

Contextualisation in telephone interpreting

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Abstract

Professional Telephone Interpreting (TI) challenges the idea that proxemic distance and visual contact among participants in a conversation are essential for providing effective interpretation. However, being physically absent from the location where the communication takes place does force telephone interpreters to develop strategies in order to situate the encounter and understand what is said. The aim of this study is to analyse some of the mechanisms telephone interpreters use to situate the communicative situation by identifying certain auditory cues that work as contextualisation elements (Gumperz 1992). The rapid procurement of this information will be conditioned by a range of factors, such as the interlocutors' knowledge about the interpreter's role.

Keywords: telephone interpreting; context; auditory cues; contextualisation cues; lack of visual information; compensatory strategies.

Resumen. *La contextualización en la interpretación telefónica*

La interpretación telefónica (IT) profesional cuestiona la idea de que la distancia proxémica y el contacto visual entre los y las participantes en la conversación resultan imprescindibles para efectuar una interpretación de calidad. Sin embargo, el no estar presente físicamente en el lugar donde tiene lugar la situación comunicativa sí obliga a los y las intérpretes telefónicos a desarrollar estrategias para contextualizar el encuentro y comprender el significado de lo que se dice. El objetivo de este estudio es analizar algunos de los mecanismos empleados por intérpretes telefónicos para situar el encuentro comunicativo mediante la identificación de claves auditivas que actúan como claves de contextualización (Gumperz 1992). La rápida obtención de dichas claves se ve condicionada por una serie de factores, como el conocimiento de los y las profesionales de los servicios públicos sobre cuál es la función de quien interpreta.

Palabras clave: interpretación telefónica; contexto; claves auditivas; claves de contextualización; ausencia de información visual; estrategias compensatorias.

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Introduction

Telephone Interpreting (TI) is a mode of remote interpretation that takes place over the telephone. Used in both the private sector and public services, it has expanded very rapidly since it emerged as a fast, inexpensive way to provide language assistance to persons who do not speak the language of the host country. In Spain, TI first began to be implemented at both state and regional level just over a decade ago in a variety of public bodies, including police stations, the social services, schools and hospitals. The appearance of this type of interpretation has given rise to a new type of professional language mediator, new in both working conditions and the skills required to interpret. Many voices have been raised and continue to be raised in academic and professional circles that are suspicious of the quality of this type of interpretation. TI has been accused of driving down interpreting rates, resulting in companies hiring unqualified interpreters due to the refusal of qualified professionals to work in precarious conditions. It has also been accused of generating lesser demands from public service interpreters themselves to be recognised and dignified as a fully-fledged profession (Lee 2007: 242). With regard to the quality of the interpreting, the ability of telephone interpreters to guarantee a faithful transmission of the message has often been called into question, since they do not have visual access to the communicative situation (Fors 1999, Mintz 1998, Niska 1999, Swaney 1997, Vidal 1998, Wadensjö 1999).

If we take a close look at the research conducted to date on TI, it is clear that it is far from exhaustive and that it therefore does not permit us to draw reliable conclusions on whether or not the quality is inferior to face-to-face interpreting. But the fact is that the few studies of which we are aware seem to indicate that, with proper training and sufficient hours of practice, telephone interpreters are able to develop strategies to compensate for the absence of visual information and communicate faithfully and effectively, ensuring a level of quality similar to that of face-to-face interpreting (Lee 2007: 249, Ko 2006: 336). This article aims to analyse these compensation strategies. We shall single out the elements in the conversational text that, properly identified, will help interpreters to contextualise, understand and, consequently, render the message in the communicative situation in which it takes place, despite the fact that they are not physically present and do not have visual access to it.

The corpus used for this study consists of 36 recordings of actual telephone interpretations in Spanish and one of the following languages: Arabic, Bambara, English, German, Mandarin, Portuguese, Russian, Ukrainian, and Wolof. The interpreter-mediated conversations were carried out in various areas of public service for which the Spanish company Interpret Solutions provides TI services:¹ hospitals, social service offices, police stations, shelters for the homeless and helplines for victims of domestic violence. The recordings were made between 2012 and 2014 and the duration of the conversations ranges from 10 to 74 minutes.

The objective of our study was to first identify the contextualisation problems that interpreters may encounter and the mechanisms that they use to address them in order to recognise and locate the context of the communicative situation in which they have to mediate. More specifically, and based on Gumperz' classification of contextualisation cues (1982), we sought out those cues that the interpreter uses to procure information on three basic aspects about the communicative encounter: technical factors, human factors and situational context.² The ultimate goal of our research, which extends well beyond the scope of this article, is to develop a didactic approach to the acquisition of specific TI skills.

However, before addressing the task at hand, it is important to clarify that the distinctive features of TI —what defines and sets it apart from face-to-face interpreting— are not limited to the absence of visual information. This mode of interpreting is also characterised by the use of (and reliance on) technology, an aspect it shares with the other type of remote interpreting: videoconference interpreting. The interpreters usually find themselves physically separate from the other interlocutors, isolated from the physical space in which the communicative encounter occurs.³ Another defining feature of linguistic mediation by telephone (and the most important for our purposes) is that the interpreter accepts the assignment and begins the interpreting process without any prior information or briefing, on the fly, so to speak. It is precisely this immediacy that is one of the advantages of TI for its users, while also being a factor of enormous difficulty for the professionals who provide the service.

1. Contextualisation in TI. Specific difficulties

When interpreting over the telephone, particularly in the case of oral languages, it is most commonly the interpreter who is in a different location from the other participants, who usually share a physical space. As mentioned above, the inter-

1. Interpret Solutions, a translation and interpreting agency, is, together with Dualia, one of the leading Telephone Interpreting providers in public service settings in Spain. These recordings are used by Interpret Solutions to monitor the quality of its interpreters' work. We would like to thank Interpret Solutions for generously sharing them with us.
2. This classification is taken from Interpret Solutions' training course, which refers to these three aspects in Spanish as "briefing técnico", "briefing humano" and "contexto situacional".
3. An exception is the interpretation of sign languages, where the interpreter is often in the same location as the deaf user.

preter is therefore only aware of what is happening in the encounter through the oral-aural channel.

There is no doubt that the fact of not being able to see the different interlocutors who are participating in the conversation hinders the work of the interpreter and, in general, affects all aspects of communication. One of the difficulties, as noted by Andres & Falf (2009: 21), is that the interpreter “can neither use visual clues in order to better understand the meaning or intention of an utterance nor can they gauge the reaction of the clients” to check that they have understood the information that has been provided. It is difficult for telephone interpreters to locate and frame what is being said in a specific communicative event, about which they receive information only through what they hear and not through what they see. This absence of visual information, inherent to TI, greatly restricts the tools available to the interpreter to endow the communicative situation with context and therefore hinders both the understanding of the message and the process that encompasses decision-making and the search for equivalents. It also affects the way interactions between the participants in the conversation are coordinated, such a fundamental task in dialogue interpreting (Wadensjö 1998: 105). For instance, interrupting, asking for clarifications, managing turn-taking become harder tasks for the interpreters to perform, since they can only fall back on verbal resources. Many of the mechanisms used to contextualise what is being said are visual in nature, and are therefore simply inaccessible when the communication channel is the telephone.

Another aspect that hampers the work of the telephone interpreter stems from the immediacy with which they are contacted by public service providers and have to start translating the message. In the case of Spain, this access is even more direct, since there is no intermediate figure of the telephone operator—as is the case of some services in countries like the United States—to connect the user to the interpreter and inform them briefly about the origin of, and reason for, the call (Kelly 2008: 11, 12). TI business turnover in Spain, lower than in other countries, makes having a telephone operator unviable, so the call from the public service is transferred directly to the interpreter through an automated voice recording. This means that the intermediate stage, which helps the interpreter to prepare and anticipate context, disappears, adding to the difficulty of the interpreting task. The result is that the interpreter must show a high capacity for adaptation, because, although this information could, and should, be provided by the public service provider, this is not common practice.

Another challenge for TI is that it may be used by persons, entities or services from outside the immediate reality of the interpreter. Consequently, telephone interpreters sometimes have to handle spatial, temporal and institutional references with which they may be unfamiliar, such as allusions to place names, services or procedures.

These difficulties are further compounded by the fact that a culture of linguistic mediation has not yet taken root. In those countries where this culture does exist, beneficiaries of the interpreting services—telephone or face-to-face—are accustomed to working and communicating through interpreters, and are thus

aware of the difficulties involved in this task and collaborate with the interpreter, facilitating communication. What tends to happen in countries like Spain is that the users tend to be unfamiliar with the processes involved in interpreter-mediated communication, with what interpreters do and even how the TI service functions. They frequently make the call and begin speaking hastily, without any preliminaries, as soon as they hear the voice of the linguistic mediator, without even identifying themselves or naming the organisation that they work for —a behaviour that can be considered a deviation from the norm of a monolingual telephone conversation. In short, the interpreter is pitched straight into the interpreting assignment without any prior information, counting only on non-verbal or verbal cues transmitted through the auditory channel, which arise at the beginning of the conversation. Voice then becomes the one element that provides the most information about the context of the communicative situation, and acquires much more relevance than it would in a face-to-face interpreting situation.

2. Contextualisation mechanisms in dialogic communication

At this point, it would be useful for our purposes to define contextualisation: what it is, what information it reveals to us and what elements make it possible in the interaction between two interlocutors. For Gumperz (1992: 230), contextualisation refers to:

[...] speakers' and listeners' use of verbal and nonverbal signs to relate what is said at any one time and any one place to knowledge acquired through past experience, in order to retrieve the presuppositions they must rely on to maintain conversational involvement and assess what is intended.

According to Gumperz, contextualisation is based on three assumptions (1992: 230), which may be summarised as follows:

1. The utterances are interpreted through inferences during a conversational exchange, which is constrained by what is said and how it is interpreted.
2. This interpretation has no absolute truth value, but is based on hypothesis.
3. Contextualisation is a process that is socially constructed and interactively validated.

As Auer (1992: 4) explains in his study on Gumperz' approach to contextualisation, context is not a monolithic reality. It is not simply there, waiting for the interpreter to identify it and use it for their benefit, but is constantly redefined as the interaction between the participants progresses, being, as it is, inherent and integral to dialogic communication. It is a flexible and dynamic concept construed during the conversation through language, and which adapts particularly well to TI, where extralinguistic reality is only perceived in this way. Thus the language used by the interlocutors is not only determined by the context, but it also contributes to construe this context. In fact, Gumperz even stated that for

there to be communication it is essential to construe context. This means that language is not only a semiotic system in which usage is determined by context: this semiotic system (or rather this system of semiotic systems) is in itself responsible for providing the context needed to interpret (understand) the structures encoded within (Auer 1992: 22). Accordingly, the context is not given as such in the interaction, but is the result of the effort of all the participants to make it available. It is not a collection of social facts or materials (such as the location in which the interaction takes place, the roles of the participants, etc.), but a set of representations of what is relevant to the interaction at any given point in time.

As Auer (1992: 4) points out, a key concept in this dynamic construction of context for dialogic communication is Goffman's "footing" (1981: 124), which demonstrates that social roles must become relevant and significant to provide context.

A 'doctor' is not a doctor because he or she holds a diploma and a 'patient' isn't a patient because s/he has entered a 'doctor's office'; but both become incumbents of the complementary roles of 'doctor' and 'patient' because of the way in which they interact, taking on the rights and obligations of the partners in this unequal relationship; etc. (Auer 1992: 22)

The way the interlocutors express themselves positions them in one role or another, aligned in their position as a provider or user of a service. The distinctive way that one or the other expresses themselves during the conversation also enables the telephone interpreter to anticipate potential utterances and, above all, to foresee to some extent the functioning of the speaking turns. For example, it is expected that the doctor will ask concise questions at the beginning of a medical consultation, while at a meeting with the social worker at that same health centre we can expect a longer conversation while the patient is informed about the available care options.

For Auer (1992: 4), Gumperz' notion of contextualisation covers very diverse aspects of dialogic communication that help to identify elements of a general nature, such as the speech genre employed by the participants in the interaction; more specific elements, such as the speech act; the topic; the roles of the participants (speaker, recipient, bystander) and the social relationship between them. All of this helps us to correctly understand the utterances produced and place them in a particular communicative situation.

2.1. *Contextualisation cues*

Contextualisation materialises largely through a range of elements, known as contextualisation cues, which act as a point of reference that help the listener to know how to understand the utterances. They may be defined as "generally speaking, all the form-related means by which participants contextualise language" (Auer 1992: 24). Gumperz stated that contextualisation cues manifest themselves through prosody (intonation, tone, stress, rhythm, speed, etc.); para-

linguistic signs (tempo, pauses, hesitations or conversational synchrony, such as overlapping of speaking turns, which influence how speakers interpret the speech of others); choices from a linguistic repertoire, “as for example in code or style switching or selection among phonetic, phonological or morphosyntactic options”; and through the use of certain lexical forms and formulaic expressions (1992: 231).

The definition of a contextualisation cue therefore includes verbal and non-verbal elements. Specifically, contextualisation cues can be classified according to referential/non-referential and lexical/non-lexical dichotomies. The non-referential and non-lexical cues would be prosody, gestures and postures, gaze, conversational support elements (backchannels) and linguistic variation. The other group would include explicit formulations of context, i.e. “prospective or retrospective statements by participants about what is going to happen or has happened”, and deictics, elements that “locate language in time and space”, but do so by establishing points of reference in the environment (Auer 1992: 24). It seems clear that many of the non-referential and non-lexical contextualisation cues, such as gestures, postures and gaze, are not available to the telephone interpreter. However, it would be useful for our TI study to include in this group background noise, both from objects (i.e. the beeping of a machine) and “audible movements” (Poyatos 1988) (i.e. a door being opened, the shuffling of papers) produced by those who participate in the conversation or encounter (for example, a sigh or a groan), which are perceptible over the telephone and provide information complementing the spoken message. Contextualisation cues do not have the power to guide or directly influence the way utterances are interpreted; rather, the interpretation is carried out through a process of inference, by which the interlocutor takes into account information about the context to identify the implicit meaning of the utterance. To put it another way, the contextualisation cues facilitate the process of inference.

As may be seen from the ground we have covered up this point, contextualisation cues may refer to extralinguistic, and also to linguistic, realities, i.e. they heed the relationship of signs to each other. Thus, textual cohesion and the various mechanisms that make it possible (reference, substitution, ellipsis, conjunction and lexical cohesion) function for telephone interpreters as contextualisation cues that enable them to correctly interpret, translate and reformulate what has been said.

3. Contextualisation cues in telephone interpreting

As discussed above, lack of visual information is a feature of IT that affects how interpreters contextualise a communicative encounter and it should be compensated by paying attention to certain elements, verbal or non-verbal, that help the interpreter’s process of inference.

It is important to bear in mind that many of these elements would probably not register on the interpreter in face-to-face communication, where they would be redundant or secondary because they are corroborated by the extralinguistic

visual reality that accompanies them. However, these elements acquire a central informational burden for the contextualisation and understanding of utterances when the interpreter is not present. For example, in a face-to-face interpretation that takes place in a health centre, if the doctor asks, “What is the reason for your consultation?”, the word “consultation” is not adding any new information, either for the interpreter or the patient, as this is recoverable from the situational context; “reason” is the word that carries the information focus of the clause. On the contrary, in telephone interpreting, “consultation” is not a phoric or referential element as it does not refer to something present in the interpreter’s non-verbal or verbal context. As a consequence, it becomes a key element for inferring information about the context in which the encounter is taking place and enables the interpreter to implement strategies for anticipating how the conversation may unfold and the situation develop. It can be said, therefore, that the absence of visual contextualisation cues in TI make different elements, verbal or non-verbal, essential for the interpretation of the encounter. They acquire a greater information and communicative value than they would have in a face-to-face situation, as they provide the interpreter with contextual orientation, facilitating their mental representation of the communicative environment.

At the beginning of the call, the identification of available contextualisation cues in a telephone interpretation acquires particular relevance, since this is the moment at which, as we have discussed, the interpreter tackles the assignment without any prior knowledge of the communicative setting or the encounter in which they are about to participate. The rapidity with which the task of translating begins not only complicates the mental locating of the encounter and correct understanding of the utterances, but also the managing of the interactions, since it is in the first few seconds or minutes that the dynamic that the *triad* or interpreter-mediated conversation will subsequently follow is established (when to start talking, how long the speaking turns will be and, ultimately, how the interpreter will manage communication between the interlocutors). If the dynamic works from the beginning, the participants will understand each other without any major problems. If, however, they are confused and do not know very well how to talk through an interpreter, communication will be slower and less effective.

The way the public service provider acts in these first moments of the conversation may be of great help for the interpreter to contextualise the encounter. A collaborative attitude may facilitate the interpreter’s performance, while a non-collaborative one may hinder it considerably. Public service providers are able to anticipate potential contextualisation problems for the interpreter by adopting a cooperative attitude, assisting in the process of inference. This is mainly due to their experience working with interpreters, but also to their awareness of all the difficulties the interpreter may face for working remotely. This can be seen in the following example: when a doctor says, “[a]hora le voy a dar a la paciente una hoja con la tabla de ejercicios que tiene que hacer a diario”,⁴ he is clearly address-

4. “Now I am going to give the patient a sheet with the exercise routine that she has to do every day”.

ing the interpreter, not the patient, describing the scene to her, aware that she cannot see the document that is being handed to the patient.⁵ This description contextualises and co-textualises the subsequent utterances wherein the doctor explains the exercises, thus facilitating understanding for the interpreter and aiding a correct interpretation of his intervention.

Another example of facilitative behaviour on the part of the service provider is taken from a conversation in a municipal homeless shelter. In this case, the service provider specifies all the exophoric references of the text in order to compensate for the absence of visual information. The explicitation process clearly facilitates the task of understanding for the interpreter.

“Aquí tiene, **en esta hoja**, los horarios y las normas de la casa. Está todo anotado. Aquí, **en esta parte** las normas generales y aquí, los horarios, **por detrás**”.⁶

These elements are a verbal support for the interpreter’s mental representation of the situation.

Generally speaking, to properly contextualise the encounter at the beginning of the call it is helpful to gather information related to three aspects: human factors, technical factors and situational context. Human factors refer to the information concerning the participants in the conversation (Interpret Solutions’ training course). In the case of public service providers, for instance, information that can help to ascertain their position and professional role; and in the case of the foreign user, information about their origin, age, sociocultural level, etc. All these data allow interpreters to infer information about the communicative event and lead to a better understanding of the goal of the encounter, the participants’ power relations and participatory roles, and the information conveyed.

The technical factors describe the device used to make the call (mobile phone, landline or *interpret phone*,⁷ dual earpiece, handsfree, etc.) and the type of call, determined by the location of the interlocutors, especially if all three are in different places (three-way calls) or if only the interpreter is absent from the place where the encounter occurs. These aspects will determine the strategies adopted by the interpreter, particularly when coordinating the speaking turns.

Lastly, the situational context is the service and physical space from which the call is made (police stations, hospitals, shelters, schools, etc.). Occasionally, the public service professional or initiator of the call starts talking as soon as they have established that the interpreter is on the other end of the line, assuming that they know where the call is coming from, and immediately begins, usually quick-

5. All the examples used in this study are verbatim transcriptions of excerpts of interpreter-mediated phone calls, the full transcript of which cannot be reprinted for reasons of confidentiality. We are enormously grateful to Interpret Solutions, S.L., one of the largest TI providers in Spain, for giving us access to the recordings of these calls and allowing their partial reproduction for our study.
6. “Here you have, **on this sheet**, the schedules and house rules. It’s all written down. Here, **in this part**, are the general rules and here are the schedules **on the back**.”
7. Phone created specifically for TI, patented in Spain by Interpret Solutions, S.L.

ly and succinctly, to explain the reasons for the call. Therefore, in order to be able to manage the beginning of the call with a deftness that will enable the conversation to be properly coordinated, it is desirable that the interpreter identify those cues that reveal the situational context.

In the following excerpts, we shall try to illustrate the elements that interpreters use as cues to contextualise calls in relation to these three factors.

The first excerpt corresponds to the beginning of a conversation in the field of healthcare. These are the first words that the interpreter hears when attending the call immediately after identifying herself with her interpreter number. The contextualisation cues that enable the interpreter to obtain information about the assignment are emphasised.

Hola, ¿me estás oyendo bien? [...] Sí. Vale. Vamos a hacer una traducción con una **persona**. Voy a informar directamente a la **mamá**, ¿vale? El **niño** está bien, ¿de acuerdo? **Le** transmite por favor que el **chico** está bien, que está bien, que no tiene ningún cambio respecto a ayer, que falta el **informe final**, pero es normal. Esta tarde habrá que hacer una **prueba**, que es una **resonancia**, pero **ella** ya lo sabe.⁸

As can be seen from this excerpt, the public service professional begins without prior introduction, stopping only to check that the interpreter is on the other end of the line. It should be remembered that the interpreter's introduction to the users at the beginning of a triadic conversation is considered to be essential to lay the foundations for effective communication. This is the moment at which linguistic mediators make themselves known to the foreign person, for whom this may be the first time that they have communicated through an interpreter, and explain some of the procedures that they follow, such as the fact that they will reproduce the users' interventions in the first person, will interpret everything that is said, will guarantee the confidentiality of the encounter, how turn-taking will be managed, etc. In this example, the public service provider leaves no time for the interpreter to introduce herself to the foreign user and explain how the conversation will play out. Nor does she introduce herself, the service that she works for or the reason for the user's visit; she simply states what she wants to be translated. If the interpreter decides to interrupt and ask her everything she needs to know to contextualise the spoken message, she will lose the thread of what she is saying, which is, moreover, very valuable information for the interpreter. Therefore, one option may be to not stop her, but to keep listening and infer information from the contextualisation cues, then, once she has finished (and before beginning to translate), introduce herself to both participants. In fact, this is the procedure recommended by agencies such as Interpret Solutions.

As regards the information about the participants (human factors) that can be gathered from this opening conversational turn, the first contextualisation cue is

8. Hello, can you hear me okay? [...] Yes. Okay. We are going to translate through a **person**. I will speak to the **mum**, okay? The **child** is fine, okay? Please tell **her** that the **boy** is fine, that he is fine, that there's been no change from yesterday, that we don't have the **final report**, but that's normal. This afternoon we'll need to do a **test**, an **MRI scan**, but **she** already knows that.

the word “*mamá*”. After “*persona*”, it indicates that the interlocutor that has requested the service is a woman who is visiting in her capacity as a mother, which automatically leads us to anticipate the word “*hijo*”; this occurs when the agent utters the word “*niño*”, thus introducing the subject of the conversation who is not present in the setting. The employee subsequently refers to the child by a different term, the hyponym “*chico*”, thus using a mechanism of co-reference between the two nouns (hypernym and hyponym). This chain of lexical cohesion by reiteration (Halliday & Hassan 1976) provides the interpreter with additional information: the child is not a baby or a very young child. These two lexical items, which are probably used unconsciously by the service provider to give cohesion to the text without repeating herself, would probably go unnoticed by a face-to-face interpreter but become a significant piece of information for the telephone interpreter because they provide part of the information relating to the human factors. It should be noted, however, that the interpreter, at this point of the conversation, is still unable to determine who the caller is or the service that she represents, or the context in which she is interpreting, which could be either a school or a health centre. The interpreter does not know the situational context until she hears the phrase “*informe final*” (which is not, in itself, very conclusive) and then the words “*prueba*” and “*resonancia*”, which indicate that the encounter is taking place in a hospital, a specialised care centre or similar location.

With reference to the technical factors, in this excerpt there are no contextualising elements to indicate with what device the call is being made.

This second excerpt also comes from the beginning of a conversation mediated by a telephone interpreter, who is also on this occasion not given an opportunity to intervene to introduce herself and ask any questions. Both interventions, by two different people, provide extensive information on the interpreting assignment, mainly through verbs, nouns and adjectives.

—¿Hola? ¿Eres la intérprete? Espera que te paso al doctor para que te cuente.

—Dígale por favor a esta señora que vamos a operar al niño de reflujo gastroesofágico.⁹

Information on the human factors is supplied by the nouns “*doctor*” and “*señora*”, which indicate who the conversation’s participants are. The expression “*te paso*”, besides the technical factors, to be discussed later, reveals that the user that has first contact with the interpreter will not play a dominant role in the *trialogue*. Applying prior knowledge or experience of this type of assignment that she may have acquired, the interpreter may deduce that the first speaker is the initiator of the call but not an active participant, i.e. a nurse or other healthcare professional who is assisting the physician in her work. The noun “*niño*” then introduces another element, which is the patient on whom the conversation is based. The interpreter may assume that the foreigner for whom she is going to

9. —Hello? Are you the interpreter? Please hold while I put the doctor on.

—Please tell this lady that we are going to operate on the child for gastro-oesophageal reflux.

interpret is the child's mother, although there is, as yet, no verbal element to suggest this, since in this case the expected lexical sequence (mother/child) has not been uttered.

Regarding the situational context, the word "doctor" immediately places the encounter in a healthcare context. Subsequently, through collocations, the word "operar" and the phrase "reflujo gastroesofágico" indicate more specifically the location—a hospital or similar (not, for example, a health centre, where operations are not usually carried out)—and the clinical specialty.

The technical information is provided by the expression "te paso", which shows that there is only one shared receiver or headset. This is an important element because it will determine each of the interpreter's speaking turns: she cannot begin to interpret until she is certain that the client is on the phone and is listening to her, which makes the handling of speaking turns more complicated.

As we have already discussed, when tackling any interpreting assignment, it is essential to know which public entities work with the telephone interpreting agencies that the interpreter works for. This will enable the interpreters to limit their areas of specialisation to the encounter itself, conduct research on the services offered, the likely participants, the most common communicative situations, the protocols that they usually follow, and the terminology. Much of this information is provided by the agencies during the period of training they offer to the interpreters.

A particular case is that of hotlines, such as those that provide support to victims of gender violence. Because these services are provided entirely by telephone, the operators are usually more sensitive to the lack of visual information for the interpreter (among other reasons, because they are in a similar situation, since they, too, cannot see the foreign user) and tend to contextualise the call, providing the name of the service and the topic of the conversation at the outset, and even giving technical information. In this case, it is important for the interpreter to remember that these are always three-way calls in which all participants are in different locations.

—Hola, buenos días, soy la intérprete de rumano, número X503481. ¿En qué puedo ayudarle?

—Hola, buenos días. Yo creo que eres Alina, que alguna vez hemos hablado, somos el teléfono de atención a víctimas de violencia de género de la Comunidad Valenciana. Tengo a una mujer en la otra línea, voy a ponerla en tres a ver qué cuenta, ¿vale?^{10 11}

10. The information given in this and the other examples used in this study (language, name of service, interpreter's name and code) are fictitious and differ from the original recording for reasons of confidentiality.
11. —Hello, good morning, I'm the Romanian interpreter, number X503481. How can I help you?
—Hello good morning. I think you're Alina, we've spoken before, I'm calling from the Valencia Regional helpline for victims of gender violence. I have a woman on the other line, I'll put her on line three to see what she has to say, okay?

This example shows how foreknowledge of the service can facilitate the task of contextualisation for the interpreters, enabling them to adjust more easily to the particular circumstances of the phone call. The information provided by the operator allows the interpreter to know who the participants are and the type of technical device that is being used (the lexical chain of co-reference —“otra línea”, “ponerla en tres”— indicative of the fact that all calls are three-way) and the topic but also aid anticipation regarding the content (e.g. description of abuse, emotional state, etc.) and the potential emotional burden of the encounter. Interpreting interventions by people under emotional stress has specific challenges both for the coordination of the encounter and for understanding the message due to the emotional speaker’s condition: nervousness in their speech, crying, broken language, possible contradictions in the information being conveyed, etc. These difficulties are compounded by the absence of visual information, but can be managed more effectively if the interpreter is able to anticipate them.

4. Conclusions

The absence of visual information and the immediacy of access to a telephone interpreter are defining features of TI that hinder the contextualisation of the encounters that the interpreter is going to mediate. Learning to compensate for this lack of information is a central goal in TI training. This requires developing a number of additional and compensatory skills to ensure effective communication. In this study we have found that the identification of auditory contextualisation cues throughout the conversation, particularly at the beginning, is one such skill, since it permits the interpreter to recognise elements that facilitate contextual knowledge, to locate utterances within the communicative situation and to understand them correctly, thus contributing to the message being faithfully rendered.

However, these findings also throw into relief the importance of public service professionals having a cooperative attitude. The fact that the interpreter can be taught to identify these cues does not make it any less desirable to improve certain aspects of the way TI functions so that the additional burden of the role of linguistic mediator does not have to be shouldered entirely by the interpreter. A useful first step would be to improve the professionals’ knowledge of how to work with telephone interpreters and to have realistic expectations about their role. Mechanisms such as providing information about the service from which the call is being made, or statements that explain context during the conversation, may be used by public service professionals to compensate the interpreter for the absence of visual cues. However, this aspect will continue to be an obstacle for TI; therefore the identification of contextualisation cues is a tool that will always be of use to remote interpreters, particularly when interpreting by telephone.

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