



Interpreted communication with children in Public-Sector Services

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Abstract: Many areas of the public sector, including, for example, healthcare and social services, are experiencing a growing need for interpreters in order to enable or facilitate communication. Although public service interpreters interpret mainly between adults, they are also sometimes called upon to interpret for children. This article argues that shifting from a monolingual to a multilingual perspective may assist public service professionals when planning and conducting meetings with children from ethnic minority backgrounds. In addition, such a perspective may improve our theoretical understanding of interpreter-mediated communication. The proposed adoption of a multilingual perspective is based on research into multilingualism, and on a review of the literature concerning interpreter-mediated communication with children.

Key words: interpreting for children, interpreter user, multilingual children, child care, ethnic minorities, oral translation

1. Introduction

In Norway, the need for public service interpreting has increased considerably over the past 40 years. Most public service interpreters interpret mainly between adults; interpreting for children is nevertheless an important field. Interpreted communicative events involving children may occur in many situations in the public sector, such as in the course of police, child-protection, asylum or social-welfare proceedings. Accordingly, it is important that public sector professionals receive training in the management of such events. In this article I argue that interpreters are needed not only by ethnic minority children who speak the majority language either poorly or not at all, but also, and perhaps counter-intuitively, by a broader group of ethnic minority children and their families.

Interpreting for children is a virtually unexplored field within public service interpreting (Gotaas, 2007; Hitching & Nilsen, 2010; Nilsen, 2013; Schoor, 2013). We know nothing about the level of demand for interpreters to work with children in the public sector; how frequently such communicative events occur; the persons doing the interpreting; or what actually happens during these meetings. Against the background of this lack of knowledge, we initiated a research project which explores interpreting for children through the application of various theoretical perspectives and methodologies to a range of data. The project has three areas of focus: 1) young children's use of interpreters and the communicative means by which young children participate in interpreter-mediated interaction; 2) potential strategies for interpreting for

young children; and 3) a survey of already existing knowledge on interpreting for children. The latter survey is the topic of this article.

Below I present a review of research that may contribute to our understanding of interpreter-mediated communication with children. In addition to focusing on studies within the field of interpreting, with a specific focus on interpreting for children, the article includes a survey of relevant findings from research into multilingualism. This survey seeks to supplement those of Ashok Chand (2005), Nora Gotaas (2007) and Dominique van Schoor (2013) with a particular focus on research and knowledge from Norway. The article also aims to enhance the professional expertise of professionals working with ethnic minority children in many different areas of the public sector. The first part of the article is divided into three sections:

- The need for public service interpreting;
- Interpreting competence in public sector services;
- Interpreter-mediated communication with children.

In focusing on these issues, I will explore knowledge about the factors that a public sector professional may need to take into account when planning and conducting meetings with ethnic minority children. In the second part of the article, I will examine the potential benefits of shifting from a monolingual to a multilingual perspective.

2. The need for public service interpreting

In Norway, the need for public service interpreting has increased considerably over the past 40 years, and there is now a need for interpreting in many different languages. In fact, the Norwegian Directorate of Integration and Diversity has registered a demand for interpreting in more than 100 languages (IMDI, 2007). This increasing demand brings with it a growing necessity to train public sector professionals in how to communicate through an interpreter. Many studies have found that communication through an interpreter is a skill that must be learned, as it differs significantly from other types of communication (Felberg Radanovic, 2013a, 2013b).

A report on children's services from the Norwegian Ministry of Children, Equality and Social Inclusion emphasises that the interpreter is an important intermediary, and that interpreter-mediated communication must be quality-assured and improved (Barne-og likestillingsdepartementet, 2012). In support of this finding the report cites children's right to information, their right to be heard, and their right to express their views on matters that concern and affect them.

A Norwegian report based on an analysis of legal aspects of child protection and custody proceedings claims that communication problems and misunderstandings arise in many cases. The report suggests that one reason may be that information has been communicated without the use of an interpreter (Hofman, 2010, p. 179). The same report also refers to a Danish study which found an interpreter had been used to communicate with the child in only one of the 30 child protection cases investigated. This was despite the fact that none of the children in question spoke Danish as their first language. There is also general agreement among both interpreters and their professional users that there is insufficient knowledge about interpreting for children (Hitching & Nilsen, 2010).

3. Interpreting competence in public sector services

In Norway, unqualified interpreters represent a serious obstacle to communication in the public sector, giving rise to challenges both for the professionals and their clients (see for example IMDI, 2007; Nilsen, 1995, 2000, 2005, 2011a). A recent report on interpreting at the university hospitals in Oslo (Linnestad & Buzungu, 2012) demonstrated that only approximately 10% of interpreting assignments were performed by a person with interpreting competence. In the light of this report, it is important for users of interpreting services to verify that the interpreter has the necessary expertise for the assignment, even when the interpreter has been provided by a supposedly reputable agency.

The main reason why so many interpreters without the necessary competence are called on to interpret in Norway is that the job title of “interpreter” is not protected by law (Johnsen, 2015). An exception is the title “state-authorized interpreter”, but in practice any bilingual person may style themselves as an interpreter and an agency may send anyone who is bilingual in the relevant languages to an assignment in the public sector. “Bilingual helper” (Gentile, Ozolins, & Vasilakakos, 1996) is a much-used term in this context. This term is used to refer to a person with bilingual skills who assists in communication between parties who do not understand each other’s language. A bilingual helper who lacks the necessary skills may distort the parties’ communication with potentially serious consequences. For example, a party may be deprived of his or her legal rights, as demonstrated by Nilsen (2000, 2005 and 2011).

A report based on interviews with child-protection professionals in Norway (IMDI, 2008) indicates that many people who work as interpreters do not have the necessary expertise. Almost half the respondents had experienced difficulties in conducting a meeting due to the interpreter’s lack of skills. 14% had experienced the interpreter taking on the role of comforting the child, while 18% had experienced intervention by the interpreter in a case (IMDI, 2008, p. 39). Clearly, levels of expertise vary enormously among interpreters working in public sector services in Norway. At one end of the spectrum there are highly skilled professional interpreters, while at the other there are very many people with very weak language skills in either Norwegian or the foreign language (Nilsen, 2000) and hardly any interpreting skills or techniques.

Several studies have examined issues relating to interpreters’ competence. Deborah A. Hwa-Froelich and Carol Westby (2003) conducted a study to assess different expectations towards the interpreter in various interpreting assignments for Vietnamese families in the U.S. They found that the different expectations towards the interpreter’s role among those involved in the communication events analysed created conflict and frustration. In their discussion of the interpreter’s role and the interpreter’s relationships with the families involved, the authors warn against treating the status of the interpreter differently from that of other professionals, whether in meetings with adults or with children. In Hwa-Froelich and Westby’s study this was important because the interpreter lacked the competence to perform the various roles she was assigned by the interpreting users, and not least because some of her actions disqualified her from acting as their interpreter. For example, the interpreter assisted the children in language assessment tests so that they achieved misleadingly good results. Similar intervention by interpreters is also a widespread issue in Norway (Nilsen, 1995, 2000, 2001).

Carmel Matthias and Noel Zaal (2002) discuss the inability of many interpreters to relate or communicate appropriately when working with child-witnesses in South Africa. In a Swedish study of asylum interviews with minors (Keselman, 2009; Keselman, Cederborg, & Lamb, 2010; Keselman, Cederborg, Lamb, & Dahlström, 2008), the researchers demonstrated how a child’s right to

be heard can be jeopardized by the use of non-professional interpreters during asylum interviews. This occurred when the interpreters put leading questions to the children and also omitted, distorted or sowed doubt about what the children said. Results from our research, however, suggest the opposite, namely that some interpreters take more account of the child than of the adult interpreting user (Nilsen, 2013). Nevertheless, the results of both studies indicate that there is a clear need to improve the competence of both interpreters and the professionals who use their services. The studies also indicate a need for more research within the field.

A status report from Fafo, a Norwegian independent research foundation, on Afghan asylum-seeking minors also includes a small section on interpreting (Øien, 2010, p. 31). When interviewed for research purposes, the minors state a preference for interpreting by telephone; they do not feel that they can speak freely in the presence of another Afghan. This is also a common problem in interpreter-mediated communication with adults. Ethnic minority communities are often small, and many people within the community are acquainted with each other. In addition, as mentioned above, frequent use is made of non-professional interpreters. Both these factors are likely to reduce an interviewee's trust in the interpreter's neutrality and confidentiality.

The Norwegian Directorate of Immigration has long experience in the use of interpreters and over the years has gained much knowledge about this field. The Directorate has its own lists of qualified interpreters, and care is taken in their selection (Utlendingsdirektoratet, 2014). For interviews with children, the Directorate's policy is to use its most experienced and competent interpreters. An evaluation by the Directorate indicates that experience and formal education are not in themselves indicators of success in interpreting for children (Hitching & Nilsen, 2010, p. 41). The main objection expressed by the asylum interviewers was that some interpreters were too dominant. The asylum interviewers also had problems with interpreters whose manner was passive and distanced. Factors such as personality and body language emerged as important. Some children were also reported to be afraid of two of the interpreters. These interpreters were not used again to interpret for children. The asylum interviewers reported that personal qualities and the interpreter's understanding of her own capabilities, character and feelings were the key factors for determining the interpreter's suitability for working with children.

The Directorate's findings suggest that not all interpreters are suitable for assignments involving children. This observation is consistent with the views of Kirsti Jareg and Zarin Pettersen (Jareg & Pettersen, 2006, p. 45), who write that some interpreters are better suited than others to work in what they call sensitive situations, and interviews with children may well come into this category. Jareg and Pettersen have extensive experience in interpreter-mediated communication, the former as a psychologist and the latter as an interpreter, and both believe that an interpreter's personal qualities are as important as his or her formal academic background. Importantly Jareg and Pettersen do not consider that the personal qualities that may render someone suitable or unsuitable for interpreting in sensitive situations are immutable. A person may be made aware of and then cultivate the necessary qualities.

The interviewers in the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration gave the following feedback about the interpreters who worked well in conversations with children: "good interpreters" are confident and knowledgeable, are not dominant, have experience with children, exude confidence, help to promote communication, are neutral, smile slightly (but are not necessarily cheerful), and are accommodating. They are caring and well-intentioned, do not look unsettling, and they help to create a good atmosphere (Hitching & Nilsen, 2010, p. 42). These characteristics are also important, however, in interviews with adults and there is reason to question the notion that some interpreters may function well for adults but not for children.

Factors that inhibit communication with children may also potentially inhibit communication with adults. It may simply be that some problems are more apparent in meetings with children, given that the communicative balance of power is more asymmetric (for a discussion of power and disempowerment in interpreter-mediated communication in public-sector services in Norway, see Nilsen, 2011a).

4. Interpreter-mediated communication with children

In the field of interpreting for children, very few articles or reports exist on how to facilitate interpreter-mediated communication. Such studies are often based on research into children's cognitive development and the use of sign language (for example Rainò, 2012; Schick, 2001) or on personal experience (Bjørnås, 2006; Phoenix Children's Hospital, 2008; Veritas Language Solutions, 2012; Wilson & Powell, 2001). Dominique van Schoor (2013) bases her discussion on general material concerning interviews with child witnesses and victims, and considers her findings from the perspective of interpreting practice. Schoor's discussions are also relevant, however, to other types of public-sector meetings involving child speakers of ethnic minority languages.

Bente Mari Bjørnås (2006), who works as a consultant in Trondheim's municipal interpreting service, states that provided both the interpreter and professional interpreting user follow the basic rules for conversing through an interpreter; there is little distinction between an interpreted meeting with children and a similar meeting with adults. Our research (Nilsen, 2013) supports Bjørnås' views on children's abilities to participate in interpreter-mediated communication. We believe that a child's participation is dependent primarily on his or her understanding and acceptance of the system of turn-taking that is fundamental to consecutive interpretation. Our research indicates that even small children can adapt, on an equal footing with adults, to an interpreter-mediated dialogue. An important condition, however, is that the adult interpreter user knows how to handle such communication, and can act as a role model for the child on how to communicate through an interpreter.

The distinction between interpreter-mediated communication involving children and that involving adults lies rather in the consequences of inadequate and unprofessional interpreting. Children are less able to assert their rights, due to their status as children and their generally less sophisticated communicative skills. As a result, an unprofessional interpreter who does not take the child seriously and interpret properly is likely to reinforce the asymmetry of the relationship. Examples of such problems appear in the Swedish research mentioned above (Keselman, 2009; Keselman et al., 2008, Keselman et al., 2010), which found that the interpreters sometimes cast doubt on children's stories in asylum interviews. In practice, the way to solve this problem is to use state-certified interpreters who have been specially trained in interpreting for children. In Norway, the useful register set up by the Directorate of Diversity and Immigration makes it possible to search for qualified interpreters in different languages (www.tolkeportalen.no), and to investigate an interpreter's formal qualifications and interpreting experience by searching for a particular interpreter's name. Interpreters can also be searched for by region and by gender. It is not possible, however, to view information about particular areas of expertise, such as interpreting for children. Currently, no training is available in this field, so interpreters have to learn solely by practical experience. This is not a desirable situation.

5. Perspectives from studies on multilingualism

In many communication situations involving ethnic minority children in Norway, there is no obvious need to use an interpreter, since many of these children speak and understand Norwegian well. Examples drawn from police interviews (Nilsen, 2000), however, demonstrate that assessing a person's linguistic skills may be a less simple exercise than first thought. Furthermore, complex issues that extend beyond the child's competence in Norwegian need to be considered. Accordingly, there may be a wider need for interpreting for children than one might assume. This is the subject of the following discussion, which is based on relevant research into multilingualism, multilingual competence and multilingual practices. I shall argue that in the public sector services we need to shift from a monolingual to a multilingual perspective when planning and conducting meetings with ethnic minority children.

Research into multilingualism at an individual level has primarily concentrated on how children acquire two or more languages simultaneously; how these languages are stored in the brain; the relationship between the different languages (i.e. the extent to which and the way in which one language may be said to be stronger or more dominant than the other(s) at particular points in time); and how bi- or multilingual people use the languages that they know (Svendsen, 2009). Questions concerning the dominance of one language over the other(s) and the ways in which bi- or multilingual people use the languages that they know are particularly relevant for interpreter-mediated communication with children. These questions are interlinked and need to be considered in the context of different types of classifications of multilingualism, which seem to highlight different features of bilingualism. (For different definitions of multilingualism see, for example, Auer & Wei, 2007; Engen & Kulbrandstad, 2004).

One type of classification of multilingualism takes the origin of multilingualism as a starting point. One such classification is *simultaneous multilingual acquisition*, which covers children who have learned the different languages simultaneously from birth (Engen & Kulbrandstad, 2004). Typically the parents of such a child will have different first languages and each will speak their own first language with the child. Another classification, which also refers to language learning, is *successive multilingual acquisition*. This covers people who learn one or more languages after the first language has been acquired (Engen & Kulbrandstad, 2004). These other languages are normally known as second or foreign languages. Other classifications exist that are based on the usage of language or functions of the languages. These reflect the fact that bi- and multilingual people often use different languages in different situations, with different persons and for different purposes. That is the case for many ethnic minority children in Norway where Norwegian is the primary language choice at school (Aarsæther, 2004; Svendsen, 2004).

Knowledge about different languages' functions is particularly relevant to interpreter-mediated communication, as it may assist in predicting how children may use and exploit their bi- or multilingual competence for different purposes. While the minority language will often be used between parents and children, it is also quite normal for many children to use the majority language (Boyd, Holmen, & Jørgensen, 1994; Lanza & Svendsen, 2007; Svendsen, 2004). This knowledge is relevant for interpreter-mediated communication with children in Norway and elsewhere, because it tells us that an interpreter may be needed even in situations where Norwegian or any other majority language is one of a multilingual child's languages. This is because the child will use different languages in different situations and with different people. A useful concept in this context is that of multilingual competence, or "multicompetence", which is a theoretical approach developed by Cook (1991, 1992, 2007, 2009). This concept relates to the totality of linguistic knowledge in one mind. Its starting

point is the idea that the mind of a second-language user is different from that of a monolingual speaker. Research in this area investigates how the second-language user puts to use knowledge of more than one language and how the different linguistic systems interact and impact on the language user's mind (Wei, 2011, p. 374).

The notion of multicompetence is useful in describing and understanding multilingual practices. By multilingual practices, I mean behaviours that involve the use of different linguistic systems. One of these practices is code-switching, which is considered a distinctive and defining feature of being bilingual or multilingual. Code-switching may be defined as the use of two or more languages or codes in the same conversation, or within the same utterance (Aarsæther, 2004). Code-switching requires knowledge of, and competence in, all the languages involved, plus the involvement of higher-level neural functions, known as executive systems, capable of cross-processing the various languages, as ample research evidence has confirmed (Wei, 2011, p. 374).

Claire Kramsch and Anne Whiteside (2008) have pointed out that social actors in multilingual settings seem to activate a higher level of communicative competence than would be necessary simply to enable them to communicate accurately, effectively and appropriately with one another. Such persons seem to display a particularly acute ability to play with various linguistic codes and with the various spatial and temporal resonances of these codes. Kramsch and Whiteside call this competence "symbolic competence". Symbolic competence is defined as "the ability not only to approximate or appropriate for oneself someone else's language, but to shape the very context in which the language is used" (Kramsch & Whiteside, 2008, p. 664). This characteristic of bi- or multilingual speakers may be worth considering when planning a meeting with a bi- or a multilingual child and his or her family, for example in a child-protection setting, because it implies that other languages in addition to the majority language may be used during the meeting. This may occur, for example, in exchanges between the child and the parents during a visit by the child-protection officer to the child's home. Even where the interaction is mainly in the majority language an interpreter may be required, as the communication may be characterized by code-switching. In cases where the parents have knowledge of the majority language, the professional may find that the parents speak their first language to the child, but that the child speaks the majority language to the parents. As already mentioned, this is a linguistic situation that is fairly common among bi- or multilingual families. In other words, research into multicompetence amongst multilinguals shows that multilingual children and adults use their languages in different situations; their languages are associated with different language domains, and there is not necessarily a dominant language (Svendsen, 2004).

When children use different languages in different situations, they may have different competences in the different languages. A bilingual person is, in other words, not the sum of two monolingual persons. Ethnic minority children tend to use one language at home and another language at school, meaning that many can be classified as functional bilinguals. Topics discussed at home differ from those discussed at school, and along with these different topics come different vocabularies. This may be an important factor when planning a meeting with a multilingual child. Some home visits should perhaps be planned so that the child may choose which language to speak. For example, when a visit concerns a situation at home that has emerged in the majority language, it may be easier for the child to describe the events in the language used at home, rather than in the majority language, which for many multilingual children in Norway and no doubt in many other European countries is associated with kindergarten or school situations. From what we know about multilingualism in children, in Norway the underuse of interpreters in institutional conversations

with such children may be even greater than the report from the Directorate of Integration and Diversity (IMDI, 2008) suggests.

In addition, it is well known that a child's language choice is not necessarily controlled by the language in which the child is being spoken to. Language choice may also depend on other factors. The deciding factor will not necessarily be language skills: other factors may play a role, such as the need for security and/or a desire for distance from persons representing a specific language (Svendsen, 2009, p. 58). A multilingual child may in other words choose not to speak the majority language in a particular situation because he or she wishes to create distance from, or not to relate to, a majority language-speaking person. In such a situation the child may opt for the parent's language, even when the child has greater command of the majority language than of the family's language. In such cases, there may well be a need for an interpreter. Allowing a parent to interpret will not be a satisfactory solution, as the result will probably be inadequate and contain little reliable information. Firstly, most parents lack interpreting skills, which, like other professional skills, must be learned. Secondly, a parent is not in a position of neutrality, so the reliability of the information will also depend on the parent's willingness to convey exactly what the child says. Use of a professional interpreter is necessary to ensure that the conveyed information is reliable.

In institutional meetings with multiple participants who have a first language other than the majority language, it is reasonable to assume that the second language will be used in addition to the majority language. In this situation it is vital for the professional in charge of the meeting to have thought in advance whether he or she needs to understand everything that is said during the meeting. In a situation where a child-protection professional will be observing the interaction between parents and children, an interpreter will probably be essential. It is important to emphasize that an interpreter will be necessary even when both the parents and the child speak the majority language well. This is because the professional will be unable to obtain an accurate picture of the parent-child interaction if the participants are interacting in a language they are not used to speaking when they are together – for example, the child may associate the majority language with day care, while the father may speak the majority language at work.

When planning meetings with ethnic-minority children and their families, the application of, firstly, knowledge about interpreter-mediated communication in general and, secondly, the linguistic practices of multilingual speakers, encourages us to shift from a monolingual to a multilingual perspective. Such a perspective is useful for underlining the importance of taking into account the linguistic competences that exist within these families and how these competences may be used. In particular, this perspective highlights the fact that the need for interpreting services is not restricted to people who have little or no competence in the majority language of a region.

6. Conclusion

In this article I have argued that in public sector services we need to shift from a monolingual to a multilingual perspective when planning and conducting meetings with ethnic minority children and their families. The argument is based on research into interpreting, mostly in Norway, and on the broader research literature on children's multilingual competence and multilingual practices presented in this article. Once we have shifted to a multilingual perspective, it is clear that the planning of a meeting must include the following steps:

1. Seek information about the multilingual competences and multilingual practices of the child and the parents in order to assess whether an interpreter is required;
2. Book a professional interpreter, as opposed to a bilingual helper; and
3. Check that the interpreter has the necessary competence to interpret for children.

This article has also shown that there is a need for more research-based knowledge on interpreting in public service meetings with ethnic minority children. We need more knowledge about the need for interpreting and about multilingual practices taking place in encounters with ethnic minority children and their families in public sector services.

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