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Telephone interpreting for asylum seekers in the US: a corpus-based study

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the asylum seekers' right to language access and specifically the provision of telephonic interpreting services for people crossing the US southern border. An overview of the language access situation is presented in relation to basic asylum seekers' rights. The fundamentals of interpreting professionalism in this realm are also reviewed. The study aim is to examine interpreters' perceptions of their work environment as contractors for the two major language service providers working with the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency and the US Department of Homeland Security. For this purpose, a corpus study was conducted based on online reviews posted on job search engines by current or past interpreter contractors. Findings identify perceptions of several inadequate management practices that negatively affect the work environment, job satisfaction and professional demands in terms of required qualifications, testing, training and supervision. The flaws observed point to an absence of the professional standards and motivation required to enable quality performance and therefore, professionalism. A proposal to offer professional services by engaged citizens is made.

KEYWORDS

Telephone interpreting, perceptions, work environment, professionalism, asylum seekers, corpus study.

*The DHS spends 8.4 million a day
to run a single detention centre.
Taxpayers' money should be better invested
in good interpreters instead of cages.*
RAICES

1. Introduction

Global mass displacement resulting from violent conflict and social instability in Africa, Latin America and the Middle East is reaching record highs according to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR 2019). This raises new and imperative questions about how to conduct relations between receiving states and speakers of limited language proficiency who are going to become members of their society either temporarily or on a long-term basis. The UNHCR annual Global Trends Report reveals that 79.5 million people around the world were forcibly displaced at the end of 2019 (UNHCR 2019: 2) and that the global refugee population has increased by about 50 percent in the period 2010–2019 (2019: 4). However, according to the same source, less than one percent of the total number of displaced people was resettled to one of 37 current resettlement countries during each of those years. Within those global numbers, there are thousands of people fleeing extreme danger in Central America and eventually crossing the US border. The exact number is unknown, but according to the UNHCR 2019 report (2019: 52), Central Americans and Venezuelans lodged one million

asylum applications on the American continent, notably in the US. These people include families, women and unaccompanied children who are trying to escape from murder, kidnapping, violence against women, forced gang recruitment and state-sponsored violence. Many of them have also had to face the same tribulations during their journey (UNICEF 2020). When they arrive at a border they are often labelled as “illegal immigrants” or even worse — former president Trump depicted them as “gang members” and added that “The asylum program is a scam” (C-Span TV Networks 2019). Crossing an international border for asylum is not illegal and an asylum seeker’s case must be heard according to international law (International Rescue Committee 2018) and US law on aliens and nationality (8 U.S. Code § 1158). Seeking asylum is an inviolable right internationally laid down by the UN through the Geneva Convention of 1951. However, in 2019 the Trump administration implemented two actions to keep migrants off US soil. The first action is the Migrant Protection Protocol (“Remain in Mexico” programme), whereby asylum seekers (hereafter ASs) entering the country are returned to Mexico to wait there for the duration of their immigration proceedings. Most migrants are kept in dangerous border areas for months without the benefit of legal assistance. The second action is the Safe Third Country Agreement, which makes migrants who have passed through Guatemala ineligible for protection in the US. Instead, they are required to request asylum in Guatemala. Furthermore, those who manage to make it to the US are deported back to Guatemala (Álvarez *et al.* 2019). These are extreme actions aimed at addressing the migrant crisis by *de facto* deportations. Usually, when people enter and remain in a country in search of international protection, their already vulnerable situation is aggravated by the fact that most of them do not speak the language of the recipient country. It is self-evident that an accurate understanding of language is critical in asylum court cases and success depends largely on the skills of the interpreter (Fenton 2004: 263). The figures cited above attest to the continuing global shortfall of qualified interpreters in asylum procedures, reception and resettlement services. According to Dubus (2016: 650), it is pertinent to study interpreters’ experiences with refugees as the steady increase of refugee populations worldwide makes it necessary to develop best-practice models that meet the needs of these vulnerable groups.

This article aims to examine interpreters’ perceptions of their work environment and job satisfaction as contractors for the two major language service providers (LSPs) working with the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency (ICE) and the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS). The article consists of two parts. The first part begins with an overview of global language provision rights and challenges for asylum seekers and a discussion of the consequences of providing non-professional services. The concept of interpreters’ professionalism is then reviewed, and the next section examines telephonic interpreting on the US southern border. The second part of the paper reports the findings of a corpus study aimed at identifying perceptions of interpreters’ work environments based

on online reviews posted on job search engines by current or past interpreting staff working for the two LSPs mentioned above.

2. Basic asylum seekers' rights to language access

There are increasing concerns in worldwide multilingual operational environments involving ASs and refugees about the failure of hosting or transit countries to attend to these people efficiently due to language barriers or inefficient interpreting services (Atabekova *et al.* 2017: 184). A lack of (adequate) language services is increasingly considered a human rights violation with dire consequences (Wallace and Hernández 2017: 151; Gordon 2015 cited in Atabekova *et al.* 2017: 186). The people responsible for assisting ASs can make a difference between freedom and captivity — and even life or death — if ASs are unfairly returned to their countries of origin because of language barriers (Barsky 1996: 61; Khan 2013; Viezzi 2012: 110). Within this context, the need for skilled, qualified and vetted interpreters becomes even more acute. For the purposes of this paper, I refer to the individuals who comply with these requirements as professional interpreters. The concept of professional interpreters refers to individuals who have received training in the provision of oral translational activity and are therefore presumed to possess the competencies required and be familiar with the profession's codes of ethics and conduct.

Many states around the world do not provide adequate language access for ASs out of a lack of awareness or interest despite efforts made by disciplinary-led discourses, which have failed to have the desired impact on policy makers (Valero Garcés and Tipton 2017: xv). Scarcity of resources or difficulties in covering minority languages must also be considered. ASs find themselves in an uncertain and critical situation as they cross a border, especially in those countries where it is common practice to place them in detention centres for an indefinite amount of time. Sometimes they are not informed of their legal rights in a language they can understand (Wallace and Hernández 2017: 146). Access to information during a crisis, as well as the means to communicate it, is a basic humanitarian need increasingly recognised as a human right (International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Article 19). All people and populations have a fundamental right to generate, access, acquire, transmit and benefit from information during personal or collective critical events (Greenwood *et al.* 2017: 21). Interpreting Studies has positioned professional language mediation as “an ideal policy response by socially progressive societies to the complex communication needs of minority-speaking populations” (Valero Garcés and Tipton 2017: xvii). Hence, calls for the professionalisation of translation and interpreting in public services have become more frequent (Martín Ruano 2017: 21). Nevertheless, communication very often takes place thanks to the involvement of a high number of non-professional interpreters in aiding ASs or refugees, motivated by a call to civic engagement (Kirst 2015; Atabekova *et al.* 2017: 190). These practices have become so common over the past years as a result of the steadily increasing number of multilingual

emergencies that a new term, citizen translation, has been coined by the INTERACT project,¹ defined by Federici and Cadwell as:

A translation practice conducted, sometimes voluntarily, sometimes by people who are volunteered, by an individual or a community of individuals who may be trained or untrained linguists. The translational activity is conducted with the assumption of achieving common good and may be paid or unpaid (2018: 24).

An example of translation citizenship is that of Translators without Borders (TWB) or the translation sections of numerous non-profit organisations, including those working with ASs. An internal survey showed that TWB translators and interpreters were primarily motivated by helping others (Translation without Borders). It can be assumed that a similar motivation also drives most volunteers in the translation section of most non-profit organisations. Nevertheless, citizen engagement with the common good may interfere with the core fundamentals of good interpreting practices. Some issues that can jeopardise adequate and efficient interpreting include no requirement for quality standards on the part of authorities, and demanding working conditions such as time pressure, lack of privacy, long hours, confusion about languages or dialects and confusion about the interpreter's role. In addition, potential mistranslations usually have no consequences for interpreters and ASs have no recourse thereon. These issues extend beyond volunteer work, however.

Corsellis (2015) and Pym (2012), cited in Martín Ruano (2017: 21), stress that language service providers keep failing to introduce stricter control mechanisms such as codes of ethics and accreditations despite ongoing calls from academia. Likewise, Martín Ruano describes language provision as "a fragmented and unregulated low-profile activity, especially in relation to languages of limited diffusion, where the shortage of trained professionals is more remarkable" (2017: 26). Martín Ruano (2017: 30) cites a European Commission report by Pym *et al.* (2012) that brought to light issues of persistent para-professionalism, lack of training, qualification and certification, and a slump in the already low pay, among others. This grim situation is compounded by widespread outsourcing trends in increasingly privatised language mediation services. Consequently, professionals are fleeing public service interpreting jobs (Blasco Mayor and Del Pozo Triviño 2015: 48; Gentile 2017: 75).

Untrained volunteer — or paid — interpreters, no matter how committed to the common good they may be, are not likely to show professional competencies such as awareness of the interpreters' code of ethics and may conduct themselves arbitrarily, for example, aligning themselves with one party or going beyond their role. Tipton (2017: 50) suggests that non-profit organisations that work with volunteer interpreters but "operate a selective recruitment process and provide training, support, feedback, and monitoring" may offer better language support than telephone interpreting

in general, or agencies that provide paid interpreters with no training or expertise in interpreting or in a particular domain.

3. Language support on the US southern border

Most migrants crossing the US southern border are Spanish speakers, who are met by officers familiar with their language. All Border Patrol agent trainees have been tested on their Spanish language skills and those who do not pass have to take an eight-week language-training programme (US Border and Custom Protection). This programme does not include interpreting skills. Yet, according to the International Rescue Committee (2019), the number of African, Asian and indigenous Central American people with limited English or Spanish proficiency is increasing steadily at the time of writing. The Committee reports they come from countries like Angola, Congo, Cameroon, Mauritania, India, Nepal and especially, indigenous people from Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador.

3.1 Telephone services

For encounters involving nationals who do not speak English or Spanish, the Border Patrol can use outsourced over-the-phone language interpretation services available 24/7 for more than 350 languages. However, they tend to avoid using these services unless a critical situation arises or at the request of visiting pro bono lawyers (Wallace and Hernández 2017: 149) or charities (RAICES). A report issued in 2016 by the Department of Homeland Security Advisory Committee on Family Residential Centers, a non-governmental committee tasked with making recommendations to the DHS on a number of issues for people with limited English proficiency in family detention centres (which are *de facto* jails), outlined a set of recommendations to improve language access. They found that the DHS's language access policy is beset with a series of hindrances and "is neither appropriately implemented nor appropriately communicated to families detained in family jails" (Department of Homeland Security 2016: 84). One of the problems depicted is the use of language lines for interpreting instead of in-person interpreters. In fact, one of its recommendations clearly states that:

DHS should avoid use of telephonic Spanish interpreters, developing and implementing policies and practices to instead provide in-person Spanish interpretive services, except in unusual or exigent circumstances, at each and every stage of the immigration proceedings, including, e.g., legal orientation; asylum officer interviews; and conversations with ICE personnel about matters such as procedures and release conditions. EOIR should do the same for appearances in immigration court (Department of Homeland Security, Recommendation 5-19, 2016: 104).

The report (2016: 104) discourages telephone interpretation when technological limitations like background noise and inability to hear well may cause users to abbreviate their accounts, thus omitting extremely important details for their case, or lead to frustration or impatience on both

sides, which is an undesirable effect at such a critical moment for the user. Telephonic interpretation is also discouraged if interpreters are likely to be cut off, as reconnections may be with a different interpreter, obliging parties to start all over again. Necessary interruptions to clarify or ask for clarification are also more difficult. Without a live, onsite interpreter, the speaker's narrative is apt to go on too long, and the interpreter may therefore miss details or summarise. Visual clues help to interpret but they are also particularly important to clarify when one of the speakers does not understand and is too confused or afraid to reveal their difficulties. Detainees may also be afraid to disclose traumatic information over the phone or may not trust someone they cannot see. An additional recommendation proposes a monitoring system to check on the quality of service provided after each telephonic interpretation:

For each use of telephonic interpretation, DHS should ask DHS staff, facility staff, court staff, interpreters (when appropriate) and the assisted detainee to rate the effectiveness of interpretation and describe any problems; when a rating is low, DHS staff should review the circumstances and take corrective steps. b) DHS should track the ratings/problems and address them. For example, if cell phone usage by interpreters emerges as an issue, the contract terms should be quickly modified to bar cell phone usage (Department of Homeland Security, Recommendation 5-20, 2016: 104).

However, despite these 2016 recommendations, unchecked telephonic interpretation continues to be prevalent (Nolan 2020). A quality in-person interpreting service is conducive to accessing information, properly defending a case, accessing necessities and even to family reunification. Telephonic interpretation remains, however, indispensable for certain minority languages or in the event of an emergency.

3.2 Consequences of providing no or inadequate language support

Wallace and Hernández question the accuracy and quality of the outsourced language line services since agencies employ interpreters of “non-publicly verifiable qualifications and experience” (2017: 149). They sustain that the US administration fails to provide detainees with effective language services. Garza² (2017), cited in Wallace and Hernández (2017: 150), argues that when language services are provided these are often deficient, inefficient and may result in wrongful deportations at the credible fear interview (CFI) stage or even during their final merits hearing. The CFI is the first interview (not a hearing), where a person must demonstrate they have a credible fear of returning to their home country. In this interview it must be determined that they cannot be subject to deportation from the US until their asylum case is processed. Inconsistencies between the CFI transcript and the final hearing testimony can be used against their case. Wallace and Hernández (2017: 150) also stress that detainees are only entitled to an interpreter from an outsourced telephone company during the CFI but not during the preparation phase. In most cases, the preparation phase is non-existent because asylum procedures do not fall under the

category of criminal cases. Accordingly, ASs are not entitled to a court-appointed lawyer, so most applicants do not have a lawyer at any stage and, without legal counselling or defence, their chances of obtaining refugee status are severely undermined. When pro bono lawyers are available for preparation purposes, they are assisted by volunteer or hired interpreters provided by non-profit organisations; in either case they are not required to have any certification or training, hence, compromising efficient communication (Hernández 2019). These meetings, which often take place in detention centres, not only involve legal procedures but also humanitarian issues regarding living or family conditions.

3.3 Asylum court hearings

Federal law requires an interpreter to be physically present for an immigration hearing only when there are more than five applicants of the same language who do not speak English (Creppy 2004: 2-3). This very restrictive law had rarely been enforced until the Trump administration took office. In 2018 the Department of Justice ordered judges to always use telephone interpreting services instead of in-person services, except for Spanish speakers (Jaafari 2019). Among other issues, access to over-the-phone interpreters should be unscheduled (US Department of Justice), which constrains the availability of interpreters during hearings and ultimately leads to backlogs in immigration courts. Jaafari (2019) also referred to judges and lawyers' complaints about the quality of the service conducted by the agencies that won the tender, which, they admitted, could lead to unfair deportation trials. As an example of this change, Nolan (2020) reports the case of an interpreter hired by one of the telephonic agencies working for the DHS (whose contractors' comments are analysed in this paper) who took a test to become an interpreter and confessed to having "invented extra material, a cardinal sin for translators" but passed anyway. Against this backdrop, it is understandable that attorneys and judges used to working with certified, live interpreters in the courtroom reject this type of language support. In contrast, immigration officers, staffers and users are much less likely to address complaints since they may feel that the communication problems that arise are normal (Jaafari 2019). Kopan (2019) reported how this scenario was aggravated by the implementation of a policy to replace in-person interpreters by a video recorded in multiple languages advising immigrants of their rights and course of the proceedings during "master calendar" hearings. Without interpreters, no questions could be answered on either side to the detriment of the weakest party. Lawyers, advocates and judges argued this cutback would hamper a fair and efficient court process (Kopan 2019). One year later, Kopan reported that after a "rocky rollout of the videos in courts" the Department of Justice abandoned this move and adherence to the original policy resumed (Kopan 2020).

It can be concluded that to achieve adequate and successful communication between service providers and ASs during the asylum process, official accreditation for interpreters as well as a monitoring system should be

requirements. The next section will address the pivotal issue of professionalism in interpreting.

4. Fundamentals of interpreting professionalism

According to Hebenstreit *et al.* professionalism can be defined as “the ability to employ specialist problem-solving skills” and “to follow field-specific behavioural norms” (2017: 74). Evetts (2013: 781) indicates that it usually requires a combination of a period of higher education, vocational training, experience, certification or registration. Dirube (2004: 70), within the discipline of industrial and organisational psychology, defines professionalism as “a set of conceptual knowledge, procedures and attitudes which allow one to resolve problems autonomously and flexibly when realizing a task individually as well as when coordinating work within an organisation”. These components are manifested through a particular behaviour consisting of “a compendium of knowledge, skills, habits and motivation” (Dirube 2004: 98). In the field of Interpreting Studies, Boéri (2015: 41) identifies a series of characteristic features of professionalism: a body of theoretical and practical knowledge that sets the basis for formal training, a system of licensure, registration or accreditation, consensual definitions of role and function, standards of practice, an interpreting industry comprised of relevant sector agencies, a professional body representative of practising interpreters, an established institutional interpreting policy, and a set of moral values and principles established in a code of ethics.

To throw light on the specific characteristics and requirements for interpreters that may, or may not, arise from the results of the present study, I present an overview of the set of theoretical and practical knowledge and skills that encompass the concept of professional interpreting competence. Pöchhacker (2016) elaborates on this notion:

For a practice or occupation to be acknowledged as a profession, it must be perceived to rest on a complex body of knowledge and skills, mastery of which can only be acquired by specialised training. Competence in interpreting can thus be defined as the congruence between task demands (performance and standards) and qualifications, and an understanding of the latter is crucial to professionalisation in general and interpreter training, in particular (2016: 166).

Pöchhacker (2016) subsequently presents a general overview of commonly accepted requirements related to interpreting competence: broad general education, proficiency in working languages, cultural competence, cognitive skills related to analysis, attention and memory, and personality traits like stress tolerance, intellectual curiosity and being people and action oriented. Regarding mastery of languages, Kalina (2002) indicates that competency in the working languages must include jargon, differences in usage, style, register, cultural norms, peculiarities, etc. Cultural competence, she poses, must comprise political, economic, social and ethnic differences, administrative structures, community life, literature, arts, history and social

developments of all the countries of interpreters' working languages. Hurtado Albir (2002: 171) adds the strategic competence of transfer from source text to target text. Kermis (2009: 43) compared the competencies of interpreters and translators put forward by a series of trainers, scholars and professionals and concluded that those common to both professions were linguistic (comprehension and production), transfer-related, thematic and cultural competencies. Those specific to interpreters were general knowledge, memory skills, public speaking, moral competence and stress tolerance (2009: 43).

4.1 Professionalism in community interpreting

Among the specific requirements for community interpreting Gentile *et al.* (1996: 54) suggest that after language proficiency, cultural competence should be considered pivotal. They also incorporated professional ethics as a specific requirement. Kelly introduced the element of intercultural competence described as "the ability to understand the way people from different cultures interact with each other" (2005: 32). Niska (2002: 137) placed social competence at the core of community interpreting and highlighted the relevance of being knowledgeable about the target group's special problems in the host country. Pöchhacker (2016: 180) considered socio-cultural identity paramount. The ISO Guidelines for Community Interpreters (ISO 2014: 8) set the following competencies to prove professionalism by means of proficiency tests in both languages: proficiency in specialist terminology, cultural awareness, consecutive dialogue, and speech (monologue) interpreting, sight translation, simultaneous interpreting (general and specialist), chuchotage, and knowledge and compliance with community interpreting ethics, standards of practice and roles. These guidelines also specify a minimum formal standard of education like a university degree or a "recognised educational certificate in community interpreting" (ISO 2014: 8).

As is apparent from the preceding paragraphs, professionalism in interpreting is achieved through a process that entails far more work, knowledge and abilities than most lay people imagine. For community interpreting the focus lies in having cultural knowledge of the working languages and showing social skills to interact with two cultures.

5. Materials and Method

A qualitative study was conducted to examine the perceptions about the work environment of the main telephonic agencies working for ICE and DHS and to gain some insight into the demands of professionalism required from their interpreters. This study was based on the analysis of past and current employees' and/or contractors' entries posted on employers' review sites available on two independent online job search engines: Indeed and Glassdoor. Users fill out two free comment fields, one for pros and one for cons, and rate the company on a 1–5 scale. One of the search engines

contains an offensive content disclaimer and the other one features an agreement to post honest reviews, good or bad, thus suggesting there is no evidence to believe any post is disallowed. One of the companies is a large corporation that claims to employ almost 10,000 interpreters speaking more than 240 languages. The other is smaller, with a total staff of 6,000 covering more than 25 professional areas. It does not reveal the number of interpreters on its books, but claims to serve 350 languages. Only US-based comments were collected since it was thought these interpreters were more likely to have worked for the DHS, particularly regarding Central American indigenous languages. Entries from January 1, 2014 to the time of data gathering were selected for company 1, while for company 2, all reviews were analysed as there were only 25 in total. Ten entries were eliminated from company 1 because they used almost identical wording, were written in a very impersonal manner in the pros field and had no entries in the cons field. Instead of portraying genuine interpreters' testimonials, the corporate language and image they used aimed to attract new employees (not necessarily interpreters) in the following manner: "this is the job for you," "it is a very great opportunity to work for this company," "great potential to move across divisions," "great feeling when you resolve a customer's issue." These entries also came from the city where the company is based. Some other entries that mistakenly referred to a different sector were also discarded. The final collection date for both companies was February 28, 2019. No subsequent reviews were analysed.

A basic qualitative analysis was conducted with the Atlas TI 8 program (Scientific Software Development), which allows for fast text identification of meaningful propositions; that is, stretches of text that can be selected and allotted to one or various codes. These are referred to as quotes. An inductive strategy approach was implemented to code the entries, regardless of any pre-established categories that might hamper the retrieval of results. After coding the text, establishing relationships between different codes and reflecting upon underlying structures, the results were organised and the reflections that had surfaced during the analysis were put together. Initially, both companies were analysed for comparison. However, since the codes, categories and concepts that surfaced were virtually identical for both companies, they were finally combined into one single document containing all entries: 104 from the larger company and all 25 reviews from the smaller company.

5.1 Results

During the analysis, 275 quotes were identified, accounting for 90 percent of the corpus. Quotes that appeared only once were excluded from the analysis to allow tendencies to emerge. Table 1 reports the codes selected to reflect the concepts.

Concept	Category	Code	Frequency	Reviewers
Work environment	Inadequate management	Low pay	44	42
		Lack of career development	33	27
		Minimum or no benefits	32	26
		Lack of communication	16	14
		Lack of support and appreciation	14	14
		Stress	10	10
		Unorganised management	9	9
		Overworked interpreters	8	8
		Reducing wages	5	5
		Unpaid overtime	3	3
		Technical problems	3	3
		No supervision	2	2
		Flexibility	9	9
Job satisfaction	Personal enrichment	Adequate pay	8	7
		Learning opportunity	8	8
		Helping people	8	8
	Unspecified perception	Intrinsic value of the activity	2	2
		Negative	23	21
		Positive	8	8
Demands of professionalism	Lack of professional awareness	Lack of knowledge about interpreting	5	5
	Low service quality	Inadequate or no training	5	5
		Little work for the experienced	5	5
		No (or inadequate) supervision	5	4
		No systematic testing	3	3

Table 1. Concepts, categories and quotes

As was to be expected, most comments focused on the companies themselves, resulting in a higher number of codes matching the concept of work environment. This concept comprises 91.3 percent of negative quotes in the category of inadequate management compared with 8.7 percent of quotes in the category of adequate management. Quotes referring to the *low pay* and *lack of career development* code prevail, notably reflected in “no raise” and “no promotion”. Two participants describe the job as a “dead-end.” *Stress* is often mentioned in connection with overwork rather than with the nature of interpreting. *Lack of communication* within the organisation sometimes includes lack of supervision. The remaining codes score lower. Within the adequate management category, *flexibility* ranks first and is often described as the main reason for accepting the job. The number of positive codes under the concept of job satisfaction (26 vs. 23) slightly surpasses the negative ones.

The vast majority of positive codes refer to the interpreting activity as intrinsically offering an *opportunity to learn* or to *help other people*, “loving the opportunity to help people in need”, “enjoying interpreting”, “[unfavourable quote] but I enjoy the work per se”. Within the category of subjective unspecified perception (no motives given) positive quotes such as “great company”, “fun”, “very good experience” or “excellent place to work at”, etc. emerge. On the negative side, the quotes included “awful”, “cruel”, “desperate”, “oppressing”, “slave”, “frustration”, “sweatshop”, “mess”, “miserable”, “scam”, etc.

The 23 negative quotes within this concept contain 19 different unfavourable utterances, compared with five different favourable expressions among the eight positive quotes. The concept of demands of professionalism became apparent from sometimes inadvertent quotes on a different subject that revealed a lack of knowledge. The category of lack of professional awareness reveals the code *lack of knowledge about the profession*, which stems from quotes stating that “not much knowledge is needed”, “GED as only requirement” or “great gig for college students”. Likewise, quotes describing the company as having the “worst culture” due to the “special needs of non-English clients” point in the same direction. The category of low service quality emerges from four codes. Two participants admitted to not having been tested whereas another one posted, “while my colleague was tested, I was not”, leading to the code *no systematic testing*. The code *inadequate or no training* arises from quotes describing the quality and duration of training: “a two-hour online seminar”. Quality is also reported to be “compromised by prioritizing new hires” or when “mediocre interpreters get the job done”, “more work for the newest employees who get less and not making the most of experienced interpreters”. Regarding *no (or inadequate) supervision*, most quotes mention that there is no feedback. One of them questions the use of a monitoring system that does not involve language comprehension in both language directions. Of all the quotes, 83.6 percent offer a bleak picture of the companies, job satisfaction and awareness of interpreters’ professionalism.

From the total list of words provided by Atlas TI, those with a judgemental value were selected and compiled in two groups: positive and negative. On the negative side, 68 expressions were connected to descriptions, opinions and feelings about their work at the company (frequency 183). The most recurrent terms arising from a negative context were “low”, mostly in combination with “pay”, followed at a distance by “stressful”, “lack” and “limited”. “Stressful” occurred in quotes referring to either communication with management or having to work non-stop. “Lack” or “limited” was mainly associated with benefits. All of them encompassed the concept of job (dis)satisfaction with the company.

Low	23	Needed	2	Inadequate	1	Pointless	1
Minimum	8	Declining	1	Inadequately	1	Problems	1
Stressful	6	Atrocious	1	Inconsiderate	1	Pressuring	1
Lack	6	Awful	1	Incorrect	1	Retaliation	1
Limited	6	Bad	1	Lowering	1	Scam	1
Hard	5	Desperate	1	Reducing	1	Sorry	1
Poor	4	Cruel	1	Less	1	Unacceptable	1
Terrible	4	Dissatisfied	1	Last	1	Underappreciated	1
Frustrating	3	Lacking	1	Victims	1	Underpaid	1
Exhausting	3	False	1	Left	1	Undervalued	1
Worst	3	Slave	1	Waste	1	Unruly	1
Worse	2	Force	1	Lonely	1	Unhappy	1
Joke	2	Frustrated	1	Mediocre	1	Unhelpful	1
Unprofessional	2	Grocer	1	Misleading	1	Unreliable	1
Unorganised	2	Harder	1	Miserable	1	Inflexible	1
Dead-end	2	Hardest	1	Mess	1		
Less	2	Hardship	1	Overworked	1		
Little	2	Heavily	1	Pennies	1		

Table 2. Negative word count and frequency

On the other hand, the 15 different positive utterances (frequency 43) were mostly found in a context related to job, work or flexibility without an elaborated description.

Good	20		Exceptional	10	Free	5
Joyful	1		Satisfactory	1	Exceptional	1
Exciting	1		Satisfying	1	Efficiency	1
Enjoyable	1		Excellent	1		

Table 3. Positive word count and frequency

Finally, the average rating the reviewers gave to the companies on the 1–5 scale provided by the job search engines were 2.37 for the larger company and 2.40 for the smaller one³.

5.2 Discussion

The findings reported in this paper are estimates of interpreters' perceived work environment and job satisfaction. They also offer an approach to the perceived demands for professionalism required by the companies. As can be observed, the negative expressions strongly outweigh the positive ones, revealing a discouraging picture of work environment, job satisfaction and demands. Only six of the 23 codes have a positive connotation. Perceived work environment is the lowest rated concept, with only two favourable codes in the category of adequate management compared to 14 codes in the inadequate management category, in which *low pay* is the prevailing code. Some reviewers mention they are paid the minimum wage, although references to pay are mainly described by a long list of unfavourable expressions (most of which are listed in Table 1). The high number of negative quotes in this category discloses the perception of an unhealthy organisational culture. Fluent communication with interpreters, as well as support, appreciation, career development, supervision and organised managerial practices in general are absent from the reviews. The necessary foundations for a positive work environment, such as transparency, bottom-up and lateral communication, support, appreciation and career development (Salanova *et al.* 2013), were not mentioned. Lack of perception of these features can affect job satisfaction. Personal enrichment represents the only favourable category within the concept of job satisfaction. It encompasses three codes directly connected to intrinsic satisfaction. Helping people and learning opportunity stand out, though both codes score modestly. Some reviewers stated that helping others is the only reason they continue with the job: "Definitely not for the money but for a pure fact that I enjoy helping others", "The only good thing is that you help people" and "The best thing is you will be able to help others", confirming citizen engagement to the common good previously discussed. The high frequency of negative quotes suggests an extremely high level of job dissatisfaction. In this regard, job satisfaction is known to interact with motivation and performance (Kanfer 2009; Tremblay *et al.* 2012). Likewise, there is evidence that work conditions such as job stability, organisational trust and work overload affect motivation, job satisfaction and performance (Gamero Burón 2010).

Several codes suggest that organisational demands for professionalism are perceived as low. Pre-employment testing is not always conducted ("I was not tested") and qualifications are not a requirement since the job is recommended for "college students" without no mention of academic field. This belief discredits professionalism and evinces a lack of awareness of professional interpreting requirements and implications. The perceived lack of demand for expertise may explain the comments about low pay and the minimal, if any, training provided. A few hours of online training, described as "4-hour computer generated training and 2 hours of an over the phone conference seminar", cannot possibly cover even the most basic skills of oral language and culture mediation as presented in section 4, much less

the intricacies and difficulties of interpreting professionally in immigration settings. One reviewer criticises the companies' expectations of the training provided, which they describe as clearly insufficient as follows: "to perform the duties of a medical interpreter (with all medical terminology), legal interpreter with all of its terminology as well as financial, etc." On the other hand, favourable quotes commending the training also reveal an absence of professional awareness. Along the same line, no reliable quality assessment is perceived to be in place. In some cases, unfavourable quotes about the company further confirm this lack of practitioners' professional awareness about intercultural competence. For example, one reviewer mentioned the "worst work culture" referring to the "special needs" of non-English speaking clients. Even in the absence of context, this criticism can by no means be considered a professional remark, but further confirmation of unfamiliarity with the requirements and complexities involved in language and culture mediation (cultural and intercultural competences). Additional organisational practices, such as unpaid overtime, excessive workload or even minimum or no benefits, further compound job dissatisfaction. It is worth noting that a series of positive quotes under the category of subjective unspecified perception, like "very easy job and no pressure", again raise suspicions about professional awareness, since interpreting is recognised as a demanding task (Seeber 2015: 60). It entails high levels of stress resulting not only from the high mental load but also from situational difficulties that may arise in any setting, but that can be extreme in refugee contexts (Holmgren *et al.* 2003; Dubus 2016: 654). Although the frequency of unfavourable quotes related to professional demands is lower than that of the other concepts, it also revealed hardly any positive quotes.

The shortcomings reported in these results point to an absence of the professional standards and motivation required to enable quality performance. A direct consequence of the poor labour standards implemented is that fully trained, certified, recognised and experienced interpreters are very unlikely to work for companies that offer the barely subsistence-level rates described above. The turnover rate, therefore, is bound to be high, as noted by some reviewers who depicted the agencies as: "revolving door company", or "one of those jobs you work until you find a real job, a career". One entry encapsulated the real value of this job as follows: "this is a good job for someone who has to take care of other business rather than being committed to work as an interpreter".

6. Conclusion

The goal of this article was to address the asylum seekers' right to language access and specifically the provision of telephonic interpreting services for ASs in the US. To the best of my knowledge, this is the first study that analyses this topic by means of a corpus analysis with data from over 100 reviews posted online over a five-year period. My data analysis points to a working environment and professionalism that are perceived as

substandard, confirming Wallace and Hernández's suspicions and distrust of interpreting service quality for ASs (2017: 151).

It follows that telephone language provision for immigration in the US continues to be a poorly paid outsourced activity with little to no regulations in place. These results confirm studies conducted in other world regions using different methodological approaches (Pöllabauer 2007; Pym 2012; Tryuk 2017; Jiménez Ivars and León Pinilla 2018). Quality service is often compromised in low profitability areas of public provision, especially in those assisting the most vulnerable members of society, which clearly include ASs. Substandard interpreting professionalism can ultimately result in human rights violations if adequate communication is not ensured due to a lack of general competence, motivation, or both as has become apparent in this study. In the light of the general decline of standards in public service interpreting (Gentile 2017), outsourced language support services have proven to be an inadequate and unreliable means for addressing ASs communication problems (Blasco Mayor and Del Pozo Triviño 2015).

Hence, although calls for the enhancement of professionalisation and labour standards in these settings continue to be imperative, the situation shows no signs of improvement. Neither does the increasing global antipathy towards migrants encourage the implementation of adequate language support public policies for this group of people. Against this background, Tipton's suggestion (2017: 50) that non-profit organisations committed to the common good could offer a more reliable language support than the private sector emerges as a possible solution. Two different types of measures should be implemented. On the one hand, members of professional interpreting associations could collaborate in pro bono work alongside pro bono lawyers within the framework of non-profit organisations working with ASs. On the other hand, in the absence or scarcity of professionals, these organisations should provide their own, preferably remunerated, interpreters. This should be done by implementing a rigorous selective recruitment process supervised by professionals, offering quality training, support and monitoring as suggested by Tipton. Training should be specific to ASs' needs, covering not only professional interpreting skills, but also legal procedures and terminology, political and social backgrounds of countries of origin, psychological issues and trauma-informed interpreting. I agree with some researchers who advocate for the active recruitment of refugees or immigrants as interpreters to assist ASs (Lai and Mulayim 2010; Ellis 2013; O'Reilly-de Brún *et al.* 2015; Schider 2017).

Language support provision for ASs by means of motivated untrained volunteers or unmotivated unvetted paid practitioners should continue no longer. As long as governments and the private sector fail to offer quality interpreting services for the vulnerable, it may be the turn of society to take a step forward as an act of civic engagement as opposed to a profitable

activity. The provision of these services will contribute to the smooth integration of these newcomers into society and be to the benefit of all.

The first limitation of this study relates to the anonymity of data, which increases the likelihood people will post negative reports. This initial bias, however, offers an opportunity to identify problematic areas. Another limitation is the impossibility of verifying whether the whole sample has worked in immigration settings. Future lines of research should address the quality perception and satisfaction of staffers, jurists and asylum seekers as well as employers' description of practices. The author declares no conflict of interest.

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Biography

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Notes

¹ A H2020 Marie Skłodowska-Curie Research and Innovation Staff Exchange Network aimed at researching translation in crisis scenarios. It brings together a unique combination of actors from social sciences, humanities, technology developers and humanitarian responders to collaborate and to educate each other. See <https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/734211/es> (consulted 28.5.2020).

² Texas detention centres, personal interview by Hernández, Carlos, Texas 2019, February 17.

³ Recall that several entries were discarded for the reasons mentioned above. Also, five entries that only produced negative quotes scored 5, leading me to conclude that the scale had been misunderstood. Thus, for the purpose of this research these scores were reversed. Consequently, the average rate presented in this paper is lower than the one provided by the sites at the time.