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Participation in bilingual interactions: Translating, interpreting and mediating documents in a French social centre

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Abstract

This study[1] explores social encounters in which 'social mediators' (SM) offer assistance to migrants and help them access social, legal and healthcare services in France. One recurrent activity in this context is the understanding and subsequent explanation of procedures for dealing with administrative paperwork, obtaining civil or legal rights, etc. Such activities may encompass several forms of mediation: firstly, providing information about the required documents or procedures to gain access to a public service; secondly, the reading and oral reformulation of any written documents migrants may have; thirdly, the oral translation of talk, provided by a lay interpreter[2] when participants do not speak a common language. Participants are thus called upon to construct an understanding of the required service and procedure. This is achieved by putting together the information offered by the migrant, the information found in the documents, and the social mediator's and interpreter's own knowledge and experience in dealing with the procedure or issue in question. The analysis specifically focuses on the organisation of participation and on the use of the users' documents, which become the object of close inspection. It shows in detail that understanding the documents' content and the procedure, and explaining them to the user is not a one-way process but rather a complex and multiparty enterprise. In this sense, the interpreter's activity is oriented to co-occurring activities. Our methodological framework includes conversation analysis and multimodal interaction analysis to analyse the data, drawn from a corpus of video-recorded encounters in a French social centre.

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1. Introduction

The goal of this article is to examine forms of participation taking place during 'social mediation', i.e. meetings in which people are offered guidance for carrying out administrative procedures of various kinds. We concentrate on such meetings in a French social centre, where the users are mostly migrants. It will be shown that when lay interpreters are present, besides translating and coordinating participation (Wadensjö, 1998; Baraldi and Gavioli, 2012a,b), they also engage in other activities necessary to carry out various local tasks. This article examines such situations in

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[2] In this paper *lay interpreter* is used to refer to a person doing oral translation without having received any type of formal training in interpreting.

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which participants scrutinise some documents containing information relevant to the interaction. The focus is on the participants' use of these documents and on the way the interpreter engages in both translating and reporting dyadic 'relational' interactions, and in searching for information in the documents. A close analysis of the multimodal activity (which includes the use of language as well as gaze, gesture, body posture, etc.) of the participants will be offered in order to show in detail how the use and understanding of documents contributes to structuring these multiparty bilingual interactions.

In recent years an increasing number of scholars have turned their interest to the study of social settings in which interpreter-mediated interactions take place. This is in response to the rising number of migrants needing to access host country institutions, and to the related need to rely on interpreters to facilitate mutual understanding among speakers who do not share a common language. Our understanding of how social interactions are carried out in such multilingual and multicultural situations is based on several studies in which both professional (Wadensjö, 1998; Bolden, 2000; Davidson, 2000; Baraldi and Gavioli, 2012a,b; Angermeyer, 2015) and untrained (Meyer et al., 2010; Traverso, 2002; Orellana, 2009; Ticca and Traverso, 2015) interpreters have been examined. One central issue in such interactions is the organisation of participation and the transitions from the production of original language talk to translation into another language for the benefit of those who (are considered to) need it. Indeed, in social interpreting settings, in which translation is typically produced *ad hoc* to meet local and emerging needs, the interpreter's participation is constantly negotiated and reconfigured accordingly (Müller, 1989; Ticca, 2010; Meyer, 2012; Traverso, 2012; Merlino, 2012). Non-systematic translation is due to several factors, including the degree of mutual understanding, the type of activity undertaken, participants' knowledge and epistemic status. For instance, participants might display some knowledge of the co-participant(s)'s language (as usually happens in language contact situations, where loan words and some understanding of the second language help achieve mutual understanding, Ticca, 2010). This also applies to mid- or long-term migrants, who are unable to use the host country's language in a productive way (i.e. for speaking), but are able to (partially) understand it (Traverso, 2002; Niemants, 2015).

Generally speaking, interpreters in social settings are seen as participants in charge of doing interactional work in order to ensure and promote the user/non-native speaker's participation in the encounter (Wadensjö, 1998; Baraldi and Gavioli, 2012a,b, among others). With our study we wish to expand this understanding of social interpreters' participation in interactions and to describe how it works in a specific setting. In our data, a social mediator (henceforth, SM)[3] offers assistance to people soliciting advice on legal or healthcare procedures. When users do not speak (enough) French, lay interpreters of French and Arabic often take part in the encounters. A specificity of these encounters is that participants' interactional work is oriented towards the understanding of the documents which the users bring along (forms to be filled in, administrative documents, bank statements, etc.), and the related procedure they need to follow. Documents are therefore central to the organisation of interaction, and are the *object* of participants' questions as well as the *source* of information useful to answer them.

Previous research from a sociological and conversation analytic perspective has studied documents as objects holding special knowledge, useful for the organisation of interactions. This is the case of Heath's study (1986) on medical consultations, and of Glenn and Le Baron's work (2011) on job interviews. In both studies, participants use the information contained in documents as resources to carry out social interaction. Documents are also described as objects that can be pointed at and referred to in order to orient participants' attention towards them (Goodwin, 2007), or even used to project future events, as in the case of participants representing a solution to an architectural problem by drawing a proposal on a paper document (Traverso, 2008; Mondada, 2012).

The following sections provide a brief review of prior research on interpreting carried out in public settings and presents our data and methodology. Then the analysis focuses on how participation is organised around the documents, and shows that participants' language competences have an impact on the interpreter's engagement in the interaction and, consequently, on the accomplishment of different forms of local activities.

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[3] The *médiateurs sociaux* (literally, social mediators) first appeared in France at the end of the 1990s and have progressively established their presence in the landscape of social work. The social mediation reference charter, adopted by the Interdepartmental Committee of the City in 2001, defines it as 'a process of creation and repair of social ties and management of everyday conflicts, in which an impartial and independent third party attempts, through the organisation of exchanges between people or institutions, to help them improve their relationship or settle any dispute among them.' Specifically, the SM's activity focuses on listening, providing information and guidance and, wherever appropriate, advising users of the service on laws or rules (http://www.ash.tm.fr/mybdd/144/144_010/mediateur-social.html, 01 August 2015, our translation).

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