Mediating Migrants: Trust and Identity in Communicating the Migrant Crisis on the South East Coast of Sicily

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1. Introduction

This contribution discusses some preliminary findings of a small-scale survey on the linguistic response to the arrivals in Sicily of migrants[1] who cross the Mediterranean Sea. The project, entitled “Sicily - the Backdoor to Europe: the real conditions of mediating and interpreting during migrant emergencies on the South East coast of Sicily” is connected with a broader project on crisis translation (Federici 2016) and with my postdoctoral fellowship at Catania University’s School of Modern Languages in Ragusa. The study aims to investigate how intercultural mediators, NGO operators working around ports and reception centres in Eastern Sicily, and the "end-users" themselves, the asylum seekers, refugees and migrants, portray their experience of negotiating linguistic and cultural barriers within the context of the ongoing migratory phenomenon. This paper focuses on issues of trust within these interpreting triads, and on the perceptions and practices of intercultural mediation as facilitator of cross-cultural communication. Data was collected adopting ethnographic methods (Crabtree *et al.* 2012; Rouncefield and Tolmie 2016) in the form of semi-structured interviews

[1] No term concerning migration is ever neutral; while some terms have very specific legal meanings (e.g. refugees, asylum seekers, permanent residents, etc), others, like “migrant” have taken on a pejorative meaning. However, for expediency, we opted for the term “migrant” to cover all categories of people landing on the coasts and at the ports of Italy having moved from their place of origin, and “immigration” for legally specific policies dealing with people movement in the Italian juridical system.

and observations conducted in-situ. A strict process of ethical approval was adhered to in order to protect those interviewees who could be considered vulnerable respondents. The interviews for this part of the project were carried out between October 2017 and December 2017. Following applications to the relevant Sicilian authorities and having been granted permission to proceed, the research was carried out in two port areas and in two different types of reception centre. The first, CARA di Mineo (ordinary reception centre), was the largest reception centre for asylum seekers in Europe until the beginning of 2019[2], and is under the jurisdiction of the Prefecture of Catania. The second, a CAS (so-called emergency reception centres created in 2014 and run by regional cooperatives), is under the jurisdiction of the Prefecture of Ragusa. The study presented here is divided into two parts: the first part contextualises the data in the current Italian socio-political scenario and presents the methodological and theoretical framework for the research. The second part discusses samples of the qualitative data collected in the form of observations and comments from the participants interviewed on the themes of trust and identity. The article begins with a brief update on the migrant situation in Europe and recent developments in the Italian political scenario that have influenced national policy on immigration and the provision of first and second reception, inevitably impacting on linguistic and cultural mediation services.

2. Migratory flows and current policy – an overview

At the time of writing, the reception system for migrants in Italy is undergoing radical reform. As mentioned above, data collection for this study took place at the end of 2017. Since then, the reduced dimensions of the migratory flow and the Lega-5SM coalition government's aggressive anti-immigration policies have altered the legal and political landscape in which intercultural mediation takes

[2] Since data collection was carried out, the Italian Minister for the Interior, Matteo Salvini, took the controversial decision to close CARA di Mineo by the end of 2019. At the time of writing, the remaining guests are in the process of being transferred to smaller CAS in neighbouring regions in Sicily.

place. Nevertheless, the research and its outcomes are by no means obsolete. On the contrary, what can be evidenced is that the precarious system of linguistic and cultural mediation in place at the time of carrying out the interviews will undergo drastic disruption and reduction due to the new measures introduced with the latest legislation on immigration. As can be seen from the table below, the numbers of arrivals in Europe have decreased by approximately 35% from 2017 to 2018. The sharpest decline is clearly in Italy where arrivals in 2018 were 85% down on 2017 (see Table 1 below). The number of migrants reaching the peninsula in 2017 had already fallen to 19,369 from a peak of 181,436 in 2016[3] due to the Italian government's pact with Libya. In February 2017 the then minister of the interior, Social Democrat Marco Minniti signed the so-called Memorandum with the leader of the UN-recognised government, Fayez al-Serraj introducing a new level of cooperation between the Libyan coastguard and the Italians, including the provision of four patrol vessels.

Total arrivals by sea and deaths in the Mediterranean 2017-2018 (January 2018-1 December 2018)				
2018 107,583 total arrivals by sea 2,133 total dead/missing			2017 164,908 total arrivals by sea. 3,113 total dead/missing	
deaths	arrivals	Country	arrivals	deaths
1,285	23,011	Italy	117,120	2,844
681	52,678	Spain	20,043	208
167	29,782	Greece	27,244	61
0	930	Cyprus	501	0
0	1,182	Malta	0	0

Table 1. Arrivals by sea and deaths in the Mediterranean 2017-2018. Data from the International Organisation for Migration. All numbers are minimum estimates. Arrivals are based on data from respective governments

The statistics seem to indicate, as Salvini and other political representatives have sustained, that Minniti's "Memorandum di Intesa" and the refusal to allow humanitarian vessels to disembark refugees at Sicilian ports are "necessary"

[3] https://www.iom.int/news/mediterranean-migrant-arrivals-top-363348-2016-deaths-sea-5079.

tactics that have succeeded in decreasing the number of migrants who land on the Italian coastline. What the political class in Italy and Europe have chosen to ignore, however, is the gravity of the situation in the Libyan detention centres[4], or "lagers"[5], as they have been termed, and the cascading effects in humanitarian terms on those refugees who are forced to remain in Libya for extended periods and then eventually manage to reach European shores (see Filmer forthcoming). Further legislation has been introduced, known as the "decreto sicurezza" [security decree][6], which provides for "Disposizioni urgenti in materia di protezione internazionale e immigrazione, sicurezza pubblica" [urgent measures for international protection and immigration, public security] that was approved by the Italian Parliament on 28th November 2018. The measures aim to curb what Salvini has referred to as 'la pacchia' [the gravy train] for immigrants, operators and cooperatives that provide first and second reception, including the abolition of residence permits for humanitarian reasons. They are substituted with "special temporary permits" that can only be issued for the following motives: particularly serious health problems; natural disaster in the country of origin; acts of civil valour; victims of human trafficking, domestic violence and cases of "serious exploitation". Foreign nationals may now be held for up to 180 days in the "centri di permanenza per il rimpatrio" [repatriation centres], instead of the 90 days previously in force. Migrants may also be detained in other types of reception facilities if there are no places available in the CPRs: even the hotspots located in port areas can now be used for extended periods. The conditions for international protection have been reduced with the introduction of more offences that would result in the denial or revocation of refugee status. In an open letter to government officials including Salvini and the Health Minister Giulia Grillo, several humanitarian medical agencies operating in Italy such as "Emergency", "Società Italiana di Medicina delle Migrazioni", "Medici contro la Tortura", "Médecins du Monde", "Medici per i Diritti Umani" [MEDU] and Medici Senza Frontiere expressed their dismay at the serious erosion of human rights and the impact the laws would have on the health of migrants and refugees arriving on

[4] http://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/6078/cnn-reporters-show-migrants-auctioned-off-in-libya

[5] http://mediciperidirittiumani.org/quattro-anni-assistenza-ai-migranti-sopravvissuti-alla-violenza-estrema/

[6] All translations are mine unless otherwise stated.

Italian shores. This brief overview of the current Italian political scenario with regards immigration serves to illustrate the context in which the research is situated. The next section outlines the research methodology and reflects on the methodological caveats associated with this type of project.

3. The study, its contexts, and its participants

Access to the ports, to CARA di Mineo, and to the "Centri di accoglienza straordinaria", or CAS, in order to collect data required high-level authorisation that took time and effort to be granted. The Port of Pozzallo, which is under the jurisdiction of the Prefecture of Ragusa, gave me access to the port itself but declined access to the Pozzallo Hotspot, the most important first reception and identification centre in Sicily. Arriving refugees and migrants stay for a purported limited period of maximum 72 hours immediately following their arrival on Italian soil. Recently, however, MEDU denounced the fact that 73 migrants had spent over two months in the centre, seriously putting their psychological and physical health at risk[7]. The port of Catania, a large and busy commercial port is under the jurisdiction of the Prefecture of Catania. Access to the disembarkation area was granted, under the condition that I only observed and did not interrupt disembarkation. I witnessed two disembarkation processes and made contact with prospective participants whom I subsequently contacted in order to carry out interviews.

CARA di Mineo, also within the jurisdiction of the Prefecture of Catania but requiring separate authorisation, has frequently been in the national news. Due to its size, its isolated location, and the institutional complexity of its organisation, it is often prey to alleged associations with the Mafia and accusations of corruption[8] due to the lucrative contracts tendered by the Prefecture for its

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[7] https://palermo.repubblica.it/cronaca/2018/10/03/news/pozzallo_da_2_mesi_73_migranti_restano_nell_hotspot_a_rischio_la_loro_salute_psico-fisica_-208084389/

[8] See Latza Nadeau's 2018 article "'Migrants are more profitable than drugs': how the mafia infiltrated Italy's asylum system. Crime families have cashed in on the 'refugee industry". https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/feb/01/migrants-more-profitable-than-drugs-how-mafia-infiltrated-italy-asylum-system

management. Reports of the centre's frequent overcrowding since it was established in 2011 have also aroused media attention, with guests peaking at nearly 4,000 in 2016 at the height of the landings in Sicily. At the time of data collection, of the centre's 380 staff, 30 were intercultural mediators. Since then, the harsh anti-immigration policies of the new Italian government have had a drastic impact on the number of migrants reaching Italian shores[9]. From January 1st to December 1st, 2018, there were 23,011 arrivals in Italy by sea, compared to 117,120 in 2017. These events have coincided with the new tender for contract for the management of the CARA, resulting in severe staff reductions. At the time of writing the compound houses approximately 1,500 asylum seekers, the majority of whom are Nigerian men. It is a place of critical security as demonstrated by the recent murder (2.1.2018) of a Nigerian woman inside the compound. Recently, the centre has witnessed demonstrations of protest by the guests against the budget cuts that have reduced services. According to the Palermo edition of the newspaper *La Repubblica*[10], the new management are provided with 15.60 euro per guest to guarantee the provision of "food, accommodation, medical, sanitary and psychological needs along with activities essential for integration for asylum seekers such as Italian lessons, sport, and training courses". Previously, the sum was almost double. No mention is made of the need for cultural mediators or the role of intercultural mediation in preparation for the integration process. All my attempts, via official and unofficial means, to establish just how much Salvini's cuts have translated into redundancies for the 30 intercultural mediators that were employed by the centre when I went there in October 2017 were met with Sicilian "omertà", or a conspiracy of silence perhaps due to fear[11]. However, based on evidence provided in this study of the scarce consideration given to the role of the intercultural mediator it is reasonable to assume that professional linguistic and cultural support for migrants is low on the list of the present government's priorities and that local authorities will make

[9] https://italy.iom117,120.int/index.php

[10] https://palermo.repubblica.it/cronaca/2018/11/21/news/catania_in_rivolta_i_migranti_del_cara_di_mineo_bloccata_la_statale_per_gela-212209681/

[11] https://www.lasicilia.it/news/cronaca/179839/cara-di-mineo-ora-gli-operatori-hanno-paura-meno-ospiti-meno-lavoro.html

significant reductions in the numbers of personnel engaged in mediation activities.

This study adopted face-to-face qualitative interviews; the only national survey of intercultural mediators to date was conducted in 2014 and sampled 579 respondents to assess the practitioner's perception of the importance of a professional association and the role of qualifications in obtaining it. Only 81 respondents (14% of the surveyed sample) worked in the 8-region geographical category "Mezzogiorno" including Sicily; only 10.7% of the total respondents had experience working in CARAs (Catarci and Fiorucci 2014: 43-48). Interviewing 6 intercultural mediators specialised in first points of contact and reception centres is a significant sample in relation to data currently available. Before beginning the interviews, participants were given a consent form, which they were asked to read, complete and sign before the interviews took place. They had the opportunity to ask questions about the study and their participation before signing the form, as well as at the end of the interview (with recorder off). Interviews were semi-structured. The semi-structured protocol started with a general question on the informant's background and experience. Specifying gender has been avoided where it could be a decisive indicator as to the informant's identity. It has been included in cases where gender impacts on the discussion and the informant's identity is not at risk.

Table 2 summarises anonymised details of the participants in the interviews.

Intercultural mediators (IM)	Operators (O)	Migrants (M)
IM1: Tunisian female. Age: 30-40. Role: IM at CARA Mineo. Languages: AR, FR, EN. IT	O1. Age: 40-50 Role: Paramedic for Frontex[6]	M1: Nigerian female. Age: 20-30 Place: CARA Mineo, interview in English
IM2: White Italian female. Age: 30-40 Role: IM for ASR (*Regional Health Service*) province of Syracuse. Languages: AR,FR, EN, IT	O2. Age:30-40 Role: Medic and Red Cross volunteer working inside CARA Mineo	M2: Moroccan male. Age: 40-50 Place: CARA Mineo, interview in Arabic
IM3: White Italian female. Age: 40-50 Role- self-employed IM. Languages: FR, EN, IT	O3. Age:30-40 Red Cross Volunteer	M3: Malian male. Age: 20-30, *three years* in CARA Mineo, interview in Italian
IM4: Eritrean male. Age: 30-40 Eritrean male Role: self-employed IM and interpreter working at CAS, with the police and judiciary in the province of Ragusa. Languages: IT, EN (very little) Tigrigna	O4. Role: Prison Psychologist Age:40-50	M4: Gambian male Age: 30-40 Place: CAS Filotea, interview in English
IM5: Eritrean male. Age: 30-40 Role: IM, employed by UNHCR. Languages: IT, EN, FR, and Tigrigna [permanent resident with refugee background]		M5: Senegalese male. Age: 30-40 Place: CAS Filotea, interview in Italian
IM6: Italian female Age: 30-40 Role: IM at CARA Mineo Languages FR, EN, IT,		

Table 2. Informants for the study

4. Methods and Methodological caveats

On the very issue of trust, undoubtedly the biggest obstacle in carrying out research of this type is obtaining the necessary collaboration from the institutions. The sample does not include social actors from the law enforcement agencies.

Despite concerted efforts to include opinions from institutional actors (coast guard, police, carabinieri, or members of the judiciary registering the migrants), I was unable to secure authorisation so that those participants were backed by their institutions.Individual operators working in these sectors whom I contacted were willing to speak on an informal and anonymous basis but were reluctant to make their participation official; the stumbling block was often signing the consent form. For the purposes of the study institutional collaboration is essential. More time would therefore be needed to gain the trust of the said institutions. On the other hand, as is discussed in what follows, a significant sample of those working across the medical field has shed valuable insight on multilingual interaction and issues of trust in the interpreting triad in which they are involved.

4.1 Language difficulties

The third category of participants, the migrants themselves were quite willing to share their experiences. In transcribing the interviewees' narratives, however, one obvious drawback became apparent: the intercultural and linguistic difficulties that have to be overcome in order for comprehension and understanding to take place. I had assumed before embarking on the interviews that most of the guests at Cara Mineo and at the CAS would be willing to do the interview in English, which for many of them would be a second language. Only a couple whose second language is French preferred to do the interview in Italian, for example, M3, who had been resident at the CARA for three years. I found Pidgin English as spoken by Nigerians challenging in terms of comprehension; and on occasions I had difficulty understanding what the interviewees were saying. This consideration was also brought to the fore by two young intercultural mediators I subsequently spoke to, one of whom suggested that on a degree programme for intercultural mediation more attention should be placed on world Englishes rather than British English. Cultural assumptions were, however, on both sides. Some of the guests were surprised that in Italy people do not speak English; the Nigerians and Gambians interviewed commented that Italians, who are "white and European", do not know English. For them, the assumption was that in Europe everyone should know English. Some guests did not know where

they disembarked in Sicily. All of them arrived with rescue ships but there are several ports: Augusta, Pozzallo, Messina, Catania, Agrigento, and Palermo. All of them were transferred by bus to CARA di Mineo, which is in the middle of nowhere, a non-place. Geographically, these people have no idea where they are, nor do they have contact with the indigenous population. After six months of being on Italian soil, M1 does not speak nor understand Italian and says that it is pointless to go to Catania on the Mineo bus (which visits the city once a week) in order to go shopping, as her language of communication is English and many Italians she encounters do not speak English.

The CAS visited hosts 75 residents, all male. It has six Italian cultural mediators who work in shifts round the clock, covering English, French and Arabic. Non-Italian intercultural mediators are called upon as and when needed to cover some African dialects such as Tigrigna and Wolof – this information was provided by the accompanying officers who acted as the official source of information during the interviews. The interviewees themselves claimed it was actually very difficult to find a mediator when needed, especially for meetings with lawyers and asylum hearings. For day to day requirements broken English would suffice on both sides.

5. The question of trust and advocacy in mediating multilingual crisis situations: moving towards source or target culture?

In situations of emergency, Wray (2006: 45) affirms that “trust is essential to effective communication”. More specifically, when lives are at stake “trust plays a vital role in establishing the conditions for effective coordination among otherwise separate organisations in the humanitarian relief environment” (Stephenson Jr. 2005: 343). The issue of trust, then, is essential to communication and collaboration under crisis conditions; even more so when communications take place in multilingual contexts. Within the discipline of translation studies the sociological turn has redefined translators and interpreters as social agents that may (or may not) exert power and influence in situations of conflict, injustice, power inequality, and advocacy (Olohan and Davitti 2015: 393).

From this perspective, along with issues of ethics and neutrality, trust becomes a crucial factor to all translational acts (Chesterman 1997: 180–83; Pym 2004), particularly in interpreting and mediation (Angelelli 2004: 22, 2016: 14). Political economist Francis Fukuyama (1995: 268) has defined the concept of trust as "the expectation that arises within a community of regular, honest and co-operative behaviour based on commonly shared norms". The rather slippery yet fundamental notion of trust presents a challenge to researchers because "it is bound up conceptually with notions of confidence, leaps of faith, familiarity, dependence, cooperation, commitment, expectations and risk" (Olohan and Davitti 2015: 391). Yet for interpreting and intercultural mediation it is extremely significant: Angelelli (2004: 50) identifies "establishing trust between the parties" as one of the five cardinal tasks of the interpreter, along with alignment with the parties, communicating affect as well as message, explaining cultural gaps/interpreting culture as well as language, and finally establishing communication rules during the conversation. In a translation network context Koskinen (2007: 677-678) observes that in order to build trust, "perspectives are addressed, knowledge is shared, and information is clear, accountable and legitimate as far as all parties are concerned". In an ideal world that may well be the case; however, this level of trust would also entail a symmetrical power balance that is rarely achieved in an interpreting triad where, for example, legal recognition of refugee status is the object of the communicative act. Asymmetrically weighted against the power of institutional representatives like the police, jurists, or even medics, the mediator, who could also be of immigrant origin, attempts to reconcile her/his past with the situation at hand, while the asylum seeker seeks to curry favour with both. The interpreter's, or in this case, the mediator's "zone of uncertainty" (Inghilleri 2005; see also Merlini 2009, 2015), relates to the dichotomy between the need to "define a role for themselves that corresponds to 'who they are' rather than to an already established notion of 'who they must be'" (Inghilleri 2005: 52). This is reflected in the discussion presented in section 6. Merlini (2015) sustains that effective communication in medical interpreting depends on the interpreter's ability to "cue read" from the context rather than merely transfer the text as spoken. According to the perceptions of the intercultural mediators interviewed here, this would certainly fall within their remit. It is beyond the scope of this paper to examine the professional

qualifications and experience required to become an intercultural mediator (see Katan 2015; Spinzi 2015; Spinzi and Rudvik 2014. See also Filmer forthcoming). For our purposes here, however, it is appropriate to mention that in Italy there is no national legislation regarding the minimum requirements, abilities or skills that would identify the professional figure of the intercultural mediator. Regional governments are responsible for laying down definitions and guidelines. They are also in charge of designing training courses that are specifically connected to their own local needs and requirements within a specific socio-geographic context. Although hard-pressed to deal with migrant arrivals, the Sicilian regional government has only recently published (2018) its definition of the intercultural mediator and a set of ambitious competencies pertaining to the role in line with the national "repertorio delle qualificazioni" [directory of job profiles]. Training programmes provided by regionally authorised bodies are, however, "non-regulated". Furthermore, although the competencies listed are many, there are no guidelines as to how such a course should be structured in order to acquire the necessary skills and knowledge requirements outlined in the job description[12].

Due to Sicily's strategic geographical position, its coastline has been the most frequent access route for migrants crossing the Mediterranean Sea. In 2016, at the height of the so-called "Migrant Crisis", the existing linguistic, cultural and interpreting services had already proved inadequate and were stretched beyond their limit despite the 'emergency' measures that were implemented (Filmer and Federici 2018). Applications for refugee status and asylum, rescue missions at sea or on arrival at Sicilian ports, and the soon to be dismantled second reception system (SPRAR system of protection for asylum seekers and refugees) are some of the contexts that are linguistically negotiated by the "hybrid multifunctional figure" of the [inter]cultural mediators (Merlini 2015: 31), "who are *entrusted* by policy-makers with the task of bridging communication between immigrants and public service providers" (*ibid.* my emphasis). Intercultural mediators working in Sicilian ports and reception centres are among the first-line responders to the

[12] https://repertoriodellequalificazioni.siciliafse1420.it/Mediatore+Interculturale/aWRwcm9maWxvPTM1MQ==

arrival of vessels (of “hope”, “fortune”, “death” in the journalistic collocations) to Italy. In the next section, we will focus on the perspective of medics regarding intercultural mediators.

6. Trust in doctors – views from the operators

Interviews were carried out with official operators in diverse fields in order to understand their experience of health-related communication and the interpreting triad in the context of the humanitarian migratory crisis: an NGO paramedic, a prison psychologist, and a volunteer medical doctor are a sample of the many professionals that migrants encounter before and soon after disembarking. Moving from fundamental and immediate needs on board the rescue vessels from the paramedics (O1), to medical support on arrival and in first reception centres (O2; O3), and medium-term support to mental health (O4), the sample provides evidence of the essential role of trust in this context. Clearly, the central issues pertaining to emergency communication are the ways in which doctors and medical teams cope with multilingual exchanges; how the migrants who encounter medics relay their needs; and, crucially, what role the mediators themselves play in the interactions between the parties. The first contact between rescue teams and migrants is on board the rescue ships, before disembarkation, should medical assistance be necessary. When asked if s/he had ever had difficulty communicating in an emergency at sea, informant O1, who is a paramedic for the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, Frontex, responded: “Yes, yes, yes. The very nature of what we do is difficult. But from an emergency point of view it is no more difficult for me than working in West London”. What O1 means is that in a multicultural city like London the language differences that need to be bridged in a hospital environment are neither different from nor more complex than those encountered in an ostensibly perilous situation such as a ship bringing migrants to the coast of Sicily. O1 maintains that in a real medical emergency, language mediation is relatively unimportant. “[The patients] put a natural amount of trust in you because you're a doctor”. O1 goes on to say that “There's a sort of unspoken agreement that you don't need a language immediately to mitigate the medical problems; they are mitigated by my actions

and my gestures that explain what I am doing". S/he then admits, however, that s/he takes the help of the friends and family of the patient for granted in order "to explain to them in their language – 'no it's ok, let them do it'". Therefore, there is a certain amount of reliance on the unofficial, natural interpreting going on around the emergency that would aid the medic in her/his work. On reflexion O1 admits that linguistic mediation would make such situations easier to deal with but "it's not necessary to get the job done". S/he demonstrates reluctance to admit that a mediator would be helpful. S/he does not mention the presence of either translators or interpreters on board the Frontex ships, so from the point of view of the triangle of trust, according to the paramedic it is more a dialogic relationship between the medic and the migrant/patient without any official intercultural mediator. Parallel to the situational contexts described by O1, IM5 reported difficulties in mediating on rescue vessels that arrive at the port due to a lack of trust, or perhaps a lack of professional esteem for the mediator by the medics: "I have been thrown off the ship loads of times. They won't let me on the ship, and I was supposed to work with the doctor – it's protocol but s/he refuses […] s/he thinks s/he understands the whole world and s/he can't even speak English". Here reference is made to a protocol, which was negated by O1. But the prevalence of a discourse on continuous "emergency" empowers operators to render intercultural mediators subservient in role, illustrating the asymmetrical power relations between mediators and medics. Angelelli notes that "[e]very communicative event involves power differentials. Every cross-linguistic/cultural communicative event includes (or *should* include) an interpreter. Interpreters play a significant role in brokering these power differentials, constantly striving for excellence" (2004: 98-99).

A Red Cross volunteer and a physician by profession, O2 does voluntary work at the Red Cross walk-in surgery within CARA Mineo. S/he supports the view expressed by O1 that there is an automatic trust in medical professionals, but s/he suggests this trust goes beyond medical advice and treatment. S/he notes that often the guests come to him/her to ask for help with a variety of issues that are not strictly related to health. Having worked at the centre for five years, the volunteer affirms that guests seek him/her out when they need language and mediation support instead of the official mediators. S/he has a B1 competence in

English, certified with a Cambridge ESOL certificate. S/he recounts that s/he has even been called upon to mediate between other operators at the centre “who perhaps don’t understand the culture of the guests”, and the guests themselves. When asked why people come to him/her rather than to one of the official cultural mediators s/he says “because they trust me". This might lead one to suspect that the guests have little faith in the mediation services provided, or like M1, are oblivious to their existence. When asked if during her six month stay at CARA Mineo she had ever asked for the assistance of a cultural mediator (one of whom was sitting in the interview room with us at the time), M1 looked blank and repeated “Cultural Mediators? What?” When the question was repeated using the word “translators”, M1 replied “No, I speak English”. To my question: “So does everyone speak English here?” M1 replied: “No. The social workers don't but if I need a doctor I go to the Red Cross, they all speak in English. Yes, yes they all speak in English. I don’t understand Italian”. This comment would appear to confirm O2’s assertion that the professional status of a doctor confers trust, beyond linguistic or cultural borders. S/he is entrusted with the role of mediator by the guests and asked to intervene in situations of verbal conflict mediating across linguistic and cultural barriers.

O4, the prison psychologist seems to be the only medical professional to whom I spoke that sees the triangle of trust as mutually constructed between the operator, the refugee and the mediator. S/he sees it as a fundamental premise for his/her work. O4 observes that although English is a lingua franca, s/he speaks very little and prison guards even less (“they hardly speak Italian, let alone English”). S/he affirms that although the non-European inmates “have the legal right to a mediator who speaks their own language”, this is very often overlooked, and in relation to appointments “non-European immigrants are absolutely the last in the queue”. A psychologist is likely through the course of his/her work to spend more time in dialogue with his/her patients. For this reason, the relationship of trust that can be established with a certain intercultural mediator is likely to be a strong bond if continued over time. O4 considers this a fundamental issue in establishing a productive environment in which to work and ultimately benefit the patient.

7. Views from the migrants

Interviews selected for this sample study include three guests at CARA Mineo and two at the CAS. The data show that interlingual communication is often "crowd-sourced" and organised unofficially amongst themselves; the presence, role, and even the title "intercultural mediator" seemed unknown to many of the guests interviewed. Instead the term "translator" is more easily understood. Conditions for data collection at CARA Mineo were controlled by the presence of mediators during the interview process, which means some of the data is likely to be self-censored by the interviewees. Nevertheless, regarding self-sufficiency, M1 provides insight into the collaboration that takes place within the CARA with regards to language, translation and mediation: "Since I arrived here, I have been helping people who do not know Italian. […] I help refugees here and sometimes I help at other places. They ask me to translate sometimes. I know Arabic, Italian, and French." This attitude draws on an unsatisfactory personal experience with an intercultural mediator who misrepresented her in court during his asylum application: "Yes, I stopped the translator many times during the session in court and corrected him by explaining to him what I meant exactly. The translator [sic] should be from the same country and there should be understanding between the person and the translator," a position reminiscent of the recurring discussion among the IM interviewees regarding building bridges of trust. M5, on the other hand, had little faith in the Italian language competences of an intercultural mediator who shared his native language, Wolof during his asylum application. M5 explains, "I asked him if he could translate my words. He said 'yes, it's perfect!' But still I don't trust. No. Because you stay here in Italy for three or four years… you say you can speak perfectly this language, but you are not born here. It's not possible. What I say to you in Wolof you cannot say all in Italian".

Levels of trust in the institutions who process asylum applications is, however, generally very low. As the waiting time is long and language support may come after initial processing, M4 who has been at CARA Mineo for three years, well beyond the stipulated maximum stay of six months**,** now speaks Italian. In his interview, he states "I have never needed a mediator. I don't go around asking for help. I try to solve the problem by myself. I don't want to bother anyone", a

position of self-sufficiency that also implies a lack of trust in institutional solutions to language barriers.

8. Identity and Trust – ethnicity and the role of the intercultural mediator

One of the liveliest points of discussion with the mediators relates to the opposition interpreter/mediator[13] and their purportedly different functions. Three of the six interviewees said that professionally they performed both roles but in different settings. Yet, all maintained that the two figures require completely different approaches and competences. IM6, for example, highlights the lack of understanding of what mediating actually entails among other operators: “colleagues should be made more aware of our role [as mediators] and that we are not just simple interpreters…they tell us ‘you have to tell him this, this, and this’. But it doesn't work like that. I'm not just a simple translator". Working for the CARA and CAS, Italian IM2 accumulated experience during the migrant arrivals in 2009-2014, which were constellated by tragic events; she observes differences in the roles: “Often there is a huge difference in knowledge between the two parties, especially when the institution is talking to the migrant who does not know the Italian state, the Italian laws, the Italian rules, the Italian culture”, in these situations she emphasises that interpreting the words without mediating the content “is plain useless”. Non-Italian IM4 sees “the mediator [as] a very important figure […] because it doesn’t just mean speaking different languages. You also have to be a mediator of people. Because to be a mediator you have to be a listener". Both these skills are designated as subject-specific in the proposed survey of the profession of cultural mediator (Melandri *et al.* 2014: 28). IM4 has experience working as an interpreter for the police as well as mediator within the CAS. In spite of the possible conflicts of loyalty and the different approaches

[13] The dichotomy between the roles of mediator and interpreter has instigated lively debate within academia, which is still ongoing (see Katan, for example, 2015: 365-391). It is too vast a topic to be broached in any depth in this contribution, however, briefly it can be noted that intercultural mediators interviewed for this study tended to perceive the “interpreter“ as a conduit performing literal simultaneous interpreting with minimal intervention on a cultural or empathic level, akin to the work of a conference interpreter. See Hale and Liddicoat 2015; Martín and Phelan 2010; Zorzi, 2007 on the differences and similarities of the two figures.

required, he feels he is able to carry out both tasks but with a written translation he was absolutely categorical: “A written text? I don’t want the responsibility. If I make a mistake I could ruin someone’s life”. Nevertheless, he describes a process whereby he simultaneously interprets intercepted phone conversations from Arabic to Italian while a police officer writes down what he says — a practice whose inaccuracies and unreliable construal are more akin to Chinese Whispers than interpreting.

The interviews also revealed tensions regarding the juxtaposition between “native speaker” mediators (meaning those whose mother tongue is not Italian and have a migratory background) and mediators who are native speakers of Italian. It would appear that ethnicity plays a significant role in the dynamics of trust. In response to the question “Do migrants prefer white Italians or co-nationals to mediate for them?”, Italian IM6 replies “Yes, many guests may prefer to have their co-nationals because they think that a person of their same culture will defend them, be less impartial”. This perception of the co-national, or at least non-Italian, mediator could also give rise to disappointment on the part of the migrant in asylum cases and certainly present an existential dilemma for the mediator. As Merlini (2009:59) explains: “mediators are bound to feel torn between rivalling needs: empathy for their fellow people; allegiance to the institution employing them; compliance with the neutrality principle of professional ethics”. On the other hand, IM6 affirms that it is equally possible that the request on the part of the guest could be for a European mediator: “Sometimes for the psychological sessions the guests ask for an Italian". This might be due to a sense of shame or embarrassment in front of someone of their own culture when discussing intimate psychological issues (see Merlini *ibid.*). Italian IM2 looks at the longer-term implications on integration if the preference is for a co-national: “A mediator from the same ethnic background can be a comfort, a sort of refuge, you see your co-national and you feel safe but in my opinion this is a doubled-edged sword because this way leads to isolation and ghettoization”. On the other hand, IM3 who has a migrant background and is a mediator for the UNHCR, sees his ethnic origin as a distinct advantage in his work: “Sometimes I take full advantage of this fact to win over their trust. Sometimes I tell them about my personal experience as a migrant to say ‘I am just like you’. In that moment you have to use every

instrument available to you". Here then, the lines might blur between empathy and advocacy producing what Inghilleri (2005) has termed "zone of uncertainty". Italian Red Cross Volunteer O3 has often assisted at the disembarkation procedures at the ports. S/he comments on the power that mediators have to determine the lives of the people for whom they are mediating.

> They [native speaker mediators] should tend more towards mediating regardless of their nationality… I ask myself also if some mediators really have the ability to mediate. The figure of the mediator is one that can decide your fate so they must be chosen with extreme care.

Pressed to say if s/he thought the mediators where too biased s/he declined to respond but said "there are some very ambiguous situations with mediators".

9. Identity and trust – gender trouble

Beyond ethnicity the equally thorny issues of gender and respect are significant components in the dynamics of trust-building. IM1, who is Moroccan and speaks Arabic, in response to the question: "Is it difficult to be a woman and do your job?" brusquely asserts "No. I am recognised and respected here". On the contrary, Italian IM6 explains that when conflict occurs between the male guests she attempts to mediate to calm them down. She feels however that her gender is a disadvantage due to the "lack of respect because I am a woman". She explains their behaviour thus:

> Everything is relative and in their culture, for many of them it's normal to think of women as having a secondary role…I didn't take it personally because I put myself in their shoes…if it had happened outside of these confines my reaction would have been different. Here I have a role as mediator and I cannot overstep the mark.

IM6's reasoning can be viewed from two perspectives: on the one hand, she confirms what Merlini (2015) refers to as the "Empathy Zone". By saying she puts herself in their shoes, i.e. by trying to identify with their culture, she accepts that she is treated with less respect and is therefore mistrusted because she is a woman. On the other hand, for the IM whose task is to prepare guests for integration in the host country we should also consider as part of the mediator's

remit to point out the differences indicating the cultural norms in the receiving context. If we acknowledge that in Italy, at least from a legal point of view, women and men are treated as equals it is also the task of the mediator to explain that outside of the compound, sexist attitudes would not be tolerated and, if evidenced in a migrant, may even be an excuse to further denigrate him. If the mediator's role is precisely that of bridging cultures, then explaining to male guests that women do not (or at least should not) play a secondary role in European societies is just as important as attempting to explain bureaucratic procedures and long waits for their court cases to be heard. IM3 also asserts that

> As a woman in certain contexts you are not recognized. What you say is not considered reliable…when you are talking to the big groups, for instance, or else, maybe when you are talking about health. In the medical context, you have problems with certain things that are left unsaid because they get embarrassed because you are a woman.

What IM3 refers to is mediating as a woman for a male patient. She confirms on the other hand that this can be an asset in the medical context when mediating for female patients. She points out however that even in a European context gender plays a role in medical care preferences. On the positive side, as a woman over 40, she feels her age is also an advantage. Bearing in mind that most migrants are young men, she says:

> The male migrants take you as a mother, and women take you as a sister so this is good because there is some sort of family relationship, family recognition because especially African countries often have a much wider idea of what a family is. It is not just blood.

Therefore, trust between mediator and migrant within the interpreting triad seems to be attained where bonds are created that go beyond the functional. However, having achieved that level of trust between these two parties might create an imbalance with the third party, the medic or institutional representative, who feels excluded from this relationship thus creating tensions. It would seem that the old adage “three’s a crowd” may be applied to mediating situations fraught with emotional intensity such as during the ongoing migratory phenomena in which human ties are inevitably formed.

10. Conclusions: The intercultural mediator must be a figure of trust

Intercultural mediators have been described as “a new breed of linguists” (Amato and Garwood 2011) whose working environment and scope of responsibility are still very much open to discussion. The multi-faceted concept of trust with all its shades of meaning and ethical and practical implications within the interpreting-mediating triad is central to any definition of the role of the intercultural mediator. While the humanitarian crisis is still unfolding in the Mediterranean, in the Italian context the “demand” for “emergency” mediation on rescue ships, at Italian ports, and for language and cultural assistance during asylum applications is on the decline due to a drop in the number of migrants arriving in Italy[14]. Many of those migrants who manage to leave Libya are now heading for Spain instead. In a longer view, while the immediate geographical location may have shifted, the issues and dilemmas relating to language policies that support multilingual communication in migration to Europe remain the same. From immediate humanitarian needs to complex legal issues, the intercultural mediator should be a crucial figure in trying to explain what happens at institutional and legal levels so that the asylum seeker or refugee is clearly informed on what is taking place. This figure should surely also represent the human face of cross-cultural understanding. In this scenario, the data presented here appears to demonstrate that current praxes reflect the impossibility of neutrality in intercultural mediation while confirming the dangers of any implicit or explicit forms of advocacy in favour of one or other sides of the “interpreting triangle”. Intercultural mediators in Italy are not trained to become “invisible” interpreters but are used to practicing interventionalism (Merlini 2009: 78), which may encourage trust-building on the part of the migrant but arouse suspicion of non-neutrality from an institutional perspective. The mediator must walk a tight-rope. In an ideal world, the highly charged multilingual situations that arise from immigration might benefit from a collaborative approach with two mediators with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds: an “interpreting square” rather than a triangle. This might balance out the “trust” conundrum and alleviate fears of undue advocacy. This, of course,

[14] https://frontex.europa.eu/media-centre/news-release/number-of-irregular-crossings-at-europe-s-borders-at-lowest-level-in-5-years-ZfkoRu

would be in an ideal world. As the political climate in Italy stands, intercultural understanding at any level, be it first reception or long-term integration, are not on the agenda of the governing powers. In fact, current immigration policy is likely to bring even more instability to the 'interpreter's habitus' (Inghilleri 2005) within the already uncertain and fluid sphere of cultural mediation.

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