ОТГОВОРНОСТТА ПРЕД ЕЗИКА

Книга 11

СБОРНИК, ПОСВЕТЕН НА
65-ГОДИШНИНАТА НА
ПРОФ. Д-Р ВЕЛКА ПОПОВА

Университетско издателство
„Епископ Константин Преславски“
Шумен, 2025

Сборникът се издава със средства по
вътрешноуниверситетския проект
на Катедрата по български език
„Отговорността през езика“,
№РД-08-98/05.02.2025 г.
Ръководител на колектива: гл. ас. д-р Ани Ангелова

ШУМЕНСКИ УНИВЕРСИТЕТ
„ЕПИСКОП КОНСТАНТИН ПРЕСЛАВСКИ“

ЗАЕДНО ПИШЕМ ИСТОРИЯТА

ISSN 1313-695X (Print)
ISSN 2815-4312 (Online)

C O N T E N T S

A R T I C L E S

GIVING CHILDREN A VOICE – A VERY SPECIAL ENDEAVOUR FOR INTERPRETERS

Gabriele Mack, Amalia Amato
University of Bologna
e-mail: gabriele.mack@unibo.it; amalia.amato@unibo.it

Abstract: This paper explores interpreting for children as a crucial yet under-researched field, highlighting its importance in safeguarding the rights of minors, particularly in migration contexts. Drawing on twelve years of research conducted in Italy, the authors examine interpreter-mediated communication with children from both adult and child perspectives. The findings reveal differing role perceptions among professionals, interpreters' active intercultural mediation, and children's strong preference for clarity, empathy, and autonomy. Despite their resilience, many minors lack adequate language assistance, especially outside institutional settings. The study calls for specialized inter-professional training to ensure equitable access to communication and protection for all children in their best interest.

Key words: interpreter-mediated interviews, unaccompanied minors, migrant children, language assistance

Introduction: Why researching interpreting for children?

Interpreting for children is only apparently a niche topic, both for professionals and for researchers. Ruthless policies as well as social and environmental upheavals are forcing entire communities to seek survival away from their native environments. This often-traumatic uprooting entails complex, multifactorial conditions of vulnerability. Any human being can become vulnerable at some stage in their life, for various reasons and in different ways, due to transient factors or circumstances. Minors are recognized as vulnerable *per se* by international law and national legislations, as their physical, mental, and emotional development is still under way, and they are therefore entitled to special protection and safeguards. Unfavourable personal, social, economic, and educational circumstances can aggravate this intrinsic vulnerability. When children migrate or are on the move, their lack of knowledge of the language spoken in an alien environment is a further disadvantage: how can children and adolescents claim and exercise their right to protection and enjoy existing safeguards if they are unaware of them because they do not understand the local language? Interpreters enabling communication and comprehension across languages and cultures are therefore crucial actors in ensuring respect for and implementation of language rights, without which no other right or protection can be enjoyed. Although it seems evident that communicating with an adult differs from communicating with a child (as demonstrated by psychological, forensic, and social sciences), interpreting is still mainly considered a service for adults. Only recently has research started addressing the specific challenges of interpreting for minors [Amato & Mack 2021a, 2022; NCAC 2024], and institutions are starting to show interest in this issue.[1]

[1] E.g. European Research Council ChildMove project. <https://childmove.com/>; American Bar Association (2023). Working with translators and interpreters in unaccompanied children's immigration pro bono cases.

Taking stock of twelve years of research

The authors of this paper have researched interpreting for children mainly in Italy, starting in 2013 with three EU-funded projects.[2] CO-Minor-IN/QUEST (Cooperation in interpreter-mediated questioning of minors) collected quantitative and qualitative data through a questionnaire aimed at professionals interacting with foreign-language minors in legal settings (police officers, judges and children's lawyers, spoken and sign language interpreters, psychologists, educators, and social workers) which was completed by 848 respondents from sixteen countries. The results [Balogh and Salaets 2015, 175–326; Amato & Mack 2017] highlight divergent, if not conflicting role perceptions among the various groups of professionals, and the need to strengthen mutual trust between all actors at the service of the best interest of the child. The following project, CO-Minor-IN/QUEST II, reversed the research perspective by looking at the perceptions and opinions of children and young people directly involved in communication through interpreters [Amato & Mack 2021a] with a child-centred approach where children were the subjects, not the objects of research. The following project, ChiLLS (Children in Legal Language Settings), narrowed the focus to the (linguistic) rights of particularly vulnerable children by interviewing migrant children in Southern Italy [Amato & Mack 2021b, forthcoming 2026]. This line of research was expanded by a series of MA theses, supervised by the authors, examining interpreting in a recreational paediatrics setting [Amato & Mangoni 2020], the conversational role of a mediator in two interviews with unaccompanied children [Pace 2021], and the experience of unaccompanied children in Northern Italy [Martina 2025].

Adults' perspective

A first tentative answer given by previous research to the question if there is a difference between interpreting for adults and for children is that interpreting for children does not require a different toolbox, but the toolbox must be extra-large [Hitching and Nilsen 2010]. Moreover, interpreters' personal qualities and flexibility seem particularly important, as some individuals interact with children far more effectively than others. This suggests that working with children entails a special responsibility for both interpreters and the other adults involved, who must be aware of their shared objectives, professional norms, and role boundaries in order to cooperate efficiently. The opinions expressed by 27 interpreters and 80 other professionals in the Italian part of the Co-Minor questionnaire [Amato & Mack 2017] on ten statements about the interpreter's function when working with children show remarkable differences between the two groups. Regarding 'support', there is general agreement that the interpreter should not support the child. That said, while 58% of the professionals think that the interpreter should support the interviewer, only 15% of the interpreters share this stance. Regarding expectations about how interpreting should be performed, there is general agreement that interpreters should „interpret faithfully", but for 63% of the other group of professionals, they should also translate „literally". There is also broad agreement on possible initiatives that interpreters may undertake, with 61% to 89% of respondents expressing support. In particular, this

[2] <https://site.unibo.it/interpretazione-minori-cominor1/en>;
<https://site.unibo.it/interpretazione-minori-cominor2/en>;
<https://site.unibo.it/interpretazione-minori-chills/en>

concerns actions such as taking the initiative to explain social-cultural differences, clarifying technical terminology, adjusting language to be child-friendly, putting the child at ease, and maintaining the flow of communication. Unfortunately, the questionnaire did not include equivalent questions regarding such initiatives by other professionals; yet it is striking how much leeway (which also means responsibility) interpreters are granted in tasks which clearly should not be their primary responsibility, such as adjusting language, explaining technical terminology, or sustaining communication. Another important finding from the questionnaire is the widespread absence of preparatory and debriefing meetings, a gap that most interpreters themselves acknowledged and regretted [Amato & Mack 2015].

A different series of research questions is what linguistic and cultural competence and communication skills are necessary to talk to and interpret for children, if and how interpreters display (inter)cultural competence when working with them, and if it should be up to them or the other interlocutors to adapt the language used to the child's needs. Some tentative answers were gained from a case study on interpreting in a recreational paediatrics setting [Amato & Mangoni 2020]. With due caution regarding the sample size and the absence of control groups, interpreters demonstrated both intercultural competence and ability to adapt the language to be more child-friendly: they strive to make instructions more accessible and understandable for children, show awareness of the linguistic and cultural differences between children and adult caregivers, and display sensitivity to and knowledge about the 'world of children' by adding specific references to fairy-tales characters or sport idols and by using child-friendly visual language to make instructions more meaningful for their audience. Such autonomous discursive initiatives demonstrate interpreters' empathy, which in turn may help build and foster positive relationships between children and their caregivers.

A case study analysing an intercultural mediator's[3] conversational moves while interpreting two interviews with unaccompanied minors sheds further light on adult participants' behaviours when communicating with foreign children [Pace 2021]. A single study does not permit generalizations, but it highlights the mediator's tendency to 'help' the interviewers by ensuring that no question remains unanswered, prompting interviewees when they are silent, or even providing answers on their behalf. In pursuing (t)his agenda, on several occasions the mediator suggests to the minor the response he considers most appropriate or adds his own questions or comments in order to elicit more precise or more relevant answers. These findings, which have also been reported in other studies [Keselman et al. 2010] with adult interviewees, suggest that in mediated interactions, interviewers need to be particularly attentive and cautious in monitoring conversational dynamics and carefully observe the conversational behaviour of both the interviewee and the mediator to ensure that a direct communication channel with the child remains open and that the child is not overshadowed by the mediator.

Children's perspective

[3] In Italy in migration settings interpreting is mainly provided by linguistic and cultural mediators who often have a migratory background and are often untrained in interpreting.

The decision to switch from the perspective of adults to children was motivated by the methodological choice to no longer consider children and teenagers as the object but as subjects of research discourse. Instead of observing 'minors' and drawing conclusions from an adult point of view, the voices of the young people directly involved become a source of knowledge and information for adults who want to improve communication with them.

The first move towards this path was an enquiry on the perceptions and preferences of children and adolescents who took part in an interpreter-mediated conversation for the first time in their lives [Amato & Mack 2021a]. Children were placed in the role of a witness and, after watching a video of a pickpocketing event, were questioned by an interviewer through an interpreter, and were later interviewed about their experience of interpreter-mediated communication. A semi-structured interview script was drafted and tailored to different age groups, with questions covering personal feelings, understanding of roles, skills, rapport and trust between the persons involved in the interpreter-mediated interview, as well as preferences for seating arrangements and interpreting techniques. Eighteen young Italians aged between six and seventeen participated in the study. Given the small sample size and the age differences involved, conclusions cannot be generalized; nonetheless, the interviews yielded useful hints, which were summarized in a list of children's preferences. When communicating through an interpreter, children appreciated being informed (i.e. knowing what is going to happen and who does what and why); feeling at ease and not being put under pressure; being listened to carefully; not being interrupted; maintaining eye contact with both interviewer and interpreter; and being allowed to choose the seating arrangement; they disliked whispered interpreting which they perceived as overlapping talk. Body language and extra-linguistic signals, which are an integral part of human communication, deserve special attention, as the children and young adults seem particularly receptive to the non-verbal behaviour of adult participants.

In the second stage of the enquiry, conducted in 2019 [Amato & Mack 2021b, forthcoming], fifteen accompanied and unaccompanied children and teenagers living in two reception centres in Southern Italy were interviewed to better understand their communication needs upon arrival in Italy as migrants or as refugees who did not speak Italian. The research questions focused on the following: the extent to which the participants received language assistance when communicating with authorities and reception-centre professionals; from whom they received information about their whereabouts and administrative procedures they were expected to follow; who helped them communicate with people who did not speak their language; which professionals they came into contact with and how they communicated with them; and whether they felt they understood others and made themselves understood despite their limited or insufficient knowledge of the local language.

The main aspects emerging from the interviews were grouped in three macro-themes: information needs (receiving and providing information); emotional needs (expressing and managing one's emotions); and relational needs (establishing relationships and interacting with others). The results show a lack of structured and organized language assistance which could help these young migrants understand and handle what is happening. The interviewees talked with their interlocutors either directly, using a vehicular language, or through informal mediators, as language assistance was mainly offered when legal obligations required authorities to collect

information, for instance for identification purposes. Upon arrival, and until children reach a secondary reception centre, their own communication needs seem irrelevant for the reception system. Sadly, even in schools and other places where social integration supposed to occur, language assistance was found to be extremely limited. Difficult or impossible communication exposes these children to additional negative experiences and creates further disadvantages. It is therefore unsurprising that all participants expressed a desire to learn the local language as soon as possible, seeing it as a means of becoming autonomous and finding their place in the new country.

The final stage in this series of studies is a replication of the study conducted in Southern Italy seven years later in the Central-Northern region Emilia-Romagna [Martina 2025]. Interviews with ten male teenagers aged between 15 and 18 revealed some similarities with the themes that emerged in the earlier study, but they also brought to light several interesting new aspects. As in the previous research, language assistance is provided mainly in institutional settings where it is a legal requirement, for example at police headquarters, police stations, and during the compulsory initial interview with a social worker. The teenagers who were interviewed said they felt they did not always fully understand what was said to them, nor did they feel fully understood by their interlocutors. Again, during the first days after arrival there is often no linguistic assistance, and alternative solutions are used, such as communicating in vehicular languages with the help of facility staff, friends or acquaintances, or relying on online translation apps (referred to as 'the translator' tout court). Especially in everyday situations and places where young people are expected to learn and socialize, language assistance is frequently absent or provided by peers who act as 'impromptu' mediators. In this case, almost all interviewees expressed a strong desire to achieve autonomy by learning the local language and being able to speak for themselves without linguistic aids or assistance.

Conclusion

The other face of vulnerability is resilience, which often generates responsiveness and a strong aspiration for autonomy in the children encountered throughout this research journey. One of the most important findings is that language support should ideally be a temporary form of assistance, yet it must still be guaranteed to every child who needs it, regardless of where, when and under what circumstances, because it is language support that enables young people to understand and exercise their rights, access important information, and take their future in their own hands. A sad result is that the persistent shortage of trained and knowledgeable mediators and interpreters compels migrant children to seek alternative solutions or rely on people without specific training, especially immediately upon arrival, when their need for support is greatest. Hopefully, these findings will not only inspire further research, but above all, foster specialized, interprofessional training for all stakeholders working with children, prioritizing the best interests of the child, especially in migration and healthcare contexts, though not limited to them. Depriving children of the opportunity to express themselves, understand others and be understood not only contravenes the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (art. 12 and 13), but also jeopardizes the future prospects of a vital component of our societies.

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