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Crossing Borders in Community Interpreting. Definitions and dilemmas.
Edited by Carmen Valero-Garcés and Anne Martin


# Crossing Borders in Community Interpreting

## Definitions and dilemmas


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CHAPTER 1

# Interpreting as mediation

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Addressing the theme of the Second Alcalá Conference on Public Service Interpreting and Translation, "translation as mediation", this paper discusses whether and how the notion of mediation applies, or should be applied, to interpreting. The semantic and terminological complexities involved in the view of interpreting as mediation are illustrated with two 'case studies' — two versions, one German and one Italian, of 'linguistic mediation'. As a result of the conceptual analysis 'mediation' is modeled in its three inherent dimensions: cognitive (mediating conceptual relations); cultural/linguistic (mediating intercultural relations); and contractual (mediating social relations). Based on this tripartite model it is argued that characterizing interpreting as mediation carries a considerable risk of ambiguity and misunderstanding and may play a role in the very practical difficulties that appear to hamper the professionalization of community interpreting in many countries. It is therefore suggested to distinguish as clearly as possible between the professional function of cross-cultural mediation (in the contractual, conciliatory sense) and that of interpreting in community-based settings, considering that there is ample scope for the professionalization of either.

## Introduction

The Second Alcalá Conference on Public Service Interpreting and Translation (Valero-Garcés 2005), from which this volume originated, had as its overall theme the relationship between translation and mediation. The title of this contribution directly reflects the conference theme, "translation as mediation", and aims to specify whether and how it applies, or should be applied, to interpreting. Thus, the basic thrust of this paper would be reflected more precisely if its title were followed by a question mark, as my aim in addressing "interpreting as mediation" is not to defend this conceptual proposal and suggest that this is how interpreting *should* be viewed. Rather, my intention is descriptive, with a focus on the semantic and terminological issues that are raised when we attempt to characterize interpreting in this manner and make use of such a conceptualization in professional practice as well as research. Indeed, I will argue that the conceptual issues underlying the view of interpreting as mediation are in large part responsible for the controversy surrounding the community interpreter's role, which is the ques-

tion this book seeks to address. It should therefore be useful to describe some of the implications of relying on the notion of mediation for a better understanding of interpreting.

This descriptive focus notwithstanding, the conceptual analysis will ultimately be shown to bear directly on normative issues and on the very practical difficulties that appear to hamper the professionalization of community interpreting in many countries, suggesting the need to harmonize concepts and practices on an international scale. Using two 'case studies' — two versions, one German and one Italian, of 'linguistic mediation' — I will illustrate the terminological complexities involved when we broadly adopt the view of interpreting as mediation. But first I will explore the conceptual complexity of 'mediation', both in its broader lexicographic dimensions and its role in translation studies.

## Mediation

It seems to be a deeply rooted, if largely unspecified assumption among those working in the field of translation (and interpreting) that what they do is a form of 'mediation'. But what *is* mediation? What does it mean, especially to someone not necessarily sharing this intrinsic translation-related assumption, such as an interpreter's employer or client?

If we accept Webster's (1986) Dictionary as an authoritative source, we find three major senses in which 'mediation' can be understood: The first is "intervention between conflicting parties or viewpoints to promote reconciliation, settlement, compromise or understanding". This is closely related to the third, more specific meaning of 'mediation', glossed as pertaining to the field of international law: "intercession of one power between other powers at their invitation or with their consent to conciliate differences between them". Only the definition listed in second place is free of keywords like conflict and intervention and refers, rather vaguely, to "the function or activity of an intermediate means or instrumentality of transmission". It appears to be this relatively abstract sense of 'something in between by which something is transmitted' that serves as the semantic template for equating translation and mediation.

Scholars of translation have indeed tended to think of their object of study as mediation in this general sense, most commonly as mediation *between* languages, or "interlingual mediation" (Viaggio 2006). Otto Kade (1968), one of the pioneers of translation studies as an academic discipline, used the German term *Sprachmittlung* ('language mediation', or linguistic mediation) as the most comprehensive designation of his object of study, and defined translation and interpreting as the principal conceptual subdivisions thereof. For either form of translational activity, this foregrounds 'linguistic mediation' as a paraphrase of almost definitional force.



### Linguistic/cultural mediation

Departing from this prototypical characterization of translation as interlingual or linguistic mediation, the right-hand side of the equation can be used to modify and enrich our understanding of translation. This has been done especially by adding the dimension of culture to that of language, that is, by defining translation as cultural as well as linguistic mediation. It is beyond the scope of this discussion to describe how this extended view came about and how translation studies came to take its 'cultural turn' (cf. Snell-Hornby 1990). Suffice it to say that a number of authors in the field came to reject a purely linguistic view of translation as too narrow, and foregrounded the cultural dimension of language, or language as part of a culture. These insights can be traced at least to the seminal work of Nida (1964) but emerged most visibly in the 1980s, not least in Gideon Toury's (1980) target-cultural approach to the study of translation and in the 'functionalist' translation theory developed by German scholars such as Katharina Reiß and Hans Vermeer (Reiß and Vermeer 1984).

Against this theoretical background, translation as mediation between languages and cultures, or between cultures and 'their' languages, is probably the default sense in which translation is equated with mediation, even when no modifier is used or when the idea of mediation is itself used as a qualifier, as in 'mediated communication' or "interpreter-mediated encounter" (Wadensjö 1998). Kade (1968) had introduced the expression "bilingual mediated communication" to refer most generally to the object of translation studies; nowadays, some four decades later, one would expect a more explicit reference to culture, as in expressions like 'mediated intercultural communication'.

It may be of interest to note, parenthetically, that the trend towards broadening the concept of translation to include the cultural dimension, and towards widening the scope of translation studies, has manifested itself in various ways. For example, "translation as intercultural communication" was the title of the 1995 Congress of EST, the European Society for Translation Studies. Interestingly, IATIS, a similar scholarly association, founded more recently, named itself by complementing 'translation' with 'intercultural studies'. This is also true of a number of academic centers in the field of translation, such as Anthony Pym's "Intercultural Studies Group" at the University of Tarragona. (A Google search for the phrase "translation and intercultural" produces over 20,000 hits.) The implication of this juxtaposition may be that wherever there is 'translation', there is also 'culture'. On the other hand, it might also be construed as an expression of doubt whether the term

'translation', traditionally centered on the core concept of 'language(s)', is strong enough on its own to convey the inseparable linkage and interdependence of language and culture assumed in modern theories of translation.

Be that as it may, we can safely assume that the association between 'translation' and 'culture' is at least as strong as that between 'translation' and 'mediation' (and, by default, 'language'), so that we can represent the conceptual relationship(s) very simply as shown in Figure 1.

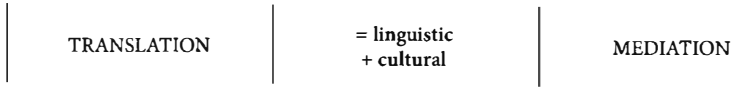


**Figure 1.** Translation as (linguistic/cultural) mediation

To the extent that we adopt Kade's (1968) conceptual proposal that interpreting is a hyponym of translation in the wider, generic sense, i.e., that interpreting is a particular manifestation of translational activity, the basic characterization of translation as linguistic/cultural or interlingual/intercultural mediation automatically applies to interpreting. In this general sense, adopted also in Pöchhacker and Shlesinger (2002: 3), characterizing interpreting as mediation actually seems rather bland and uncontroversial. As indicated above with reference to lexicographic sources, however, there is more to the notion of 'mediation' that may have a bearing on the concept of interpreting.

## The interpersonal mediator

Compared to (written) translation, the concept of interpreting clearly foregrounds the inter*personal* dimension of the translational process. This is reflected in most definitions, which usually describe interpreting as enabling communication between persons or groups who do not speak the same language. Rather than an abstract intermediate position between languages (and cultures), mediation in interpreting thus relates also to the position of the interpreter between the communicating parties. This intermediate position is at the heart of the Latin expression underlying the term for interpreter in English and in many other (Romance) languages. The origins of the word '*inter-pres*', though not conclusively established, have been associated with 'inter *partes*', designating the human mediator positioned between two sides or parties (Hermann 1956/2002: 18).

In the case of mediated face-to-face communication, or dialogue interpreting, the intermediate position is evidently physical: the interpreter is the person in the middle. This image is in turn highly suggestive of the interpreter's position in the interactional sense: we might think of the interpreter's 'distance' or proximity to either party, or ask whose 'side' the interpreter is on — which would land us right in the middle of the controversy surrounding the interpreter's role.



It is also here, in connection with the interpreter's role in the interaction, that terminological preferences are likely to shift from mediation as an activity to the 'mediator' or agent. This focus on the human agent in-between has generated a number of labels for designating various kinds of intermediaries or 'mediators'. The list, as reviewed in Wadensjö (1998: 62–68), includes 'middleman', 'broker', 'go-between' and 'gatekeeper', and could be extended by such terms as 'facilitator', 'agent', 'advocate' or 'conciliator' (cf. Roberts 1997: 13–14). These and other terms are not easily distinguished and exhibit considerable conceptual overlap. Typically, though, there is an assumption that different kinds of intermediaries can be posited along a continuum of active involvement and intervention, ranging from the least involved, such as a neutral messenger, to the most involved, such as a negotiator. This view implies a complementary continuum which reflects different degrees of an intermediary's authority and power in — and effect on — the interaction, ranging again from messenging to, say, binding arbitration.

The terms used here for illustration make it fairly easy to see how a conceptual focus on mediation between two (or more) parties rather than two languages and cultures foregrounds a much more complex and dynamic understanding of 'mediation'. In contrast to the simple image of a 'from–to', or 'back-and-forth' movement between language systems and cultures (however defined), interpersonal mediation cannot be discussed without reference to such features of human interaction as intentions, objectives, expectations, attitudes, status, power or conflicts. Though not inconceivable for the analysis of (written) translation (e.g. in an exchange of translated correspondence), the interpersonal mediation perspective seems much more relevant and revealing for real-time interaction that is not based on ('finished') texts but evolving as a dynamic discursive process with an open outcome — as aptly captured in Wadensjö's (1998) distinction between "talk as text" and "talk as activity". Since an interpreter's actions have a much more immediate effect on the progress and outcome of the interaction, it has become increasingly common to construe the interpreter's mediation activity as one of 'moderating' or 'managing' the interaction to guide it toward a felicitous outcome. This seems acceptable enough in the case of the interpreter resolving overlapping talk, for instance by intervening to stop simultaneous talk, asking for repetition, or choosing which utterance to interpret, and how (see e.g. Roy 1996, Zimman 1994). But mediating interactive discourse would of course go further than that and include actions designed to overcome obstacles to communication such as 'cultural differences' (cf. Kondo and Tebble 1997: 158–163; Jones 1998: 4). Examples include explanatory additions, selective omissions, persuasive elaboration or the mitigation of face-threatening acts, all of which give the interpreter's mediation a con-

ciliatory orientation and thus bring it closer to the more active sense of 'mediation' quoted at the outset, that is, intervening to reduce differences and promote understanding. This is what would be expected also of a mediator in the more strictly defined legal sense — a third party called upon to resolve a conflict, as in the case of mediation for labor disputes, marital problems and certain types of criminal offenses (e.g. Bush and Folger 1994, Folberg and Taylor 1984).

It is at this point that the notion of *communicative* mediation between languages and cultures links up with what I would call *contractual* mediation for the resolution of (intercultural) conflicts or differences. The interface between these two dimensions is formed by the concepts of 'understanding' and, in particular, 'culture': intercultural mediation, in the inherent sense assumed by translation theorists, merges into mediation by a third party contracted to facilitate cross-cultural understanding.

Given these two different perspectives on mediation in the context of interpreting, it is not surprising that the interpreter's role, construed as that of a 'mediator', should be fraught with controversy. While the general sense of linguistic/cultural (communicative) mediation derived from translation theory would apply to interpreting by definition, the realm of contractual mediation is so broad as to include distinct professional profiles that go far beyond translational or communication-enabling activity. To put it more pointedly: Every interpreter is a mediator (between languages and cultures), but not every mediator is an interpreter.

While the tension arising from the two dimensions of mediation discussed above seems problematic enough, the conceptual complexity of 'mediation' is not limited to a bipolar opposition with some shared middle ground. This at least emerges from the work of Hatim and Mason (1990), who devote the final chapter of their influential monograph to "the translator as mediator" and explore the notion of mediation particularly in a cognitive dimension.

## Cognitive mediation

As in the discussion above, Hatim and Mason (1990) make a two-fold distinction to explain translation as mediation. The first, not surprisingly, relates to language and culture: "Translators mediate between cultures (including ideologies, moral systems and socio-political structures), seeking to overcome those incompatibilities which stand in the way of transfer of meaning" (1990: 223). This obviously draws on the default sense of something being transmitted between languages and cultures, but it also points to a certain degree of intervention to reduce differences.

The second sense in which the authors explain 'mediation' is explicitly defined in their Glossary (1990: 242) as "the extent to which text producers and receivers feed their own beliefs into their processing of a given text." While Hatim and Mason (1990: 223) see the translator as standing at the center of the communicative process, "as a mediator between the producer of a source text and whoever are its TL receivers", their definition of mediation is centered on the cognitive dimension of knowledge use in comprehension, without special reference to the translator/interpreter as a special kind of text producer and receiver.



As they go on to show this process of mediation at work, they reveal the crucial contradiction arising from the fact that the translator/interpreter's comprehension is cognitively mediated. They first state a fundamental fact about translation as follows: "Inevitably, a translated text reflects the translator's reading". At the same time, and in the same paragraph, Hatim and Mason (1990: 224) assert that cultural nuances in the source text "have to be relayed untainted by the translator's own vision of reality." At issue here is the notion of 'faithful transmission', or neutral messenging, which is at the same time a principal expectation of the interpreter's communicative mediation and an impossibility, given the inevitably personal (subjective) cognitive mediation of what the interpreter needs to understand and make understood. This is of course not specific to interpreting but is a fundamental, if not *the* fundamental paradox of translation.

The crucial tension between the expectation of 'similarity', or faithful representation, and the inescapable 'difference' of translation has been discussed also by Theo Hermans (2000), who pointedly refers to the translator's and interpreter's "margin of visibility" as a "gap", characterized as "a matter of voice, of the discursive presence and the subject-position that inevitably enters translation, as it enters every form of speaking, from the moment text production begins." (2000: 6–7) Whether couched in terms suggestive of spoken discourse or of written translation, Hermans (2000) makes this point about translation in general (as do Hatim and Mason in the statement quoted in the previous paragraph):

> The translator's textual presence cannot be neutral, located nowhere in particular. The way a translation overwrites its original may be deliberate and calculated on the translator's part but as often as not it is unconscious, or barely conscious, dictated by values, preferences, presuppositions and perceptions built into the individual and social beings that we are. (Hermans 2000: 7)

## 'Triangulating' mediation

The three dimensions of mediation discussed above — cultural/linguistic, contractual, and cognitive — can be viewed as interrelated, and Figure 2 is an attempt to suggest how they form the conceptual complex that we expect to guide our understanding of interpreting.

As indicated by the triangular shape, the conceptual space of mediation extends into all three 'corners' or dimensions. The act of mediating (in interpreting)

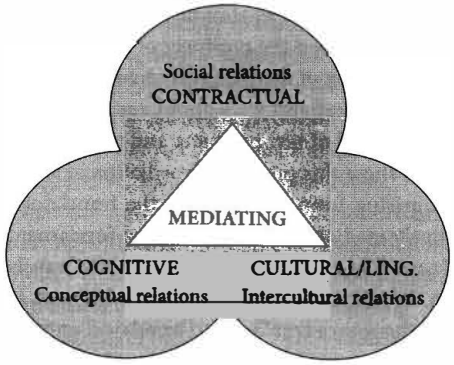


**Figure 2.** Three dimensions of (interpreting as) mediation

always involves a cognitive aspect, a cultural/linguistic aspect, and a contractual aspect, and mediation is therefore set in the overlapping contexts of conceptual, intercultural as well as social relations. Along the base of the triangle, in particular, one can conceive of a continuum extending between and connecting the cognitive and the (inter)cultural. Likewise, intercultural mediation by an interpreter is necessarily a matter of social relations — an interpersonal interaction for which the interpreter is contracted to mediate.

This interplay of the cognitive, linguistic, cultural and interactional dimensions is also reflected in the following quote (attributable to Helle Dam) from the chapter by Kondo and Tebble (1997) on intercultural differences in interpreting:

> If the ideal function of the interpreter is to ensure smooth communication between the primary parties, then his role is to remedy this potential *cultural noise* on the channel by adjusting the culturally determined peculiarities of the source text to the culturally determined expectations of the receiver (Kirchhoff 1976: 24). Thus the ideal role of the interpreter is to serve not only as a linguistic but also as a cultural mediator.

## . . . or interpreting?

Having analyzed the concept of mediation and pointed to the various ways in which different dimensions of mediating can be related to interpreting, I would now like to review some influential positions in the theoretical and professional literature on interpreting with respect to the (community) interpreter's role description as including mediation. I will begin with the German concept(s) of '*Sprachmittler*', in which the problem of defining interpreting is compounded by ambiguous and competing terminology.



### Sprachmittler

In the German-speaking part of the translation/interpreting community, the term *Sprachmittler* ('language mediator') is commonly used and understood as one of the basic terms in this professional domain. It is also more semantically transparent than the word *Dolmetscher* ('interpreter'), which has a long history in the German language and has been used also in the wider sense (including written translation). But *Sprachmittler* is in fact a twentieth-century neologism. It was proposed in 1940 by the head of the translators and interpreters association in the German Reich as a catch-all term for what in English might be called 'professional linguists'. The concept of *Sprachmittler* is thus an abstraction to cover various domains of the (foreign-) language professions.

The generic notion of *Sprachmittler* seems to have spread quite fast. Wirl (1958) used it throughout his early monograph on 'fundamental issues of translation and interpreting', and Feldweg (1996: 20–21) expresses his preference for the term, not least from a professional interpreter's perspective. Despite its origins in the Nazi era, *Sprachmittler* was also widely used in East Germany (the former German Democratic Republic), where Kade introduced '*Sprachmittlung*' to denote the activity as such, or rather, any concrete activity involving mediation between languages. *Fremdsprachen*, the East German journal for language professionals founded in the 1950s, defined itself as a journal of *Sprachmittlung* as late as the 1980s and had a section on news for *Sprachmittler*.

It was not until the 'cultural turn' in German translation theory in the 1980s (Snell-Hornby 1990) that the term *Sprachmittler* came to be questioned on account of its ostensible focus on language rather than culture. Authors wishing to stress this point would use '*Sprach- und Kulturmittler*', or adopt Kade's neologism *Translator* in this comprehensive sense.

It was also in the 1980s that Karlfried Knapp, extending his background in German language and linguistics into the emerging field of intercultural communication, began to investigate the mediating behavior of people with some level of bilingual competence in everyday situations of intercultural face-to-face communication. As a label for this type of lay interpreting, or "natural translation" (Harris and Sherwood 1978), he proposed *Sprachmitteln* ('linguistic mediating'), a term whose subtle morphological distinction from *Sprachmittlung* disappears when using the corresponding word for the person performing this activity (*Sprachmittler*).

Knapp (1986) defined *Sprachmittler* in contradistinction to professional interpreting, where the interpreter is supposedly invisible ('behind the scene') and can be considered "a non-party in the interaction" (Knapp-Potthoff and Knapp 1986: 152). No doubt thinking in particular of simultaneous conference interpret-

ers working in the booth, Knapp-Potthoff and Knapp (1986: 152) suggest that "the interpreter's function in general is comparable to that of a machine, giving a more or less literal translation of what is said in language A in language B". Professional interpreters are thus "a mere medium of transmission" (ibid.: 153) working to a high standard of accuracy, whereas a (linguistic) mediator would content her/himself with rendering the sense of what the speaker intends to convey. Crucially, the role of a *Sprachmittler* is seen as two-fold, including the transmission of the interlocutors' utterances as well as mediating communication as a "true third party". This dual function also implies the use of reported (third-person) speech to distinguish what is relayed between Speaker A and Speaker B from interventions that emanate from the mediator's 'I' — a discursive practice that is generally viewed as characteristic of non-professional interpreting (e.g. Harris 1990).

The dual concept of the (non-professional) interpreter's role is summarized as follows:

> The non-professional interpreter at the same time functions as a *transmitter* of the messages of $S_A$ and $S_B$ and as a *mediator* between conflicting viewpoints, assumptions, and presuppositions. (Knapp-Potthoff and Knapp 1987: 183)

Aside from the duality of roles, this quotation also reflects the duality, or trinity, of mediation discussed above: In a scenario of intercultural communication, the '(linguistic) mediator' actively deals with conflicts, as would a mediator in the contractual sense, while at the same time effecting the necessary cognitive adjustments based on his/her knowledge of either culture. In the latter sense, Knapp-Potthoff and Knapp's (1986, 1987) view of translatorial mediation is in line with what is postulated by Kirchhoff (1976) — and Dam (in Kondo and Tebble 1997), among others — for professional conference interpreters, that is, the need to adjust the source-cultural features of the input text to the target-cultural expectations of the audience. Mediation thus cannot be considered an exclusive domain of non-professional interpreting, not even when comparing untrained bilinguals and conference interpreters.

Knapp and Knapp-Potthoff are in fact aware that their categorical distinction is difficult to maintain, particularly in relation to (professional) liaison interpreting. They acknowledge "situations in which the professional interpreter has a much larger scope, allowing him to deviate from a 'near-literal' translation and to become more of a third party in the interaction" (Knapp-Potthoff and Knapp 1986: 153) while at the same time conceding that in some situations a 'mediator' will function as 'a mere medium of transmission' (cf. Knapp 1986: 5). The difference, it seems, is a matter of degree, and Knapp-Potthoff and Knapp (1986: 153) indeed envisage a mediator's role as "located somewhere on a continuum between that of a mere medium of transmission and that of a true third party." Since this



is also where we would position a professional dialogue interpreter, thanks to Wadensjö's (1998) empirical findings on the interpreter's intertwined functions of "translating" as well as "coordinating others' talk" (1998: 18), the distinction between a (non-professional) *Sprachmittler* and a (professional) interpreter, at least with regard to the 'defining feature' of the mediating function, proves to be of limited use. Indeed, the alleged distinction, based on and reinforcing the channel or "conduit" metaphor of linguistic communication (Reddy 1979), perpetuates the myth of professional interpreters always achieving — or aspiring to — a word-perfect rendition, which ultimately reduces the professional to "an asocial information-processing system" (Linell 1997: 61).

## Mediazione linguistica

My second conceptual case study centers on the notion of linguistic (and cultural) mediation as established in Italy in the course of the 1990s and referred to as *mediazione linguistica* as well as *mediazione linguistico-culturale* and *mediazione interculturale*. As in the case of *Sprachmittler*, there is again a fundamental duality and ambiguity surrounding the concept of linguistic mediation. In the Italian case, this is linked — fittingly, but purely coincidentally — to the so-called Bologna Process in European higher education, which envisages a uniform three-tier structure of university studies, with three- to four-year programs at the bachelor level followed by one to two years of study at the postgraduate (master's) level. In many countries, including Italy, this has meant changing from single-tier (usually four-year) programs leading directly to the 'graduate' (master's, licentiate) level to a two-level structure.

In the case of translator and interpreter education, the need to create an undergraduate level where none had existed before was met in different ways, even within European schools joined together in CIUTI, the International Conference of University Institutes for Translators and Interpreters. The Italian curriculum was restructured at the national level by the introduction of a three-year undergraduate degree (*laurea*), optionally followed by a two-year postgraduate degree (*laurea specialistica*). For the undergraduate level, the government decreed a total of 42 courses of study, one of them being *Scienze della mediazione linguistica*, which might be rendered in English as 'linguistic mediation studies'. Since this is the (only) *laurea* in the area of translational activity, the term *mediazione linguistica* — much like Kade's *Sprachmittlung* — serves as the hyperonym for (professional) translation and interpreting. In this sense, Garzone (2001) paraphrases 'interpreting' as 'oral linguistic mediation' when she speaks of "mediazione linguistica orale, di norma designata con il termino specifico 'interpretazione'."

Under the broad curricular designation of (*scienze della*) *mediazione linguistica*,

Italian universities are free to offer specific (three-year) courses of study. Leaving conference interpreting to the postgraduate level, a number of schools, such as the long-established ones at the universities of Trieste and Bologna, have launched *laurea* courses that offer training in liaison interpreting (though this is cautiously obscured by the new designation 'applied interlinguistic communication'). A particular focus of interest of such programs would be international business communication, for which Garzone (2001) describes the interpreter's role as (also) that of an 'intercultural mediator'.

As in the German example above, the terms described here for one context — in this case, university-level training of interpreters (and translators) — are used also in a different social sphere within the same national and even regional environment, and with a rather different meaning.

As the need for what we call community interpreting became more pressing in the 1980s and 1990s in Italy and elsewhere — a need that remained uncatered for by the established (conference) interpreter training institutions, the communication needs of immigrants (and of public institutions serving immigrant clients) were typically attended to by members of the respective ethnic groups, some of which at considerable 'cultural distance' from the host society. Offered through migrant-oriented NGOs (such as COSPE) or community associations and agencies, these services, required in particular in the field of health care, were typically conceived as 'intercultural mediation'.

Not surprisingly, considering the vast cultural differences and potential for inter-ethnic misunderstanding, the role envisaged for such '(inter)cultural mediators' includes much more than enabling linguistic communication, even though 'translation' (or, rather, interpreting) usually tops the often extensive list of tasks. Phrases like 'more than just translating' or 'not only linguistic but also cultural mediation' would be typical of such definitions, developed by practitioners and service providers 'on the ground' rather than scholars of translation in academia.

With reference to the various senses of mediation discussed above (Fig. 2), the role description of a 'cultural mediator' would usually combine mediation in the cultural/linguistic and the contractual sense. Depending on the setting (such as health care or education) and the local or regional institutional context, a large number of cultural mediation initiatives emerged, along with their own approaches to training, if any, and standards of practice. One such conception, which has also been laid down in regional legislation, is the intercultural mediation project in the province of Reggio Emilia, located in the Northern Italian region of Emilia Romagna, which was also featured in a large-scale European project on "Migrant-Friendly Hospitals" (MFH 2004). (This regional initiative is also studied and discussed by Tomassini and Nicolini 2005, who render the concept of *mediazione linguistico-culturale*, *MLC* for short, more closely as "linguistic and cultural mediation".) With reference to the regional decree enacted in November 2004, Antonio Chiarenza (2004) offers the following description:



An intercultural mediator:
- is able to accompany relations between migrants and the specific social context, fostering the removal of linguistic and cultural barriers, the understanding and the enhancement of one's own culture, and the access to services.
- assists organisations in the process of making the services offered to migrant users appropriate.

Complementing this description is the following set of four skills required of the intercultural mediator:

- Understanding of different migrant needs and resources
- Linguistic mediation: interpreting & translation
- Intercultural mediation: culturally competent communication
- Orientation of relations between migrant users/services

Without going into a detailed analysis of the above list of skills, which is in fact a description of the mediator's four-fold role, it is clear from the juxtaposition of key terms and from the rather abstract functional description that the notions of 'mediation' and 'interpreting' in this conception are inextricably intertwined. Maintaining a distinction between 'interpreting', as (linguistic) mediation, and 'intercultural mediation' as including interpreting is possible here only by limiting the notion of interpreting to language; as soon as interpreters are assumed to mediate between cultures as well as languages, the distinction breaks down and any definitional boundaries become blurred.

There is no doubt that this and other conceptions of cultural mediation (such as those developed and described by Hans Verrept, in this volume) would merit further analysis and discussion. However, the point I am trying to make, or illustrate, with the two case studies of the notion of 'linguistic mediation' is of a more general, conceptual nature for the international community of practitioners and researchers of interpreting in community-based settings. It is to draw attention to the inherent ambiguity and confusion that may result from the equation of 'interpreting' and 'mediation', and to the consequences of this indefinition for progress in the field of community interpreting. Even within a particular language — such as English — it is difficult, if not impossible, to ensure a common understanding (in the broader social rather than the academic sphere) of concepts like translation, language and culture as well as mediation. But beyond this inherent conceptual

complexity, a broader, international consensus on 'interpreting as mediation' is greatly at risk from linguistic traditions, legal dispositions and even group-based preferences in various sociocultural contexts that may take shape as conflicting terminological choices.

Recapping this development over the past one or two decades, and using several additional examples, I hope to bring the fundamental tension, or gap, into focus with special reference to the professionalization of community interpreters (rather than mediators) in the following, concluding section of this paper.

## Bridging the gap?

The unclear and sometimes uneasy relationship between interpreting and mediation, reviewed here in line with the theme of the Second Alcalá Conference, reflects a tension that can be traced back to the very beginning of the international debate on community interpreting in the mid-1990s. The traditional, if idealized view of the (professional) interpreter as a highly skilled (and specially trained) information or message transmitter between speakers of different languages is contrasted with the figure of the culturally competent intermediary who acts to promote mutual understanding between communicating parties at a level beyond that of language. The latter concept came to be expressed, rather famously, by the term 'cultural interpreter' as promoted in Canada in the late 1980s — and questioned by Canadian translation scholar Roda Roberts (1993) in no uncertain terms.

This basic antithetical pattern seems to have been replicated, with variations, in a number of European countries. More often than not without any link to (or support from) the interpreting profession and its training and research institutions, community-based, or service-based initiatives were launched to meet the newly arising cross-cultural communication needs resulting from massive (voluntary and forced) migration. A few additional examples may serve to illustrate this point:

- In France, Inter-Service Migrants built up an infrastructure for *interprétariat*, using the very term that Danica Seleskovitch (1985), the leading representative of interpreting theory at the time and head of the dominant 'Paris School' of interpreting studies, had rejected as a 'barbarism' associated with the practice of untrained bilinguals.
- In Austria, an initiative in the late 1980s to offer native-Turkish 'language assistance' in municipal hospitals deliberately avoided any reference to 'interpreting' for fear of encroaching on an established professional domain.
- In Italy, as described above, the 'linguistic and cultural mediator' (*mediatore linguistico-culturale*) became enshrined in immigration legislation in 1998, with no immediate relation to the newly reformed university curriculum for *mediazione linguistica*.
- In Spain, home to over two dozen university faculties for translator and interpreter training, numerous municipalities have created positions for, or outsourced '(inter)cultural mediators', whose primary tasks have been described as 'linguistic translation' and 'interpretation of cultural clashes' (Carrasco 2004), while the *Escuela de Mediadores Sociales para la Inmigración* in Madrid (EMSI 2005) trains 'social mediators for immigration' with a much broader remit.



Most of these initiatives involve some form of cultural mediation, whether by definition or design, and suggest a departure from the notion of 'interpreting', for which professional associations and training institutions exist in all the countries mentioned above. Where this departure is marked terminologically by the use of 'mediation' rather than interpreting, the issue of professional qualifications and training is raised — and often remains unresolved. Whatever the training envisaged, it is far from any international or even national consensus of the kind largely established for interpreters. This is by no means surprising, given the strikingly heterogeneous concepts of mediation, institutional settings and employment situations involved. Indeed, many of the discrepancies regarding the role of such mediators are derived from the variable combination of these factors. Minimally trained community volunteers helping migrants communicate with counselors; specialized staff offering language assistance (and more) in hospitals; or trained mediators called into schools to resolve situations of cross-cultural misunderstanding or conflict — all of these would seem to have little in common, too little at least to feel part of a single community of professional practice. And yet many of these individuals or groups working bilingually and biculturally may typically spend much of their time enabling communication between two interacting parties, with information, orientation, conciliation or educational tasks added as extra responsibilities, few of which would normally be construed as mediation in the specific, legal sense of conciliation and informal justice (cf. e.g. Bush and Folger 1994, Folberg and Taylor 1984).

Against this background, the notion of 'professional licence' may help to put the issue of interpreting vs. mediation into focus: Based on the conceptual structure established for either in their respective domains of scholarship, it would seem fairly easy to distinguish (contractual) mediators, with their set of training-based qualifications and role description, from interpreters (as linguistic and cultural mediators by definition), again with their typical and widely understood function of enabling intercultural communication by relaying and coordinating others' talk. The fact that the community interpreter's role continues to be debated among researchers (as in this volume) should not be seen as casting doubt on whether

such a basic consensus exists. On the contrary, it seems to be a sign of maturity for a professional discipline to keep engaged in reexamining and fine-tuning standards of practice, including the extent and manifestations of 'cultural mediation', or management of culture-bound and context-dependent meanings. With regard to the triangular structure shown in Figure 2, this would mean deciding on the cut-off point towards the top corner, thus consolidating a 'base' of interpreting as inherently cognitive and communicative (linguistic and cultural) mediation. While accepting that community-based interpreting is a complex and interdisciplinarily engaged domain, the dimension in which it seems justified to consider a measure of interdisciplinary *dis*engagement is that of (contractual) mediation: With ample scope for the professionalization of both intercultural/social mediators and community interpreters, it may be wise to promote either intermediary activity in its own right, distinguishing as much as possible the professional function of cross-cultural mediation (in the contractual, conciliatory sense) from that of professional interpreting in community-based settings. The two can be expected to coexist — side by side, most likely in a constructive, complementary relationship, and even in the same person, provided that the dually qualified professional and his or her clients are aware that the service provided in a given interaction is either interpreting or mediation, and in either case founded on a state-of-the-art model of professional practice.

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