediators perform various tasks, including health and social guidance, information dissemination, cultural mediation, and interpreting in dyadic and triadic communicative encounters. While interpreting is only one aspect of their role, it is crucial to the NGO’s humanitarian mission (Tesseur, 2018). Their work falls within crisis translation and communication during emergencies (Federici & O’Brien, 2020), as seen during COVID-19, when clear multilingual communication was vital for safety.

This study highlights the complexities of mediation in migration settings, shaped by overlapping challenges: a high number of undocumented migrants unaware of their rights, mediators’ lack of training in language, intercultural mediation, trauma, and ethics, and their limited understanding of the distinction between interpreting ethics and humanitarian work.

In this scenario, mediators take on multiple roles, shaping new forms of activism based on evolving needs. They act as cultural brokers, bridging communication and managing conflicts, while also seeing themselves as humanitarian workers executing their organization’s mandate. Their role is proactive and visible (Todorova & Ruiz Rosendo, 2021), requiring flexibility as interpreters, brokers, advocates, social workers, fixers, and aid workers. Lacking clear ethical standards, they rely on personal ethics or align with the NGO’s code of ethics to guide their decisions and actions (Delgado Luchner and Kherbiche, 2018).

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The role of cultural(ist) assumptions in asylum hearings

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As the literature in legal anthropology shows, the categorical separation of “migrants” from “refugees” results from “theoretical assumptions about the world that are smuggled in through our cultural model of the individual” (Hayden 2006): a founding principle in refugee law, the conceptual distinction between the economic and the political proves increasingly problematical. Over the last three decades, social and legal critical studies also highlighted the relational nature of the “refugee” category, and how it receives and changes meanings in relation to the changing politics of the state.

In this paper, I focus on some selected cases I encountered during my ethnographic research on asylum hearings, where the non-credibility of the narrative was predicated upon specific cultural ideas about what constitutes an individual, or upon culturally specific interpretations of the political. The selected cases allow me to show how the status determination procedure often says more about states’ preoccupations and “western” interpretations of social phenomena, than about the actual experience encountered and recounted by asylum seekers. Hopefully, they can also provide some reflections on ways to promote more just procedures.

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Shadowed by bureaucracy: The latest Italian way to asylum

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The list of legal instruments employed to defuse the “asylum crisis” in Europe is relentlessly expanding. Anticipating the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, the Italian government developed an unprecedented arsenal of legal provisions and administrative practice within the realm of international protection. They range from the so-called accelerated procedures - a scheme that shortens the deadline for appeals and rules out its suspension effect - to a much longer list of safe countries of origin, whose citizens suffer reduced guarantees throughout the asylum procedure. Additionally, less visible strategies are being implemented namely the appointment of non-professional staff and an even shorter duration of asylum seekers’ hearings.

Over the past two years, the National Asylum Commission issued a remarkable number of instructions addressed to the local Territorial Commissions with the aim of steadily increasing the number of decisions. To achieve this goal, the National Asylum Commission urged the simplification of procedures resorting to preset templates, shorter time devoted to interviews and COI search, and a minimum number of weekly decisions.

Transcripts analyses and individual interviews highlight the case of Bangladeshi asylum seekers, an eloquent testimony to such belittling approach: even if most of them incurred burdensome debts, have been trafficked, kidnapped and tortured in Libya, and then smuggled to Italy, their applications for international protection are often denied as a result of inadequate investigations and interviews (lasting at times not more than 15 minutes).

While presented as a performative improvement, these changes are in fact mainly aimed at quickly deflating the number of pending applications. To do so, asylum requests are dealt with in a bureaucratic manner rather than ensuring protection for applicants, regardless of the serious consequences of denying protection to people at risk of persecution and/or serious harm. Beneath the surface of the right to asylum lies a ground of pain and hopes, struggling against the fierce shadow of propaganda.

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