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Interpreting for Syrian Refugees in Turkey

An Overview of the Interpreter's Background and Training

Abstract: The arrival of 3.5 million Syrian refugees has put pressure on some public services in Turkey. To mitigate language challenges, interpreters have been called upon to facilitate Syrian refugees' access to these services. However, there has been limited research into the profiles and training needs of those interpreters. This article partly reports on a survey conducted with 27 interpreters. The data reveals that while these interpreters are often educated to university level, they frequently lack specialised training in interpreting. When training is provided, it is typically conducted on-the-job, although Public Service Interpreting courses are gaining traction. Crucially, this contribution advocates for enhanced training, particularly when working with trauma survivors.

Keywords: Public Service Interpreting; Interpreting Training; Syrian Refugees; Turkey

1 Contextualisation

Migration and refugee integration remain at the centre of contemporary political and public discourses. One reason lies in the number of forcibly displaced people across the globe having now reached over 100 million, the highest ever recorded (UNHCR 2023). Being able to communicate in the dominant societal language of the host community is recognised as key within integration frameworks for refugee receiving countries (Ager & Strang 2004, Wolffhardt et al. 2019). However, refugees may not speak the language of the host country and will rely on trained or 'ad-hoc' interpreters to help them overcome linguistic and cultural barriers.

In this context, the authors of this paper launched a research project in January 2023 to investigate interpreting provision for Syrian refugees who have sought refuge in Turkey. This paper reports on two key aspects of the project: the interpreters' demographics and the interpreting training they received. By examining both the interpreters' backgrounds and the training they received, this paper provides an insight into the current interpreting provision on the ground and identifies potential training needs to support interpreters.

2 Contextualising the research

When the Syrian war broke out in 2011, many Syrians initially sought refuge in neighbouring countries. However, poor conditions which included a lack of employment rights and insecure legal status led many of these people to try to reach Europe (Heck & Hess 2017). In the absence of a common European asylum policy, Germany, for instance, announced it would accept Syrian asylum applications even for people who had previously applied for asylum in other European countries. In 2015, one million people sought humanitarian protection in the European Union (EU) (Lehner 2019). In March 2016, to “end the irregular migration from Turkey to the EU” (European Parliament 2016) the EU agreed what is commonly referred to as the ‘EU – Turkey refugee deal’. This joint statement agreed three key points; firstly, that Turkey would try to stop people travelling irregularly from Turkey to the Greek islands. Secondly that anyone who arrived in Greece irregularly from Turkey would be returned to Turkey and thirdly that for each Syrian returned from the Greek islands, the EU would settle another Syrian refugee from Turkey to the EU (European Parliament 2016). In exchange, Turkey received six billion euros to improve humanitarian conditions for refugees in Turkey and Turkish nationals were granted visa free travel to Europe. The EU also agreed to resume Turkey’s EU accession negotiations as part of the deal (Batalla Adam 2017).

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNCHR 2023), and despite the above deal, Turkey currently hosts more refugees than any other country in the world. Figures from the Norwegian Refugee Council (2023) indicate that Turkey has received 4.3 million refugees

since 2011, a figure relative to 5% of Turkey's total population. It is estimated that 3.5 million of these people are Syrians who have sought refuge there since the start of the civil war in Syria in 2011.

As discussed by Lowndess and Polat Karakaya (2022), Turkey had, at first, an open-door policy welcoming Syrians fleeing the civil war. Although Turkey is a signatory of the United Nations 1951 Geneva Convention and the 1967 Protocol, the two key legal documents which define international standards of protection and clarify the rights of refugees, Turkey has upheld the geographical limitation clause of the Convention, meaning it only grants refugee status for people arriving from Europe (Heck & Hess 2017). For refugees who are not Europeans, the process for gaining refugee status must be channelled through the UNHCR (Heck & Hess 2017). As part of the 'open door' policy, Syrians were initially offered 'guest' status, which later became 'temporary protection status'. As a result, Syrians have no pathway to a more secure legal status or longer term right to remain in Turkey (Heck & Hess 2017), but they are provided with access to public services, including courts, health services and education (Lowndess & Polat Karakaya 2022: 390).

According to Eser (2020), Syrian refugees currently live in many different regions of Turkey, notably the provinces of Istanbul, Gaziantep, Hatay, Sanliurfa, Mersin, Izmir and Kilis. Given the significant number of Syrian refugees, the local government has experienced difficulties with implementing national strategies to integrate them. Due to the length of the Syrian war, now in its twelfth year, the nature of support needed has also changed since the 2015/2016 reception crisis. Initially, it was assumed that the refugees would return to Syria when the war ended. The need for urgent short-term protection and humanitarian assistance has now shifted into a need for longer-term social and economic integration which requires appropriate policy, collaboration and support services. As İçduygu and Şimşek (2016) note, supporting refugees in Turkey is no longer a case of preventing large numbers of people arriving or returning them to Syria, instead it "requires practical measures aimed at providing them with better settlement and integration opportunities" (ibid.: 59). In fact, since 2018, there has been a change in the government approach and anti-refugee narratives have emerged, with one of the major barriers being language differences (Lowndess & Polat Karakaya 2022). Notably, the arrival of

such high numbers of Syrian refugees has been highlighted as putting pressure on local services. Eser (2020) reports that, at the end of 2016, there were nearly 21 million visits to medical centres by Syrian refugees, over 160,000 students in schools and nearly 300,000 in temporary learning centres.

The need to access public services, often in a different language, is to be understood with the context of Public Service Interpreting still being in its infancy in Turkey. Eser (2020) reports a lack of more formalised training, especially in the required language combinations, to cater for refugees' needs when accessing public services. The issue is not new. Indeed, 20 years ago, Diriker and Tahir-Gürçağlar (2004) noted that only very few courses in Community Interpreting existed in Turkey, with the UNHCR offering some training. Similarly, the Between Languages and Cultures programme also offered interpreting training, focusing more specifically on ethical and practical interpreting dilemmas in asylum settings when the interpreters themselves are asylum seekers. Taking stock of the situation ten years later, Diriker (2015) finds that professional interpreters in Public Service Interpreting are greatly lacking, especially in health and education settings. For instance, "arrangements involving Kurdish [...] are still very much ad hoc and rely on non-professional interpreters" (ibid.: 98). More recently, in her study with a small group of interpreters, Polat Ulaş (2022) highlights that interpreters working with Syrian refugees come from different ethnic backgrounds (although primarily Syrian Turkmen) and their level of education varies. Her study shows a lack of training and when available, the training was limited in scope and content.

3 Research methodology

To investigate the current interpreting provision offered to Syrian refugees in Turkey, an online questionnaire was designed and administered through the platform JISC (n. d.). The online questionnaire, originally designed in English by the research team, was translated into Turkish by one of the team members. It was preceded by a Participant Information Sheet and a Consent Form. The questionnaire was then structured into the following four sections: demographics, interpreting training, interpreting experience and

remote interpreting technology. It included a total of 43 questions designed to elicit factual, behavioural and attitudinal data. This was achieved through a combination of open-ended and closed-ended questions, employing Likert scales and semantic differential scales for responses. The questionnaire concluded with a thank-you page, which included a request for participants to share the questionnaire link with their colleagues who work as interpreters for Syrian refugees in Turkey.

Upon receiving the Open University Human Research Ethics Committee's approval, a pilot study with three participants was conducted. Based on the participants' feedback and the research team's analysis of the responses they provided, the questionnaire was refined and launched. The questionnaire was made accessible from 15 June 2023 to 21 July 2023. A link to the questionnaire was sent by email to prospective participants and charities working with interpreters. It was advertised and distributed through social media networks and participants were also asked to snowball the questionnaire to their colleagues and existing networks. To ensure the study's relevance, participants had to confirm that they were practising interpreters in Turkey and that they had experience in working with Syrian refugees. In total, 30 people participated in the study. However, three participants opted out of having their responses included in any publications. Therefore, for the purpose of this article, their data was excluded from the analysis.

The following section presents findings based on the responses of the remaining 27. Given the sample size, this study's results will be reported in terms of participant numbers rather than percentage. Furthermore, qualitative responses were analysed using thematic analysis. In order to preserve the participants' anonymity, they will be referred to as P1 for Participant 1 and so forth.

4 The interpreter's profile

This section presents the data gathered from the questionnaire's first two sections: the interpreters' demographics and interpreting training.

4.1 Demographics

Among the 27 study participants, 15 identified as male and twelve as female. The majority of the participants (n=26) fell below the age of 40, with the largest subset (n=20) being in the 21 to 30 age range. There were no participants below the age of 21 or above 50.

Regarding ethnicities, ten participants identified as Turkish, five as Turkmen and ten as Arab (Syrian origin). Additionally, two participants selected the option 'other' and one of them specified that they identified as Arab with mixed Kurdish, Turkish origins.

Slightly over half of the participants (n=14) were Syrian refugees. The yearly distribution of their arrival spanned from 2010 to 2018, with most arriving in a steady stream each year.

Participants were also asked to self-report on their language proficiency on a scale from one to ten, with one being the lowest proficiency and ten being the highest proficiency. While the proficiency in Modern Standard Arabic varied among participants, the majority (n=25) self-reported a high level of competency in both Arabic (Syrian dialects) and Turkish, with scores of seven or higher. However, there were two exceptions. P18 indicated a low proficiency in Syrian Arabic dialect, scoring a two, but self-reported a higher competency in Modern Standard Arabic, with a score of six. Similarly, P24 self-reported a lower proficiency in Turkish, scoring a six, but stated they were a native speaker of Arabic, proficient in both Modern Standard Arabic and Syrian dialects.

As a follow-up question, 22 participants specified the type of Syrian dialects they speak. Four participants said that they spoke all the dialects in Syria and three other participants indicated that they were fluent in more than one Syrian dialect. The others noted that they spoke dialects from the areas of Aleppo (six participants), Damascus (seven participants), Idlib (four participants), Homs (two participants), Latakia (one participant), Harran (one participant), Rakka (one participant) and Hasak (one participant).

Finally, participants reported that they could speak other languages. Fifteen stated they spoke English at levels ranging from beginner to very advanced. One participant indicated they had post-beginner proficiency in Russian, while another mentioned speaking Libyan dialects, though they did not specify their

proficiency level. Additionally, one participant reported a high proficiency in the Turkmen dialect and another indicated a moderate ability in Kurdish.

4.2 Interpreting training

The participants' highest level of education can be broken down as follows:

High school	5
Higher Education Institute (2-year degree)	4
Bachelor's degree (4-year degree)	13
Master's degree	4
Other	1 (currently university student)

Table 1: Participants' level of education

Regarding interpreting training, the responses were evenly divided: 13 participants reported having undergone some form of interpreting training, while 14 stated that they had not received such training. Among those who had received interpreting training, participants provided further information on the source or type of training they had received which could be divided into two categories: more formalised interpreting training as part of an undergraduate course (n=1) or a Public Service Interpreting course (n=7), or on-the-job training received when working on a project with an NGO, WHO or UNHCR (n=6). Additionally, 16 participants indicated they had received specific training for working with Syrian refugees, in contrast to eleven who had not undergone such training.

When asked about training received to interpret for trauma survivors, only seven participants had received some specific training. Five participants provided further information, as follows. Two people stated that they had received psychological first aid training, one person had received training delivered by UNHCR, one participant had received training from the university and during a project working with people who had experienced trauma and one participant had received occupational health training.

When asked about more recent training, particularly following the earthquakes in Turkey in February 2023, 23 participants stated that they had not received any further training. Three did receive further training and identified the following sources:

- Public Service Interpreting training;
- psychological first aid training;
- training offered by the Turkish Disaster and Emergency Management Authority (AFAD).

Participants were then offered the opportunity to elaborate on the kind of interpreting courses that would help them hone their interpreting skills and knowledge. Out of the ten people who gave some qualitative feedback, the areas identified were either to help interpreters with their interpreting skills (simultaneous interpreting, communication and public speaking skills), the interpreting field they work in (including interpreting for trauma survivors and interpreting in emergency aid), or improve their language competencies (including terminology).

In terms of whether the training needs have changed more recently, particularly since the earthquakes, the picture was very split, with eleven participants saying ‘yes’, compared to 15 saying ‘no’. In their qualitative answer, one participant identified the need for interpreters in disaster response. The other six participants, who provided an answer, highlighted the need to train interpreters to work with people who suffered trauma and in the area of crisis management, especially for victims of the earthquakes.

4.3 Shedding light on the interpreting provision for Syrian refugees in Turkey

The data discussed above offers an insight into the interpreters’ profiles for those working with Syrian refugees in Turkey. In line with Polat Ulaş’s (2020, 2022) studies, interpreters tend to be under 40 years of age and many are Syrian refugees themselves. The interpreters are well-educated and they self-report a high proficiency level in Arabic (Syrian) and Turkish. However, it is also

apparent that many have not received interpreting training. When participants reported that they had received some type of training, the data indicate that it was rarely delivered through an undergraduate course within a university context, but more often through a Public Service Interpreting course or on-the-job training. To some extent, our data confirms Diriker and Tahir-Gurcaglar's (2004), Diriker's (2015) and Polat Ulaş's (2020, 2022) findings in the sense that training is still lacking, as many of our participants had not received any training. However, our data also shows a new tendency as training is not just offered on the job through NGOs and that Public Service Interpreting courses are becoming more popular. This suggests that the Public Service Interpreting landscape, often described as being in its infancy in Turkey, is changing.

The data in this paper clearly identifies some training needs. The data shows that only half of the interpreters were trained to work with Syrian refugees and very few had received training to work with trauma survivors. Although relatively new to the field of interpreting studies, the need for trauma-informed approaches to refugee integration and language teaching is well-evidenced in academic literature (Palanac 2019). As many refugees experience trauma, interpreters themselves are often exposed to the retelling of traumatic events as part of their work. A trauma-informed approach to interpreting training aims to enable interpreters to better understand the presentation and impact of trauma and support the wellbeing and resilience of both interpreters and the refugees with whom they work. Drawing on principles from mental health services (SAMHSA 2014), Naimi (2022: 2) notes that a trauma-informed approach is based on the six key principles of "safety; trustworthiness and transparency; peer support; collaboration and mutuality; empowerment, voice and choice; and humility and responsiveness". These principles could be embedded within specialist training for interpreters to improve their skills and confidence when working with people who have experienced trauma.

5 Conclusion

In conclusion, this study provides insights into the landscape of interpreting services for Syrian refugees in Turkey. While many interpreters are well-