The Role of Non-Professional Translators and Interpreters in Emergency Migratory Settings: A Southern Translocal Perspective

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Abstract

Migration involves the intense circulation of peoples, goods and cultures as well as, less explicitly, hierarchical and hegemonic power relations between territories and their inhabitants. Languages, and the borders they establish, are essential to such movements and relations. But no language is innocent or neutral, because it reflects and structures our ideology and worldviews.

This is particularly easy to observe when taking into consideration the practice of language mediation across the Mediterranean routes, where migration flows and transnational interests are leading to new models of contacts between people with different linguistic and cultural heritages thus problematising our traditional understanding of language as a social projection of territorial unity held together by shared behavioural norms, beliefs and values. More specifically, the main theoretical goal here is to challenge the boundaries of translation and interpreting theory and practice and move beyond the traditional concepts and forms of professional practices, ethics, and language ideologies. Against this background, this paper reports on a research project that involved conducting interviews with several volunteer interpreters, translators and language mediators who have worked with newly-arrived migrants in Southern Italy, and attempts to explore the intersections between the language mediator's role and agency, local practices, and politics and ethics of hospitality. To this end, interview questions addressed a range of issues concerning trust, empathy, solidarity, hospitality, conflict, denial, testimony, and communitarian objectivity that simultaneously focused on how the politics and ethics of hospitality is contingent upon local practices and how the language mediator acts in vulnerable situations (e.g., ferries, camps, conflict zones, reception and detention centres).

Keywords