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Interpreting for International Protection Seekers in the Mediterranean Region: A Comparison of the Problems and Needs Identified by Stakeholders in Malta and Spain

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ABSTRACT

Despite the increasing perils involved, more and more migrants and asylum seekers try to reach Europe every year by crossing the Mediterranean Sea. Those who manage to survive come ashore along the coasts of the southernmost countries of Europe, namely Italy, Greece, Spain, Cyprus and Malta (UN, 2023). These countries have a duty to ensure the dignity of those migrants reaching their borders, to uphold their human rights and to facilitate their integration in the host society. For these purposes, the work of professional interpreters becomes essential.

This paper analyses the language-related needs and problems faced by the main entities responsible for attending international protection seekers in Malta and in Southern Spain. It also proposes some possible forms of alleviating the situation. The data provided is based on the results obtained from a qualitative study involving semi-directive interviews with the said entities.

KEYWORDS: asylum, interpreting, international protection, migration, refugee.

RESUMEN

A pesar de tener que enfrentarse a incesantes peligros, cada vez más personas se lanzan a cruzar el Mediterráneo para buscar asilo y refugio en Europa. Aquellos que consiguen sobrevivir, alcanzan las costas de los países del sur, es decir, Italia, Grecia, España, Chipre y Malta (UN, 2023). Estos países tienen la obligación de asegurar que esos migrantes sean tratados con dignidad, que se respeten sus derechos humanos y que se facilite su integración en la sociedad, para lo que resulta esencial contar con intérpretes profesionales.

El trabajo que aquí se presenta analiza las necesidades lingüísticas y los retos a los que tienen que enfrentarse las principales entidades encargadas de atender a las personas solicitantes de protección internacional en Malta y en el sur de España, y plantea algunas posibilidades para mejorar la situación actual. Los datos analizados han sido extraídos de una investigación cualitativa en la que se realizaron entrevistas semidirigidas en las entidades mencionadas anteriormente.

PALABRAS CLAVE: asilo, interpretación, migración, protección internacional, refugiado.

1. Introduction

Each year, more and more people embark on perilous journeys due to conflicts, disasters, environmental degradation, poverty and violation of human rights. According to UNHCR's Global Trends report (2023), in 2022 108.4 million people worldwide were forced to leave their homes. That was 19 million people more than in 2021. This, in turn, led to an increase in the global number of asylum and refugee applications from 27.1 million in 2021 to 35.3 million in 2022—the largest interannual increase ever recorded, largely attributable to the war in Ukraine.

Most people in need of international protection remain close to their countries of origin in the hope of eventually being able to go home. Many, however, dream of reaching Europe, an increasingly difficult goal given the EU's tendency to implement ever more restrictive migration policies aimed at preventing these people from reaching its borders (CEAR, 2023).

Despite the growing obstacles they have to face, a swelling number of migrants and asylum seekers still attempt to reach the European coast, usually by embarking on an increasingly perilous journey across the Mediterranean Sea. Their main destination points are the southernmost regions of Europe, namely, Italy, Greece, Spain, Cyprus and Malta. As a result, these countries find that the number of migrants and asylum seekers reaching their coasts are now rising every year (CEAR, 2023; UN, 2023). From January to September 2023, 186,000 people arrived by sea in Italy, Greece, Spain, Cyprus and Malta, representing an increase of 83 per cent in comparison to the same period in 2022.

One result of these growing migration flows has been an increased need for translation and interpreting in migration settings, as such services prove essential in helping migrants and asylum seekers to overcome cross-linguistic and cross-

cultural barriers. They also help facilitate their integration into the host society and safeguard their language rights (Wallace and Hernandez, 2017). Despite the relevance of the work carried out by translators and interpreters, however, in many countries no specific training is required for interpreting in this particular context and no consensus seems to exist on the role of interpreters or the demands made of them (Pöllabauer, 2004). As this paper will show, there is therefore an urgent need to professionalise interpreters to work in such settings.

2. The Mediterranean Migratory Routes

The main migratory flows into the EU are through the Mediterranean Sea. This is considered one of the most dangerous ways to reach continental Europe because it is sea crossings that usually result in the highest number of deaths and disappearances (Girone and Lollo, 2011). Three different migratory routes have been identified in the Mediterranean Basin: the Western Mediterranean route, the Central Mediterranean route and the Eastern Mediterranean route.

Migrants and asylum seekers taking the Western Mediterranean route have Spain—especially Andalusia, the southernmost region in the Iberian Peninsula—as their main destination. This route was the most frequent way for migrants to reach Europe until 2020, when numbers began to decrease due to international migration containment policies, the supervening Covid-19 pandemic, and other factors (European Council, 2023a). According to Frontex (2023), 10,401 people attempted to reach Europe illegally via this route from January to September 2023. Most of these migrants were Moroccan (5,578 people), followed at a distance by Algerians (3,379 people), Guineans (283 people), Syrians (231 people) and other groups from different sub-

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Saharan countries.

Migrants taking the Central Mediterranean route, the deadliest route in the region (IOM, 2023), try to reach the coasts of Italy and Malta. From January to September 2023, the number of people attempting to reach these countries was as high as 13,1630. The principal countries of origin of these migrants were Guinea (14,885 people), Côte d'Ivoire (14,036 people), Tunisia (11,294 people), Egypt (8,402 people) and a mixture of other, mainly sub-Saharan, countries.

Lastly, the Eastern Mediterranean route was taken by 36,099 migrants attempting to reach Europe in that same period. In this case, the main destination point was Greece. The countries of origin of these migrants were Syria (10,100 people), Palestine (4,213 people), and Somalia (2,518 people), followed by a mixture of other countries.

Due to their geopolitical locations, Malta and Spain, the countries on which the present study is focused, have thus clearly become two of the main gateways used by migrants and asylum seekers wishing to reach Europe by sea (Frontex, 2023). More details of the migration situations in these two countries are given below.

2.1. Malta: Key Destination Point for the Central Mediterranean Route

The number of migrants and asylum seekers using Malta as a gateway to Europe increased significantly after this country joined the EU in 2002. In fact, Malta is now the second country in the EU with the highest percentage of migrant population, second only to Luxembourg (Eurostat, 2023).

Over the last 10 years, Malta has experienced a constant increase in immigration flows, the peak being 28,341 in 2019. Even though immigration flows fell drastically coinciding with the Covid-19 pandemic, the most recent national census,

taken in 2021, showed the number of migrants living in Malta to be 115,449. This represents 22.2% of the country's total population (Malta National Statistics Office, 2022).

The majority (81%) of the migrants arriving in Malta in recent years came from African countries, with the rest (19%) coming from Asian countries. The most common countries of origin for these migration flows were Eritrea, Syria, Sudan and Egypt (ibid., 2022).

International protection procedures in Malta have in general followed the same patterns as migration. Over the past decade, 23,400 asylum applications were filed in the country, with a maximum of 4,090 being registered in 2019. In 2021, a total of 1,517 applications for international protection were registered, a decrease of 38.9% compared to 2022. This reduction was mainly due to the migration policies adopted by the EU and to the Covid-19 pandemic. Most asylum applications in the last few years have been submitted by citizens of Sudan, Syria, Libya, Bangladesh, Somalia, Eritrea and, most recently, Ukraine (Malta National Statistics Office, 2022; Prague Process Secretariat, 2023).

As mentioned earlier, Malta receives migration flows via the Central Mediterranean route (Frontex, 2023). Migrants and international protection seekers using this route to enter the EU embark on long, dangerous journeys from North Africa and Turkey. The vast majority of them pass through Libya on their way to Europe, and this has contributed to the development of well-established, long-lasting human smuggling and trafficking networks in that North African country. Indeed, in February 2017 EU leaders approved new measures to reduce the number of irregular arrivals via this route and committed themselves to increasing cooperation with Libya to combat migrant smuggling (European Council, 2023a). In this scenario, Malta occupies a strategic position for saving lives on the Central Mediterranean route, responding to displacement crises and combating the smuggling of migrants and trafficking of persons off the Libyan coast.

2.2. Spain: Key Destination Point for the Western Mediterranean Route

Spain, too, plays a key role as a migrant-receiver country in the EU (IOM, 2022). In 2022, Spain ranked second in the EU for the number of migrants arriving there illegally (CEAR, 2023). Unsurprisingly, Spain's relationship with migration flows from the African continent is significantly conditioned by its geographical position adjacent to northwestern Africa, making it the main destination for African citizens both from the Maghreb and from western sub-Saharan areas (Spanish Ombudsman, 2021). This is reflected in the numerous episodes of mass migratory arrivals that have taken place in recent decades, an ongoing process which, according to the Spanish Ombudsman, has existed in the past, exists now and will continue to exist in the future (ibid., 2021).

With regard to international protection, in 2019 Spain ranked third in the EU (behind Germany and France) in terms of the number of asylum applications received (118,264) (CEAR 2022; Eurostat 2022). The number of asylum applications fell in the following years due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, delays in obtaining interview appointments and moving through the reception system, and differing criteria regarding international protection procedures (CEAR, 2022; IOM, 2022). However, despite the difficulties involved in accessing the asylum procedure, in 2022 Spain registered a record of 118,842 asylum applications, 80% more than the previous year. The steady upward trend that started in 2012 therefore continues (CEAR, 2023).

Within Spain, the arrival of migrants is a particularly pressing issue in the southernmost regions of the country, namely Andalusia, the Canary Islands, Ceuta, and Melilla, with Andalusia and the Canary Islands constituting the main destination points for those travelling by sea (Martín-Ruel,

2021; Spanish Ombudsman, 2021). A distinction can be made between two main maritime gateways to Europe through Spain, one corresponding to the Western Mediterranean route and the other to the Western African route in the Atlantic Ocean (European Council, 2023b).

Andalusia, on which this paper focuses, has become the main destination point for migrants taking the Western Mediterranean route, above all for geopolitical reasons (Frontex, 2023). In 2021, the region ranked third in the number of asylum applications received in Spain (6,902 applications), behind Madrid and Catalonia (CEAR, 2022), climbing to second in 2022, when only Madrid received more applications (CEAR, 2023). The Andalusian provinces that received the highest number of applications were Malaga, Seville, and Almeria. With regard to nationalities, most of the migrants arriving in Andalusia by sea were from Morocco, followed by people from Algeria, Guinea, other sub-Saharan African countries and Syria (Frontex, 2023).

However, the arrival of migrants entering Spain through Andalusia has slowed down since March 2022, due mainly to the cooperation agreements on migration signed by Spain and the EU with Morocco and other countries like Senegal, Niger and Mauritania, where border control and surveillance of the migrant population have now been increased (CEAR, 2023).

The restrictions imposed on this route resulted in an upward trend in migration via the Western African route, with an increase in the number of irregular arrivals in the Canary Islands—despite this being one of the world's deadliest routes (Fidalgo and García, 2022). The number of migrant arrivals via this route reached its peak in 2006, when almost 32,000 migrants came ashore in the Canary Islands. Since then, the flow of migrants has increased continuously. Between January 1 and October 15 this year (2023), the islands received 23,537 migrants, an 80% increase compared to the same period last year (European Council,

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2023b; Reuters, 2023). This confirms that the strengthening of EU restrictive measures, far from solving the problem, encourages the use of riskier alternatives: whenever one route is closed, another more dangerous route is activated (CEAR, 2021).

In conclusion, the migratory routes in the Mediterranean are still very much active, to the extent that the situation must now be talked about not as a migratory crisis, but as a structural phenomenon of geographical migratory flows that cannot be addressed from an emergency perspective (CEAR, 2021). In this scenario, the work of professional translators and interpreters becomes essential and should therefore be monitored and regulated.

3. Methodology

The work presented here is based on a research project carried out by a group of researchers from the Universidad Pablo de Olavide (including the author of this paper). In this study, twenty interviews were conducted with personnel from nine entities in Andalusia (southern Spain) and eleven in Malta which provide assistance for migrants and international protection seekers. All the people interviewed were either responsible for hiring interpreters or needed the services of interpreters in order to do their jobs. The research objective was to explore the needs, the functioning and the interpreting requirements of entities dealing with refugees and asylum seekers. The idea was to collect specific information regarding the entities' translating and interpreting needs, how they covered those needs, the languages for which they needed translation and/or interpreting, the characteristics and shortcomings of the interpreters/translators they habitually worked with, and the profiles they would ideally like their interpreters/translators to have.

Following a qualitative research method, the

researchers involved in the project created a questionnaire of open-ended questions which served as a basis for the semi-structured interviews subsequently carried out with the different entities. The questionnaire comprised a total of thirty-nine open-ended questions: seventeen on interpreting, seventeen on translation, four on training and interaction with translators and interpreters, and one last open question on potential areas for improvement. Once the questionnaire had been prepared, semi-structured interviews were conducted with each of the entities. Each interview lasted for approximately one hour. Since the research method used was qualitative, the interviews were conducted not only to obtain information from the interviewees, but also to gain an insider (emic) view of their needs, attitudes, and issues (Corbetta, 2003).

The interviews were recorded, with the consent of the interviewees, and anonymously transcribed to obtain real, reliable data that could be used in the research. The information was then processed, following the research technique known as content analysis, which allows researchers to "determine the presence of certain words, themes, or concepts within some given qualitative data" and to "quantify and analyse the presence, meanings, and relationships of such certain words, themes, or concepts" (Columbia Public Health, 2022). Although obtaining generalisable data is more complex using a qualitative approach than in quantitative research, the qualitative approach provides a basis for building hypotheses and theories.

3.1. Interviews in Andalusia

Nine interviews were carried out in Andalusia: five in Seville and four in Almeria. The interviews in Seville were conducted between January and March 2019. Four of the

interviews were held with two people at a time, so a total of nine people took part, including a head of general training for migrants, a psychologist, a centre manager, a lawyer, the head of a translation and interpreting service, a centre coordinator, two people in charge of the international protection program, a social worker, and the head of a legal department. For data protection purposes, the entities involved will hereafter be referred to as entities A, B, C, D and E. The interviews in Almeria were carried out by the author of this paper between May and July 2022. In this case, two interviews were held with one person, one interview was held with two people, and one interview was held with a group of seven people, making a total of eleven participants: four heads of translation and interpreting services, three cross-cultural mediators, a centre manager, a lawyer, a psychologist, and a social worker. The four entities consulted in Almeria will hereafter be referred to as entities F, G, H and I.

It should be mentioned that three of the four entities interviewed in Almeria were different branches of the same entities interviewed in Seville, each with their own specific needs and characteristics. It should also be mentioned that two of the entities interviewed, one in Seville and one in Almeria, provide assistance for unaccompanied minors.

The profiles of the entities consulted vary quite considerably in terms of the length of time they have been active in this field and the number of people they attend to, offering a wide variety of possibilities. All of them, however, have one thing in common: although they previously had offices in other parts of Spain, they have all either opened offices in Andalusia or considerably increased the services they offer in this region in the last 10-15 years.

3.2. Interviews in Malta

Eleven interviews were conducted in Malta by the author of this paper between June and September 2021. Unlike in Andalusia, in Malta all the interviews except for one were individual. A total of twelve people were interviewed: three project coordinators, two directors, two assistant directors, one CEO, one chief of mission, one programme manager, one operations assistant and one support worker. For data protection purposes, the entities involved will hereafter be referred to as entities MA, MB, MC, MD, ME, MF, MG, MH, MI, MJ and MK.

As occurred with the entities interviewed in Spain, the profiles of the entities interviewed in Malta again vary quite considerably in terms of the length of time they have been active in this field and the number of people they attend to. However, it is important to note that the entities interviewed in Malta have very different characteristics from those interviewed in Andalusia.

Firstly, whereas the Spanish entities interviewed provide a more cross-cutting service—that is to say, they attend to the different needs of international protection seekers from their arrival right through until their application is resolved—in Malta this only happens with four of the entities interviewed, the other seven focussing more on covering specific needs of protection seekers (legal aid, housing, money, social assistance, etc.). Another noteworthy difference is that most of the Maltese entities interviewed tend to work on a project basis, something that does not occur with the Spanish entities. Finally, while all the entities interviewed in Spain were independent NGOs, in Malta two of the entities interviewed were government-funded.

Despite these differences between the two countries and the entities interviewed, we believe that a comparison of the

results obtained in the different interviews may provide a broader picture of the situation and contribute to a better understanding of the interpreting needs and problems encountered in this context in the Mediterranean region.

4. Analysis

This section analyses the responses obtained in the interviews regarding the major themes in the questionnaire: the languages the entities usually use to communicate with the refugees and asylum seekers, the types of interpreters they work with, the problems they face, and the skills they think interpreters working in this field should have.

Some relevant results of the interviews in Andalusia have already been disseminated in several publications (see Briales and Relinque, 2021; Martín-Ruel, 2020; Relinque and Martín-Ruel, 2022 and Relinque and Vigier-Moreno, 2023). This analysis therefore begins with some comments on the results obtained from the research carried out in Malta, which have not yet been published. The results of the research carried out in Andalusia will then be summarised

and the results obtained in the two regions will be compared.

4.1. Languages Required in International Protection Scenarios

The questions in the first part of the questionnaire asked about the languages for which the entities needed interpretation, whether they required specific varieties or dialects of those languages and which languages they used as *lingua francas*. The information collected is presented below.

4.1.1. Languages Required in Malta

Although the different entities acknowledged that their needs vary as different conflicts emerge throughout the world, they said the languages for which interpreting services were most frequently needed were the following (those that were specifically commented upon by the interviewees are highlighted in bold):

Table 1. Languages Required in International Protection Scenarios in Malta

Entity	African Languages	Amharic	Arabic	Bambara	Bengali	English	French	Hindi	Parsi	Somali	Spanish	Sudanese	Swahili	Tigrinya	Urdu
MA			x	x	x	x	x							x	
MB		x	x	x	x		x			x				x	
MC	x		x	x		x	x	x						x	
MD	x	x	x		x	x	x	x		x				x	x
ME		x	x			x	x			x	x			x	
MF			x			x	x			x	x	x		x	
MG	x		x			x	x				x				
MH		x	x		x	x	x			x					
MI	x		x		x		x	x						x	
MJ			x			x	x						x	x	
MK	x		x			x	x		x					x	x

As can be seen in the table, the most frequently requested languages are Arabic, French, and different African languages, especially Tigrinya. It was found that French, Arabic, English and even Maltese (due to its similarity with Syrian and Libyan Arabic) are often used as lingua francas to communicate with people seeking asylum or protection. Most of the interviewees mentioned that they always try to find interpreters who speak the migrants' languages. However, they also acknowledged that, due to their limited resources and the small size of their country, this is often a hard task, hence their need to resort to lingua francas. One last point of interest is that most of the entities agreed that the interpreters they work with are usually from the same country or share the same mother tongue as their

clients, but the interpreters of French are usually Maltese who speak or have studied French.

4.1.2. Languages Required in Andalusia

As in Malta, the needs of the entities vary depending on the conflicts that may arise around the world. Notwithstanding, the languages for which interpreting services were most frequently needed were reported to be the following (those that were specifically commented upon by the interviewees are highlighted in bold):

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Table 2. Languages Required in International Protection Scenarios in Andalusia

Entities	Afghan Languages	African Languages	Arabic	Armenian	Bambara	Chinese	English	French	Georgian	Russian	Tamazight	Tigrinya	Ukrainian	Urdu	Wolof
A			x				x	x		x		x	x		
B			x	x	x			x	x	x			x	x	
C			x				x	x							
D									x	x			x		
E		x	x			x	x	x		x			x		
F			x		x		x	x	x				x		x
G	x	x	x		x		x	x							x
H		x	x		x		x	x		x	x	x	x		x
I		x	x		x		x	x			x				

Despite the variability of language needs, in Andalusia nearly all the entities clearly have a need for French, Arabic, African languages, Russian, Ukrainian and English. As in Malta, the interviewees mentioned that French, Arabic, English, and even Russian are often used as lingua francas to communicate with people seeking asylum or protection, although this occurs only in routine cases, for administrative expediency or in emergency situations, and only when permitted by the cultural level of the person involved. According to the interviewees, lingua francas are not used in more important situations, such as interviews with psychologists or lawyers. All the entities agreed that the interpreters they work with usually have the same mother tongue as their clients, except in the cases of English and French, where interpreters may be Spanish or European citizens who speak those languages.

4.1.3. Languages Required in International Protection Scenarios: Comparison

All the entities consulted clearly need to communicate in a wide variety of languages. Both in Malta and in Andalusia, however, the use of African languages, especially sub-Saharan languages, stands out. The use of lingua francas, especially Arabic, French and English, is also noticeable, although, according to the responses obtained in the interviews, their use is less widespread in Andalusia than in Malta, where the size of the country and the limited resources restrict the possibility of finding interpreters for the languages required.

One notable difference between the two regions is that in Andalusia there was already a need to communicate in

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Ukrainian and Russian even before the beginning of the war in Ukraine, and that, at that time, Russian was already used as a lingua franca, something that did not happen in Malta. Another striking difference is the use of Maltese as a lingua franca in Malta due to its similarity to Syrian and Libyan Arabic.

4.2. Interpreter Profiles in International Protection Scenarios

Another part of the interview directly addressed the profiles of the interpreters the entities usually work with, with special attention to the training and professional experience of those interpreters. The results obtained are presented below.

4.2.1. Interpreter Profiles in Malta

To overcome language barriers, the entities operating in Malta mainly resort to their own employees who speak the language of their clients or a lingua franca, or to volunteers and ad hoc interpreters, who are usually migrants, other refugees, connections, members of the community (community leaders) or university students who speak the required language. They also rely on family members and friends, but only in less formal situations or when they have no other way of communicating with their clients. Only two of the people interviewed said they try to avoid using members of the clients' community as interpreters, particularly when they are dealing with especially sensitive cases.

Six entities claimed to have their own pool of interpreters made up of individuals with whom they have successfully worked before and people who have acquired experience working with other entities. This means that most entities working in this field in Malta share the same pool of

interpreters. Moreover, when those entities who don't have their own pool of interpreters require interpreting services, they usually call for interpreters who have experience of working with the other NGOs.

In most cases they don't know the qualifications of the interpreters they work with, but they acknowledge that they do not usually have any formal training in translation and interpreting. It is also remarkable that only one entity has a person with university training in translation and interpreting on its staff.

It is noticeable that only one entity claims to hire interpreters through the European Asylum Support Office (EASO), which is located in Malta. This is particularly interesting, as the entity in question thinks that the EASO provides professional interpreters, whereas what the EASO actually does when it receives their call is to contact different translation agencies to ask for interpreters, particularly one agency in Italy, one in Spain and one in Belgium. EASO too, therefore, knows nothing about the interpreters' qualifications or training, as the agencies do not provide this information.

The entities in Malta conceded that it is very difficult to find formally trained interpreters for most of the languages they require. Only Maltese interpreters have official training in interpreting, but they can only be hired for European languages. These interpreters are usually hired by the government-funded agencies, while the NGOs prefer to resort to interpreters who are conational with their clients because, even when speaking in French, they say, "they don't speak the same French" as university graduates. One form of training that is quite sought after by these NGOs is the cultural mediator course offered by the Maltese government, even though this course does not include any training in interpreting. This proves that, for the entities interviewed in Malta, the difference between an interpreter and a cultural mediator is blurred. However, the people interviewed declared that even among those who have

taken this cultural mediator course it is difficult to find interpreters for the less common languages.

To summarise, the entities operating in Malta trust more in the experience of interpreters than in their qualifications, especially experience acquired through providing interpretation services for the Ministry for Home Affairs, for other government agencies or for other NGOs.

4.2.2. *Interpreter Profiles in Andalusia*

Whenever possible, the entities in Andalusia try to overcome language barriers by using either their client's language or, if the education level of their client allows it, one of the previously mentioned lingua francas. If they require a language their employees are not familiar with, or for more serious interpreting tasks, they will make use of external, paid interpreters, either hiring them through agencies or, in the case of three of the entities interviewed, resorting to their own pools of interpreters.

The entities interviewed don't know the training or background of the interpreters hired through agencies, as agencies do not provide this information. Neither do they know the training or qualifications of the interpreters included in their pools, which are usually made up of people they have worked with before or with experience of working with other entities. It is remarkable that only two of the entities interviewed employ in-house interpreters, who also perform other tasks apart from interpreting.

As for ad hoc interpreters, the entities said that they only turn to them in one-off situations and for less important interpreting tasks, such as routine visits to the doctor, administrative processes, etc. Ad hoc interpreters are usually university students with a very good command of two languages, foreigners who have lived in Spain for a long time, other refugees or, on exceptional occasions, family or friends.

4.2.3. *Interpreter Profiles in International Protection Scenarios: Comparison*

In both countries, the first resource the entities turn to is members of their own staff who can communicate either using the client's language or, more frequently, using a lingua franca. The big difference comes when they have to resort to external resources. The Spanish entities tend to contact agencies, while the entities in Malta look for volunteers or contact interpreters in their own pool of interpreters.

One common feature of the entities working in both countries is that they hardly ever employ qualified interpreters as part of their permanent staff and they usually know nothing about the qualifications of external interpreters. However, most of them acknowledged that the interpreters they usually work with do not have formal training in interpreting.

Finally, it was found that the Maltese entities tend to depend more on volunteers and ad hoc interpreters than their Spanish counterparts, who said they call in such personnel only for less formal interpreting tasks. It should be mentioned here that, although their knowledge of languages can be very helpful in some situations, these volunteers and ad hoc interpreters usually lack the training and skills necessary to interpret in this context. Even though they make an effort to compensate for their lack of professionalism with motivation and involvement, their participation may give rise to problematic situations (Martín-Ruel, 2020).

4.3. *Problems with Interpreting Services in International Protection Scenarios*

In the next part of the questionnaire, we asked about the problems the entities experienced with the interpretation

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services they used and the factors which, in their opinion, led to those problems. The results obtained are shown below.

4.3.1. Problems with Interpreting Services in Malta

The table below shows the most frequent problems faced by the people interviewed in Malta.

Table 3. Problems with Interpreting Services in International Protection Scenarios in Malta

Entities	Availability	Professional Competence	Linguistic Competence	Conflicts of Interests	Budget	Gender	Ethnicity	Cultural Aspects	Official Bodies
MA	x	x	x	x		x			x
MB	x	x		x		x			
MC			x					x	
MD	x	x	x			x	x		
ME	x	x	x	x				x	x
MF	x		x		x				
MG		x							
MH	x								
MI	x				x		x		
MJ	x								x
MK									

As can be seen, the main problem for the entities in Malta is availability. Most of the people interviewed remarked that as Malta is a small country, it is difficult to find interpreters for less-spoken languages who are suitable for the task they are required to perform. Moreover, as the same pool of interpreters is used by all the services, including the different NGOs, the police, the hospital, and the Government, those people who are suitable for the task of interpreting are not always available. The NGOs also mentioned that trained interpreters are usually occupied with international entities or with the government, so

it is difficult to book them for one-off jobs, emergencies or short-notice requirements.

Linguistic competence and professional competence are the next problematic areas listed in the ranking. Linguistic competence problems are mainly due to the fact that some clients are expected to speak a given language just because they come from a particular region or country, even though it may not be their first language or they may not even understand it. The interviewees also mentioned difficulties arising from the varieties of the languages spoken by their clients—particularly

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in the cases of French or English, as European French and English differ considerably from the French and English spoken in Africa. Problems are also encountered with the use of *lingua francas* (Relinque and Martín-Ruel, 2022).

With regard to professional competence, the entities consulted mentioned a wide range of problems: interpreters that get everything wrong, interpreters with no knowledge of the appropriate terminology, interpreters who exceed the remit of their role or intervene inopportunistically, interpreters who show too much empathy or who lack empathy, interpreters whose translations are much shorter than the clients' statements, interpreters who conduct parallel conversations with the client, interpreters who ask or answer questions themselves, interpreters who add personal opinions or translate messages even though they have not understood what has been said, etc.

Another relevant problem the entities have to deal with are conflicts of interests. As mentioned earlier, there is a group of interpreters in Malta who work for different actors in the international protection field. These interpreters therefore meet the same clients in different scenarios, and this may compromise their fidelity to the message expressed and their confidentiality. Conflict of interests also arises when interpreters belong to the same community as the client: some clients are reluctant to open up because they don't want their community to know everything about them. In other cases, problems arise with community interpreters because the dividing line between personal and professional relationships is not clearly defined. Here, the fidelity to the message and the confidentiality of interpreters from the clients' own communities should be questioned.

Gender problems, although not that common, affect not only male interpreters but also female interpreters. On the one hand, there is a problem of availability, as for many languages there is a shortage of female interpreters; on the other hand,

some male clients do not want to speak to female interpreters or professionals. Indeed, there are also some male clients who do not want to speak to male interpreters.

Another problem worthy of attention concerns difficulties experienced with official bodies in Malta, especially courts. According to the people interviewed, English-speaking clients from Africa do not understand the Maltese English spoken in such official bodies, just as French-speaking clients from Africa do not understand the French spoken by the court interpreters, who are usually Maltese interpreters who speak European French. It was also highlighted that the official bodies resort to anybody who speaks a particular language, without considering the interpreter's competence or qualifications. Yet another problem is that official bodies do not generally take into consideration the migrants' mother tongues: they often use *lingua francas* and assume the migrants understand them, which they often don't, especially when official or legal language is used. The interviewees also mentioned that the courts do not always allow the NGOs to bring their own interpreters, and migrants very often say that they do not understand the interpreters appointed by the Commissioner for Refugees. This being the situation, some of the people interviewed mentioned that many international protection seekers, because they have had such bad experiences with Government interpreters, prefer to do their asylum interviews in English, even though their English is not good enough, rather than doing them in their own language. In other public services the problem is simply that no interpretation services are offered for the languages spoken by the migrants.

Some of the entities consulted mentioned ethnic problems, citing the inevitable issues of trust (or the lack thereof) which arise depending on ethnicity, tribe and nationality, especially among migrants arriving from the Horn of Africa.

At this same level, cultural aspects also come into play, with clients very often saying they understand things that they do not

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understand. According to the interviewees, many migrants arriving from English- or French-speaking countries do not want to admit that they do not speak English/French or that they do not understand the English or French spoken in Malta. Some of them are ashamed to admit that they cannot read or write, while others do not understand the proceedings or how to fill out the necessary forms.

Lastly, there are budgetary problems, especially when the entities' usual collaborators are not available or when they work on a project-by-project basis. In these cases, the entities

cannot invest money in all the languages they may require and, when one project finishes, they have no more money with which to hire interpreters for the next one.

4.3.2. Problems with Interpreting Services in Andalusia

The following table shows the problems most frequently faced by the entities interviewed in Andalusia:

Table 4. Problems with Interpreting Services in International Protection Scenarios in Andalusia

Entities	Availability	Professional Competence	Linguistic Competence	Conflicts of Interests	Budget	Gender	Ethnicity	Cultural Aspects	Official Bodies
A	x	x	x						
B	x	x							
C		x	x					x	
D	x	x							
E	x	x		x	x				
F		x							x
G	x	x				x	x		x
H		x	x			x	x		x
I	x		x			x			

As it can be seen, the problems identified by the entities in Andalusia are mainly related to the interpreter's professional competence. The interviewees said that some interpreters make personal comments or value judgments, overstep the interpreter's role, answer directly on behalf of the client or even advise the client, conduct parallel conversations either with the organisation's representative or, especially, with the

client, and even break down on hearing the harrowing stories told by international protection seekers. Some entities complained particularly about the interpreters sent by one of the translation agencies most frequently employed by the Spanish public services.

Interpreter availability ranked second in the list of problems, especially for less widely spoken languages and in emergency

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situations. Next came the linguistic competence of the interpreters used: in some cases they do not master the language variety spoken by their clients and in others they have a low level of Spanish.

Although to a lesser extent, some entities also mentioned difficulties related to gender, ethnicity, cultural aspects in general, conflict of interests and budget. In the case of gender, they said that, even though they usually take this into account, they have had to tackle some cases of Arab men who did not want to work with female interpreters or professionals, gay clients or women who did not want to tell their stories in front of male interpreters, or women who did not want male interpreters in medical settings.

With regard to ethnicity, the entities interviewed mentioned difficulties with Ukrainians who did not want to work with Russian interpreters or refused to speak Russian even though they knew that language (it is important to recall that these interviews were conducted before the war in Ukraine), clients who refused to work with an interpreter from an ethnic group that had attacked theirs, conflict between people from Mali and Senegal or between Moroccans and Algerians, confrontations between the Mandinka and other ethnic groups, etc.

Turning to cultural aspects, one of the entities mentioned problems with sub-Saharan clients who did not feel identified with or represented by Moroccan interpreters, sub-Saharan clients who said they understood what they were being told but who did not really understand it, etc. It should be noted that these problems were only mentioned by one entity. Most of the entities interviewed stated the opposite: that is to say, that the interpreters they employed usually help them to resolve or avoid cultural conflicts.

Budget problems and conflict of interests were only mentioned occasionally. One conflict of interest arose when a client met the same interpreter that he/she had met during an

interrogation by the police. This generated mistrust and the client refused to speak through that interpreter. With regard to budget problems, the entities interviewed confirmed that thanks to the UE funds they receive it is not too difficult for them to hire interpreters for international protection seekers.

Finally, some entities said they encountered problems with official bodies. It is noteworthy that these problems were mentioned by the entities located in Eastern Andalusia, but not in Western Andalusia. They were mainly related to the Andalusian Health Service, and especially its clinics, which sometimes did not have access to interpreters. On other occasions, the telephone interpreting service provided by the Andalusian Health Service did not work or the clinic staff did not want to attend clients using this service and told the client to return another day with someone who spoke their language. The entities in Eastern Andalusia also mentioned a lack of sensitivity and cultural tolerance in the City Council and in the Social Affairs office, which, according to the people interviewed, are not prepared for international protection despite having been receiving international protection seekers for years. This seems to coincide with the situation in other parts of Spain (León-Pinilla, 2018; Pena Díaz, 2015; Valero-Garcés, 2003).

4.3.3. Problems with Interpreting Services in International Protection Scenarios: Comparison

It seems clear that the main problems encountered by the entities interviewed in Malta and in Spain are the professional competence and availability of interpreters, especially for less widely spoken languages. Once again, this demonstrates that there is a lack of professional interpreters for the languages that are most often required in the field of international protection.

Linguistic competence is another important issue in both countries, although not as important as availability and professional competence. All these problems indicate a need to

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monitor the language level of interpreters taking into account both the variety of the language spoken by the clients and the language spoken in the host country.

Interestingly, in both countries the entities interviewed mentioned problems with official bodies, most of the problems in Malta arising in the courts and those in Andalusia, and particularly in Eastern Andalusia, being found in public health service clinics and in the Social Affairs office. This might suggest that there is a need to raise awareness of interculturality in public entities.

Conflicts of interests are more frequent in Malta than in Andalusia due to the size of that country and its limited resources—factors which are also reflected in the budgetary problems mentioned.

Although in both countries the entities interviewed stated that they are always alert to cultural aspects in general, and gender and ethnic problems in particular, on some occasions

they have had to deal with such issues, and due to the availability difficulties mentioned previously, they sometimes just have to work with the interpreters that are available.

4.4. Ideal Interpreter Profiles for International Protection Scenarios

Once the entities had explained the services they need, the characteristics of the interpreters they usually work with and the problems they face, we asked them to reflect upon their ideal interpreter profile for work in international protection. Their answers are summarised below.

4.4.1. Ideal Interpreter Profile for Malta

The following table shows the skills most sought-after by the entities interviewed in Malta:

Table 5. Ideal Interpreter Profile for International Protection Scenarios in Malta

Entities	Professionalism	Native Speaker	Command of Languages	Empathy and Confidence	Familiarity with Users' Culture	Reliability	Respect for Users	Professional Experience as an Interpreter	Training in Cultural Mediation	Familiarity with the Asylum System in Malta	Flexibility	Tone of Voice and Non-Verbal Communication
MA	x				x				x	x		x
MB	x	x			x			x	x	x		
MC				x		x						
MD			x	x	x			x	x	x		
ME	x		x	x		x						
MF				x	x	x				x		
MG	x				x		x					
MH		x	x	x	x	x					x	
MI			x	x	x							
MJ		x	x	x				x		x		
MK	x			x		x		x		x		

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As can be seen, the most sought-after qualities are empathy and confidence, familiarity with the user's culture and familiarity with the asylum system in Malta. These are followed by command of languages, professionalism, reliability, professional experience as an interpreter, training in cultural mediation and native speaker. Lastly, we find flexibility, respect for users, and tone of voice and non-verbal communication.

Interestingly, the most important skills, in the opinion of the people interviewed, are confidence and empathy, especially with gender cases and with children. The interviewees also found knowledge of the client's culture and familiarity with the asylum procedure in Malta (context, proceedings, papers, terminology...) to be quite relevant.

The entities operating in Malta also insisted on reliability and trustworthiness, pointing out the importance of being able to trust the interpreter and that the interpreter should listen and faithfully translate exactly what is being said. The people interviewed said they need to be sure that the interpreter understands what is going on and what is being said.

Command of languages, especially of English and of the languages spoken by clients, is also important. The people interviewed said that their interpreters need to know both English and their clients' language and culture very well, and have to be conscious of the cultural reality and the cultural problems experienced in a particular country or region (religion, behaviour, background, etc.). Here, however, we find some discrepancies: some entities want to work with interpreters who are native speakers or people from the client's own community, and therefore know the culture very well, while others do not necessarily need interpreters who are native speakers and even expressly stated that the interpreters should not belong to the same community as the client.

With regard to training, some said the interpreters they use

would require some training in cultural mediation, with particular reference to government-run training courses. Others just spoke of "qualifications". These answers are not included in the table because they did not specify what sort of qualification the interpreters should have. From the interviews, however, it could be deduced that they were referring to some sort of qualification in cultural mediation. Some of the people interviewed also mentioned that they would not require university degrees, as those people who act as interpreters for non-European languages would not have time to qualify. It is also interesting that no reference was made to training in interpreting. On the other hand, experience as an interpreter in the humanitarian field is highly appreciated.

The interviewees also valued professionalism positively, although focussing more on the ethical side of the profession than on technical aspects. Here, it was again made clear that they do not clearly differentiate between cultural mediation and interpreting.

Finally, the entities consulted also expressly mentioned respect for users, timetabling flexibility, and tone of voice and non-verbal communication (the different stages of asylum proceedings are repetitive and interpreters are sometimes so used to them that they may show boredom or even start looking at their phones).

4.4.2. *Ideal Interpreter Profile for Andalusia*

The following table shows the skills most sought-after by the entities interviewed in Andalusia:

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Table 6. Ideal Interpreter Profile for International Protection Scenarios in Andalusia

Entities	Professionalism	Command of Languages	Training in Interpreting	Empathy and Confidence	Familiarity with Users' Culture	Respect for Users	Psychological Preparation	Tone of Voice and Non-Verbal Communication	Professional Experience	Training in Social Education and/or International Protection
A		x	x	x					x	
B	x	x	x	x	x	x	x			
C		x						x		
D	x		x	x	x	x	x	x		x
E	x									
F	x			x	x	x		x		
G	x									
H	x			x	x	x		x		x
I		x		x	x					

The results for Andalusia are reasonably balanced, although the most sought-after qualities are professionalism, empathy and confidence, and familiarity with the culture in question. These are followed by command of languages, respect for users, control over tone of voice and non-verbal communication, training in interpreting, psychological preparation, training in social education and/or international protection, and, lastly, professional experience as an interpreter.

As these results have been analysed in detail in Relinque and Vigier-Moreno (2023), here we will simply note that the ideal situation for most of the people interviewed would be to have their own employees trained in the languages required, so that they would not need to rely on interpreters.

4.4.3. Ideal Interpreter Profile for International Protection Scenarios: Comparison

It seems clear that empathy and confidence are highly appreciated by the entities operating in both countries. As the interviewees stated, in the international protection context it is essential for migrants to be able to trust the interpreter and for the interpreter to display a certain degree of empathy regarding the client's situation, without becoming too emotionally involved.

Familiarity with the user's culture is also quite important for the entities in both countries, indicating that, in this field of work, the dividing line between the figure of the cultural mediator and that of the interpreter is fuzzy (Arumí Ribas, 2017; Pöchhacker, 2008). This is even more noticeable in Malta than in Andalusia, since, as mentioned earlier, in Malta some of the entities prioritise cultural mediation training over training in

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interpreting.

Professionalism, too, ranks high in both countries. The entities consulted in the study referred mainly to deontological issues, such as interpreters being aware of the place and situation they are in, not expressing value judgments or opinions, being objective and impartial, not holding parallel conversations or answering directly, knowing how to act in each context/situation, etc. With regard to the interpreter's command of languages (another of the most sought-after qualities in both cases), the entities in Spain specified the command not only of *lingua francas* but also of those languages for which they have a higher demand for interpreters. The entities in Malta, however, referred mainly to the clients' languages and to English, as sometimes they hire interpreters who speak the client's language properly but are not fluent in English. Respect for users is also mentioned in both situations, although this quality was expressed more overtly in Andalusia than in Malta.

Some clear differences can be seen with regard to training and experience. While in Malta entities tend to seek training in cultural mediation, experience as an interpreter in the international protection field and a good knowledge of asylum procedures, these skills are hardly mentioned in Andalusia. Admittedly, two entities in this region did mention training in social education and/or international protection as a means of broadening the interpreter's knowledge of the reality of international protection and improving the language services rendered, and this could arguably be likened to the cultural training and procedural knowledge mentioned by the entities in Malta. Lastly, reliability was widely mentioned in the interviews in Malta but was not expressly referenced in Andalusia.

Conversely, the entities operating in Andalusia drew attention to other characteristics hardly mentioned, or not mentioned at all, in Malta, such as the tone of voice and non-

verbal communication, thereby attaching great importance to in-person communication. Training in interpreting was also mentioned in the interviews in Andalusia, although most of the Andalusian entities emphasized the difficulty of finding individuals with training in interpreting for the most sought-after languages. These entities also talked about psychological preparation, since the accounts given by their clients can be harrowing and interpreters must be prepared to hear and interpret their stories.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that the characteristics mentioned above are considered ideal in the particular context of international protection, which is quite different from the reality of other types of interpreting such as conference interpreting or business interpreting, where interpreters may require different skills.

4.5. Results of the Analysis

The results of the analysis presented above indicate a series of similarities and differences between the reality of interpreting in international protection scenarios in Malta and in the south of Spain.

The similarities include:

- High demand for interpreting in this field.
- Difficulty of finding interpreters for certain languages.
- French, Arabic and English are used as *lingua francas*.
- The interpreters' mother tongue is usually the foreign language, except in the cases of French and English.
- Knowledge of culture and language is preferred over training or experience in translation and interpreting.
- Lack of training in translation and interpreting.
- Blurred line between interpreting and cultural mediation.
- Trained interpreters do not form part of migrant reception agencies' staff.

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The main differences are:

- In Malta, there is a pool of interpreters shared by most NGOs.
- NGOs in Malta trust references from other NGOs.
- In Malta, the entities have stronger links with the different migrant communities.
- Entities in Malta depend more on volunteers or ad hoc interpreters than those in Andalusia.
- In Andalusia, the NGOs operate more independently and there is less contact between them.
- The entities in Andalusia make more use of translation agencies.

In summary, despite these differences, the reality of interpreting in international protection settings is quite similar in both countries. Interpreting is considered an indispensable tool, not only by the people who work for reception entities, but also by international protection seekers themselves, both in formal situations, like receiving legal or psychological guidance, and in day-to-day activities, like finding a home or a job. Special attention should therefore be paid to the provision of this service.

5. Conclusions

The Mediterranean crisis is causing a massive influx of migrants towards European shores. As a result, we now live in plural societies in which people with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds coexist and interact. In order to achieve multiculturalism, it is essential to integrate migrants into the host society, and public services and administrations must therefore work to ensure coexistence and intercomprehension. In this context, the work of interpreters is essential to avoid communicative misunderstandings and social imbalances between the parties involved. Interpreters help to eliminate communication barriers that would otherwise be

insurmountable and make it possible for migrants to access procedures under conditions of equality and justice.

However, there is a need to regulate and professionalise the interpreting tasks performed in this field. To do this, contributions are required from different spheres: from the university, by training specialised interpreters in this sector; from the public administration, by implementing and ensuring the quality of interpreting services; and from companies, by recognising that this is a very demanding profession that requires properly trained professionals who must be remunerated appropriately.

International protection constitutes an important niche of employment for translation and interpreting graduates and for migrants and refugees themselves. All of them, however, need specialised training in this field. We again propose—as we did in Relinque and Vigier-Moreno (2023)—two different training courses. For urgent needs or for less widely spoken languages for which it is very difficult (or impossible) to find interpreters with a university degree in interpreting, we propose the implementation of crash courses that would help ad hoc interpreters to acquire some basics of the trade, including training in principles of professional ethics and conduct (Briaies and Relinque, 2021; Otero, 2018; Universidad de Alcalá, 2023; Universidad Pablo de Olavide, 2022). For the design and implementation of these courses, help would be required from the University. On the other hand, it would also be useful to offer a specific master's degree in interpreting in international protection settings, focussing on more widely spoken languages like French, English and Arabic which are already taught at universities (and for which there exists a more stable demand, especially as lingua francas). In these courses, special attention should be paid to cultural mediation and to the different varieties of the languages studied (Tryuk, 2020).

Considering that we are living in a time when humanitarian crises are increasing and economic resources are scarce, we also

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consider that there is a need for collaboration between the different actors that provide services in international protection contexts at supranational level. In view of the many similarities that exist between the needs identified in the countries analysed, we think it would be interesting to create a pool of interpreters within the EU or within the countries of the Mediterranean Basin. A platform for interpreting could be created, which would constitute a key aid to migration management. All European entities and governments could invest part of their budgets in such a project, and then benefit from it by sharing their resources. This could be done thanks to the possibilities offered by technology, following the example of other apps or websites that already exist and which provide different services for migrants and refugees throughout Europe, such as The RefAid mobile app (RefAid, 2023). In such a network, it would be important to ensure that the interpreters are properly trained, and for this purpose we propose the two types of training mentioned above.

In conclusion, migration is here to stay, so we need to be looking at how we can build bridges to ensure integration. The more we team up and collaborate, the stronger we will be and the more we will achieve.

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