

Interpreting Democracy: Interpreters as Drivers of Democratization

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Dieser Beitrag verfolgt das Ziel, eine Verbindung zwischen dem Public Service Interpreting (öffentlichen Dolmetscherdienst) und den im Buch „La Democrazia in Trenta Lezioni“ (Demokratie in dreißig Vorlesungen) von Giovanni Sartori (2008), dargestellten drei Grundsäulen der Demokratie herzustellen. Ein besonderer Schwerpunkt des Beitrags sind drei demokratische Werte, die von Dolmetschern verkörpert werden: Schutz der Rechte der Minderheiten, Vermittlung und Gleichberechtigung.

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1 What Does Interpreting Have to Do with Democracy?

What's Gone Wrong with Democracy is the title of a recent report published on the weekly newspaper *The Economist* (2014), which warns that democracy today is in serious peril, and that the international community has to act promptly to prevent the collapse of one of the most enlightened ideas that mankind has ever had. According to this article, one of the reasons why democracy appears to have lost momentum even in its Western strongholds is the 2008 financial crisis. What is most surprising about this statement is that the destiny of contemporary democracy appears to be closely linked to that of globalisation, because there is a fragile link connecting markets and governance. Following the economic downturn, many Western countries have clamped down on immigration, fuelling populist and xenophobic backlashes. According to the OECD International Migration Outlook (2013), the current situation of persistent unemployment in many countries, combined with ageing populations, generates fears that “immigration may put further pressure on the public purse” (*ibid*: 11). This explains why many Europeans today still struggle to come to terms with cultural diversity, facing the eternal dilemma regarding the peaceful coexistence of different cultures. Since immigration is no longer a contingent, incidental phenomenon but a structural one, the failed integration of migrants in our societies stirs up racist sentiments in the majority of the population,

which have recently spurred the rise of far-right political parties that hope for the implosion of the European project.

As several sociologists point out, many Western European nations, traditionally known as emigration countries, have unexpectedly become receivers of immigrants, a situation that has generated a sense of powerlessness and instability across the continent, especially because Europe has a stronger ethnoculturally-based tradition of nationhood compared to immigration countries, such as the United States. At a time when chauvinistic and populist ideals are getting increasingly strong in a Europe ravaged by the recession, the centrality of democratic principles must be safeguarded more than ever before, and the only way to protect these values is to remind people what democracy is about. It is not a coincidence that, in the same year of the collapse of Lehman Brothers, the political scientist Giovanni Sartori (2008) wrote a book entitled *La Democrazia in Trenta Lezioni* (Democracy in Thirty Lessons) in which, by explaining the main tenets of democracy from a philosophical perspective, he aimed at shedding light on the potential threats to democracy and the possible ways to tackle them.

As world politics and social systems have evolved over the years, so has the very notion of the word *democracy*, which today is emptied of its political connotation and has acquired a new sense, a renewed meaning. Democracy is originally a political concept, but it has now stretched to more private aspects of life, becoming an overarching principle regulating our social behaviour. Rather than expressing the need to give power to the people, today democracy means narrowing the distances: between people and institutions, between the rich and the poor, between the powerful and the powerless. Dialogue is therefore the most concrete way through which democracy expresses itself, and interpreting is the main pillar supporting intercultural communication, as underlined by Point III.6 of the European Commission's Communication entitled *A New Framework Strategy for Multilingualism*, which states that interpreters "support immigrant communities in courts, hospitals, police and immigration services. Properly trained, interpreters contribute to safeguarding human and democratic rights" (European Commission 2005: 11). Interpreters should be considered as professionals, but, above all, as individuals who serve noble purposes, because they help people to understand each other by build-

ing bridges across cultures and languages. The social scope of interpreting can be beneficial both for immigrants seeking linguistic assistance and for the profession as a whole, whose increasing visibility can lead to the full recognition of its value.

This paper aims at establishing a connection between public service interpreting and some of the basic pillars of democracy, outlined in Giovanni Sartori's book *Democracy in Thirty Lessons* (2008). The methodological framework consists of a critical analysis of three democracy lessons, which will be provided in order to demonstrate that public service interpreters contribute to the creation of a democratic society. A special focus will be placed on the democratic values which are embodied by interpreters, which are: respect for the rights of minorities, mediation and equality.

2 Interpreters and Minorities' Language Rights

Assuming that democracy is a form of government in which "the supreme power is vested in the people and exercised by them directly or indirectly through a system of representation" (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary 2014), Sartori (2008) poses an intriguing question: what constitutes the people? The fundamental principle of a democratic society is based on the majority rule, according to which a majority group has the power to make binding decisions for the whole community. In consolidated democracies, free elections should no longer be the only parameters through which democracy is measured: a true democracy should guarantee the expression of the popular will, but it also has to prevent the majority from abusing their power to violate the basic rights of the minority. As the British historian Lord Acton (1877, in Somit & Peterson 2005: 33) remarked, "the most certain test by which we judge whether a country is really free is the amount of security enjoyed by minorities". Even though Lord Acton was referring to political rights, this statement is also relevant to the societal field, where the protection and promotion of minority rights across Europe represents an important contribution to "the building of a Europe based on the principles of democracy and cultural diversity" (Council of Europe 1992).

Although Article 21 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (European Commission 2000) states that “any discrimination based on any ground such as sex, race, colours, ethnic or social origin, genetic features, language [...] shall be prohibited”, language is seen as one of the main causes of discrimination. Several scholars have contributed to establishing linguistic human rights as a multidisciplinary research area, their main objective being that of bringing together language and human rights, since “there is abundant evidence that language is often a factor in the mediation of social injustice” (Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson 1994: 1). This means that, though language may be one of the main causes of discrimination, it can also become the only element that brings people together. Minorities have been granted many rights in relation to language, enshrined in binding treaties and covenants, whose implementation is not just a choice, but a moral and legal imperative. Language rights can be said to be fully respected when national institutions give minority-language speakers the opportunity to express themselves in their own language, so that they can be granted political representation, a fair trial, access to education and to healthcare structures.

Considerable momentum was created by the European Directive 2010/64/UE (European Union 2010) on the right to interpretation and translation in criminal proceedings which, if properly implemented, can protect individual rights by developing the minimum standards for the right to a fair trial. The need to respect language rights should be more urgently felt, especially in light of data collected in a recent report issued by Eurostat (2014), which showed that, in the year 2013 alone, 435,000 asylum applicants were registered in the European Union. This means that immigrants are confronted on a daily basis with language and cultural challenges in hospitals, tribunals, police stations and other public institutions, which can discourage them from seeking care or legal assistance, with the tragic consequences that may arise. In the preamble of the Final Report issued by the Special Interest Group on Translation and Interpreting for Public Services (hereinafter SIGTIPS), Androulla Vassiliou, the European Commissioner for Education, Culture, Multilingualism and Youth remarked, translation and interpreting have become a fundamental part of public life, “not only in our international organisations, parliaments and conference centres but also in our town halls, court rooms, hospitals and other venues where people have access to public services” (SIGTIPS Final Report 2011: 5).

Interpreters therefore greatly contribute to safeguarding the rights of minorities, which are not just migrants but any group which is “numerically inferior to the rest of the population of a State, in a non-dominant position, whose members possess ethnic, religious or linguistic characteristics differing from those of the rest of the population” (Capotorti 1977: 6). Consequently, they contribute to the advancement of democracy and are a tool for cohesion, a lack of which can result in tension, inequality and social exclusion.

3 Interpreters and Mediation

Democracy is based on freedom of expression (Sartori 2008: 5). This means that people living in a democratic society have the right to express their thoughts, which may be different from other people’s beliefs and, sometimes, may even clash with them. In the political sphere, democratic political processes regulate competition among groups with conflicting preferences, and this suggests that democratic societies are less likely to experience conflicts. Therefore, the peaceful coexistence of people with different religions, skin colour, political opinions and sexual orientations is the result of a mediation process, whereby mutual respect is the only way to achieve tolerance and avoid other people’s rights being infringed upon.

The link between interpreting and mediation is worth analysing, because it is underlined by the etymological meaning of these two concepts. The word *interpreting* comes from Latin and is a combination of the preposition *inter* (between) and *partes* (parties), which gives an idea of somebody who is positioned between two people and enables communication. Likewise, the etymology of the noun *mediation* can be traced back to the Latin verb *mediare*, which means “placed in the middle”. Whether interpreters are mediators in the fullest sense of the word is a topic that has been widely discussed in Interpreting Studies. The conceptual issues related to mediation are one of the main causes of the lack of clarity surrounding the interpreter’s role, because the definition of interpreters as mediators implicitly acknowledges that they are not just language transmission belts, but play an active role in communication. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss whether and when the notion of mediation applies to the role performed by interpreters, but it is a fact that when communication breaks down, conflicts break out, and interpret-

ers are responsible for managing all forms of communication between people who otherwise would not understand each other. As the core of the term *mediation* is connected to conflict prevention, it can be assumed that mediation is the fundamental element of a democratic process. Similarly, mediation between languages and cultures is a way to give voice to cultural minorities, and therefore interpreters are linguistic and cultural mediators *par excellence*, as they tend to “open up worlds, facilitating dialogue between different cultures in an atmosphere of reciprocity and mutual exchange” (Pignataro 2012: 72). This democratic feature of interpreting is particularly crucial in legal settings and war zones.

In public service settings, interpreters are rarely perceived as mediators. Data gathered from recent studies on the perception of the interpreter’s role (Valero-Garcés & Vitalaru 2014) illustrate that service providers (be they police officers, magistrates, solicitors, medical staff) are prone to see the interpreter as a neutral agent, whose sole objective is to transfer a message from one language to another in the most accurate possible way. Nevertheless, in a situation of tension or conflict, the interpreter is expected to act as a mediator. This often occurs when foreign police officers interview refugees during asylum hearings. Even though codes of ethics say that interpreters should not intervene in extremely dramatic situations, i.e. when the foreigner begins to cry, police officers admit that they expect interpreters to “release the tension by taking some actions on their own, without waiting for the officer’s permission” (Tryuk 2014: 88). This example illustrates that in this kind of situation interpreters do mediate, in the sense that they equalise power differentials not only between those who participate in the conversation, but also between institutions and the most vulnerable segments of society. Therefore, the interpreter’s role is to “understand the nature of oppression, and work out ways to eliminate social imbalances” (Witter-Merithew 1999: 59).

War zones are another field in which interpreters work in stressful and tense situations. It is not a coincidence that the latest conference organised by the University of Alcalá de Henares (Valero-Garcés & Vitalaru 2014) was entitled *(Re)visiting Ethics and Ideology in Situations of Conflict*. Its chief objective was to shed some light on interpreters who work in conflict and in emergency situations, in contexts where people are tortured,

imprisoned, violated and even killed. The sheer amount of conflicts of various nature across the globe has increased the demand for interpreters, as more and more studies highlight that the interpreter's role in conflict zones is not just that of a language conduit. Much attention should be paid to the political and social consequences of the interpreter's job, particularly in the case of ethnic or religious conflicts, where the meaning of words can be easily misunderstood or thwarted, thus contributing to the creation of conflict. In such a delicate context, where language can be used as a weapon, interpreters are not just people who are able to speak two languages, but individuals who can influence "interpersonal relationships for the sake of a wider cause, such as achieving peace in a conflict, post-war reconstruction, promoting understanding between peoples, or even repairing foreigner's misperceptions" (Baker 2012: 20). In doing so, however, interpreters expose themselves to serious traumas, violence, torture, and even death, as in the case of the dozens of interpreters killed during the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. It is reported that during the war in Iraq, more than forty interpreters who worked for the British forces were targeted and murdered by militias, because they were accused of conniving with the enemy (BBC News 2007), which demonstrates that the locals who worked as *ad-hoc* interpreters were accused of betrayal, as they were seen to be on the side of the country's occupants.

This prompted the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC) to write several open letters to European Heads of State asking them to grant asylum to those interpreters who have collaborated with Western forces for the last 12 years and now feel that their lives are in peril. In conflict zones, interpreters are not just linguistic mediators between conflicting parties, but physical ones, who put their lives at risk to save others', as was underlined by Bertham Hacker, a former member of the German Federal Army (Laver 2014). At a seminar on interpreters in conflict zones held in Nuremberg in 2013, he gave statistical evidence of the number of times interpreters have actually saved the lives of military personnel, as in the case of Italian journalist Daniele Mastrogiacomo, who was captured in Afghanistan with his interpreter, Ajmal Naqshbandi. The life of the journalist was eventually saved, whereas Ajmal was killed by his kidnappers. Although interpreters are not supposed to be noticed, they experience first-hand the tragedies of countries torn by armed conflicts. As an American soldier

wrote, “their lives and actions reflect an astonishing degree of dedication, courage and sacrifice [...]. In my eyes, interpreters are unrecognized heroes” (The New York Times Online 2012).

4 Interpreters and Equality

The notion of equality has always been subject to a variety of interpretations (Sartori 2008: 55). Aristotle (2007), for example, distinguished between arithmetical and proportional equality. The former term implies that everybody should be given the same opportunities irrespective of their merits, whereas the latter indicates that everybody should be granted opportunities corresponding to their merits or achievements. Arithmetical equality establishes that everybody wears M-size clothes, and therefore only clothes of that size will be produced. Proportional equality, on the contrary, suggests that different kinds of clothes should be produced in order to fit people’s different clothing sizes. Therefore, proportional equality is more suitable to public service interpreting, because it ties in nicely with the theory of social justice. According to the American philosopher John Rawls (2009), justice is a synonym of fairness, a condition that guarantees equal access to the same rights and opportunities to every member of society. As Rawls points out, the concept of justice as fairness goes beyond that of social justice, which is understood as equal access to those things necessary to lead a decent life, and depends on whether it promotes or hinders equality to enjoy “civil liberties, human rights, opportunities for healthy and fulfilling lives, as well as whether it allocates a fair share of benefits to the least advantaged members of society” (Robinson 2014). The principle that lies behind Rawls’ theories draws inspiration from the theories of the social contract, whereby people agreed on norms of peaceful coexistence. In a democratic society, made up of free and equal citizens, the concept of equality provides that all social services must be open to all people, irrespective of their race or background. Following this line of thought, it could be assumed that there are two ways in which interpreters serve as tools to ensure equality: 1) they guarantee that immigrants have access to public services; 2) they can debunk stereotypes about immigrants.

The SIGTIPS Final Report (2011) points out that, in order to guarantee free and equal treatment, immigrants must have access to public services in Europe. This right is also included in number 6 of the Common Basic Principles (The Justice and Home Affairs Council 2004) “access for immigrants to institutions, as well as to public and private goods and services, on a basis equal to national citizens and in a non-discriminatory way is a critical foundation for better integration”. However, some European countries are still lagging behind in the provision of interpreters in legal and healthcare settings. The notion that people who live in a foreign country are responsible for communicating with the authorities is supported by governors who believe that immigrants should be able to express themselves in the language of the host country to be able to access public services. Such an assumption unveils a certain degree of ignorance, as the language spoken in our daily lives is not quite the same as the legal or medical jargons, where a high linguistic register and technical expressions are used, and whose understanding is hampered by the stressful situation experienced by suspects and patients.¹ It would be beneficial for national institutions to understand that investing in this professional form of language assistance would save considerable costs deriving from suspects being needlessly remanded in custody and mistranslations of diagnoses, such as the case of a physician in Washington (Barclay 2006) who almost sent a patient to the Psychiatry Ward because he understood that his Spanish-speaking patient had visions of the *devil*, whereas she was simply feeling *débil* (weak). There is a flurry of reported cases both in the media and in literature which show that the situation is no longer sustainable, especially in Europe, where enormous gaps in interpreters’ modes of recruitment and qualifications exist: in Italy, for example, more than 30,000 trials are at risk because of a severe shortage of qualified court interpreters (Gianvito 2010). Interpreting is an under-regulated profession in Italy, where the only requirement to work as a court interpreter is to be enrolled in an official register at the Chamber of Commerce or registers of local courts. Several studies (Rudvin & Tomassini 2011) reveal that the vast majority of interpreters surveyed do not have any qualifications, do not know Italian sufficiently well

¹ In his work *La Manomissione delle Parole* (Manumitting Words), the Italian magistrate and writer Gianrico Carofiglio (2010: 128) talks about the obscurity of the language of law, which is often intentionally overcomplicated. “The language of law has always been a sacerdotal rather than a technical jargon, in which the unnecessary obscurity is an exercise of style, which denies the communicative function of language and expresses itself in a subtle, authoritarian power exercise” (translation by Paola Gentile).

to perform interpreting, do not have any interpreting skills (note-taking, management of turn-taking shifts) and have a poor knowledge of the Italian legal system. A degree in languages would be preferable, but is not a necessary precondition to serve as a court interpreter; in many cases, there are no specifications of requirements except for the ability to speak two languages. In the words of Garwood (2012: 173), poor accreditation and a lack of quality control systems in Italian courts lead to “a daily violation of a fundamental human right”, a statement that is confirmed by reports published on the EULITA website (2014).

Social attitudes to minorities are also factors which hinder the full integration of migrants in our societies. Last February, the Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights Nils Muižnieks gave a speech in Brussels about the criminalisation of migration (Muižnieks 2013). He warned that the linguistic choices of politicians who appeal to people’s gut feelings portray a threatening image of immigrants: the use of the term “illegal migrant/migration” instead of ‘irregular migrant/migration’, as well as the definition of migration flows with terms such as “flood”, “inundation”, and “invasion” aim at raising suspicions about the criminal nature of these displacements. This rhetoric emphasises that the immigrant, a person who has desperately escaped from war, famine or dictatorship is a stranger, someone to be kept at bay. Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (2013: 54) maintains that fear of the stranger is one of the main features of our globalised era: despite its positive changes, globalisation has divided people rather than uniting them, creating ever-widening income, cultural and social gaps. Strangers are therefore disturbing elements which obtrude the comfortable dichotomies characterising traditional political rhetoric, as they are neither friends nor enemies, but “they can be both” (Bauman 2013: 55). Bauman’s line of thought draws upon assumptions made by Georg Simmel (cf. Wolff 1950), who was the first to describe the stranger not as a complete outcast, but as someone who is near and far at the same time. The stranger, he argues, “is not a wanderer who comes today and goes tomorrow, but is someone who comes today and stays tomorrow” (Simmel in Wolff 1950: 402). Immigrants are therefore strangers, who are more likely to be marginalised, and, above all, to be deprived of their fundamental rights. The stranger is looked at with suspicion and is more likely to be deemed responsible for crimes, which is why there is a widespread impression that im-

migration and criminality are linked. Interpreters therefore have a moral duty to debunk stereotypes concerning immigration: they can raise awareness of the fact that a Nigerian prostitute is not a deviant person, but a slave, a woman deprived of her freedom and dignity. With adequate training, focusing both on interpreting techniques and sociocultural aspects, the interpreter can be a channel through which service providers gain knowledge about the nature of certain crimes and the structure of criminal organisations. Denying people the right to speak is an act of oppression, and it reflects the thoughtless attitude of public authorities which dismiss these issues as “teething problems”, as in the case of the former UK Ministry of Justice who made this remark when confronted with the fact that a woman who had undergone violent sexual abuse was not provided with an interpreter (Hotham 2012). To reference once again to Aristotle, who wrote that justice is a sort of equality, and injustice a sort of inequality, forms of equality that are put in place in modern democracies should aim at eliminating those “unchosen inequalities”, i.e., prior circumstances over which individuals had no control but which have an impact on their participation in society. Providing qualified interpreters would be a step forward in this direction.

5 Conclusion

The objective of this paper was to analyse the many links between public service interpreting and the basic tenets of democracy, as listed in the seminal work by Giovanni Sartori (2008). According to the scholar, a democratic society is characterised by respect for the rights of minorities, and interpreters contribute to safeguarding this right by providing language assistance, as language is considered to be one of the main causes of discrimination in today’s world. Sartori also points out that democracy can only exist where there are some forms of mediation, which settles disputes. As conflicts arise due to a lack of communication, interpreters (either working in war zones or in public services) perfectly embody this value. Lastly, Sartori suggests that equality is also a byword for democracy, and interpreters are professionals who address the need to guarantee migrants’ equal access to healthcare and legal services. At the beginning of this paper, it was pointed out that the face of democracy has changed due to globalisation. People, as well as human rights, know no borders. Therefore, a possible way to prevent

social inequalities from increasing would be the implementation of pluralistic policies that acknowledge “universal personhood” (Koenig & de Guchteneire 2007), whereby rights are granted regardless of a person’s nationality. In this respect, interpreters are the personification of human rights, drivers of peace and democracy: without them, a just world would not be possible.

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