

# Cultural differences in interpreter-mediated medical encounters in complex humanitarian settings

**Maura Radicioni**

*University of Geneva*

Interpreters and mediators working in complex humanitarian settings are faced with new challenges, both linguistic and non-linguistic. As part of ongoing research, the presentation reports on cultural differences in interpreting as major variables in interpreter-mediated medical encounters in complex humanitarian scenarios. The author addresses the importance of cultural issues and the need to focus on interculturality in humanitarian interpreting, based on the assumption that differences in culture can be a serious barrier to effective humanitarian communication. In the presentation, mediation is not considered simply as the transfer of linguistic features, but rather “as resolution of (intercultural) conflicts, i.e. as the facilitation of cross-cultural understanding and communication beyond language demarcation” (Baraldi 2014). In this respect, the role of mediators should also encompass that of cultural gatekeepers.

This contribution is part of a qualitative study in the form of ethnographic observation of the interpreter-mediated medical encounters taking place at the Castel Volturno clinic of the Italian NGO *Emergency ONG Onlus*, which provides medical assistance to both Italians and migrants in a complex humanitarian setting. Most of the patients arriving at the clinic are foreigners with a migration background. They have fled from war-torn countries in Africa and are now employed in low-paid jobs in agriculture or as sex-workers. The presentation does not yet show the results of the ethnography, which is currently being prepared and will be carried out at some later stage. Instead, it focuses on interculturality and the importance of a shared cultural background between mediators and their clients, with this being an issue frequently referred to during the contacts held so far with the mediators of the clinic. Early e-mails and telephone conversations were exchanged with the mediators at Castel Volturno at the beginning of the research project. These were then followed by questionnaires with semi-structured interviews administered to the mediators. A preliminary visit to the facility was paid in the summer of 2019, with initial observations of the setting where Emergency cultural mediators operate and with communications with them on aspects, including their tasks, perceived an expected role, main difficulties encountered, positionality and ethical issues.

Though aware of the limitation of the study, i.e. the fact that the results shown indicate a preliminary trend that awaits to be confirmed by the future ethnographic analysis on the field, the importance of a interculturality appears to be a major factor facilitating mediators' working activity. Cultural mediation is perceived as more effective, and interpreters coming from the source culture of the clients are more trusted and recognized, due to a shared cultural background between them and their clients, their belonging to the clients' community and their deep understanding of clients' cultural beliefs and ideology. Increased focus on the shared culture between interpreters/mediators and their clients can therefore help adequately deal with existing cultural differences and ultimately contribute to enact a so-called “cultural compromise” between migrant patients and health professionals with the goal to facilitate prevention, health promotion and education, and treatment.

**Keywords:** complex humanitarian settings, humanitarian interpreting, cultural differences in medical interpreting, Emergency ONG Onlus.

## **References**

- Angelelli, C. V. (2004). *Medical Interpreting and Cross-Cultural Communication*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Baraldi, C. (2014). An interactional perspective on interpreting as mediation. *Lingue Culture Mediazioni*. 1(1-2), 17-36.
- Delgado Luchner, C. & Kherbiche, L. (2018). Without fear or favour? The positionality of ICRC and UNHCR interpreters in the humanitarian field. *Target*, 30(3), 408-429.
- Pöchhacker, F. (2008). Interpreting as Mediation. In *Crossing Borders in Community Interpreting. Definitions and Dilemmas*. Valero- Garces. C. & Martin, A. (Eds.) 9-26. Amsterdam - Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- Quaranta, I. & Ricca, M. (2012). *Malati fuori Luogo. Medicina Interculturale*. Milano: Raffaello Cortina Editore.