

Urban Traces

Superdiversity



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I am deeply grateful to the Brussels Center for Urban Studies and the research groups BIAL and BRIO to have made my stay in Brussels possible. Within the framework of BCUS Visiting Research Fellowship, I carried out a project during September, October and November 2018 which aimed at further exploring superdiversity and multilingualism in Brussels. My main purpose was to study the quality of communication between public service providers and end users who speak a great variety of foreign languages and belong to very different cultural backgrounds.

The quality of communication in public services has been my main concern from the moment I started my research career. I work at the University of Alcalá, in Madrid. The capital of Spain shares some characteristics with that of Belgium. The ones which are most important for my research have to do with their long history of migrants and asylum seekers reception and the many challenges that multilingualism and multiculturalism currently pose for quality public service provision.

In 2016 the European Commission suggested the creation of a common procedure for international protection and aimed at the harmonization of reception conditions in

the EU. The main objective was to simplify the asylum procedure and thus shorten the time for decision-making. Although different measures were taken in different countries to tackle the many different aspects of the asylum and migration phenomenon, consultation of the 13th Annual Policy Report of the European Migration Network (2016) reveals that few references are found to language brokering and effective communication.

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much awareness of the importance of effective communication when it comes to the earliest stages of the migration process, i.e. the stages in which translators and interpreters play a crucial role. Although several Member States make reference to developments

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related to access to information and legal counseling, only a couple of them mention access to interpretation.

However, translation and interpretation activities are, in spite of the lack of recognition, absolutely necessary and should be approached from both a political angle (by the corresponding agents) and an investigative angle (by research bodies). We know that there are different mechanisms that co-exist to facilitate communication between service providers and users (asylum seekers or migrants). This fellowship has helped to describe and evaluate these strategies and mechanisms in order to be able to suggest improvement measures.

In a previous study done within the Civil Society Fellowship project “Taal- en communicatiepraktijk in de hulpverlening: de Brusselse case study” financed by the BCUS and promoted by the research groups BIAL and BRIO in 2015, the focus was put on public service providers (social workers, psychiatrists, psychologists, administrative coordinators, nurses, etc.). The focus of my research fellowship was, consequently, on public service interpreters and end users.

Apart from BIAL and BRIO research groups, I also worked in close collaboration with ENPSIT, the European Network of Public Service Interpreting and Translation, based in Brussels. They constituted the perfect platform to obtain data for my research, both from the leading heads of the steering committee, who made themselves available for interviews and meetings, and from the rest of the members, who helped to distribute worldwide a questionnaire aimed at gathering information about the mechanisms and strategies used by both public service providers and translators and interpreters in order to communicate with foreign speakers with a special focus on technology.

Also relevant for this piece of research is the co-operation established with the Directorate General of Interpretation. Several meetings have been held with Public Service Interpreting as the main topic. DGI-SCIC has recently launched a Knowledge Center on Interpretation: an online platform that contains information and resources about interpretation, as well as an interactive section that allows for networking and discussing by means of virtual communities that can be accessed after creating a log-in profile. Inside the KCI there is also space for Public Service Interpreting and the meetings I have had with responsible members of the DGI have contributed to shaping this space as well as to fostering mutual knowledge and understanding between DGI conference interpreters and ENPSIT public service interpreters.

One of the things I enjoyed the most during my stay in Brussels was the opportunity to meet multicultural, multilingual and diverse groups. This has been done thanks to the organization of meetings and workshops by colleagues from the Vrije Universiteit Brussel, the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven or the European University Foundation. They allowed me to get in touch with both students, colleague scholars and other people who provided me with different points of view about my research. Some of these meetings were formal, but others took place in informal ways, which does not mean they were less valuable and productive. On the contrary! Thanks to the initiative Food for Thought organized by VUB and ULB I got in touch with fellow researchers from other disciplines who widened my understanding of research questions and methods. During lunch meetings with postgraduate students I met researchers who later introduced me to other members of their linguistic and cultural communities who, in turn, provided me with valuable data. And my always helpful university colleagues organized weekend evenings in the course of which I was softly introduced to prospective informers.

I am happy to say that some of the results of the studies I have carried out have already been disseminated. During my stay, I was invited to give a plenary lecture in Seville in the framework of the I International Conference *Cross-Linguistic and Cross-Cultural Communication for Asylum Seekers and Refugees (CIICAR)*, and in Spring 2019 an article authored together with my colleagues from VUB, KULeuven and ENPSIT will see the light as part of the journal *FITISPos-IJ*. And the best part of this all is that this fellowship has just been the beginning of a longer and really interesting research co-operation.