

# Tearing down the communication barriers: Towards the Greek register for Public Service Interpreters

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**Abstract.** The creation of a PSI register in Greece, primarily for asylum and immigration purposes, represents a significant stride towards a register of proficient and qualified interpreters for the entire Greek public sector. This initiative marks a pivotal turning point in the crisis management process, as it addresses the communication and language requirements of foreigners lacking a knowledge of Greek. Given the ongoing arrival of refugees and immigrants since 2015 (and the resulting issues) and noting that the Greek Ministry of Migration and Asylum uses contracted providers for all relevant interpretation services, setting up an interpreter register would be an appropriate and sustainable response to the increased interpretation requirements of the said Ministry, as well as of other public sector services. This paper presents an overview of the project launched to lay the necessary foundation for the establishment of a training, accreditation, and management framework for PSIs in the Greek public sector, spanning from untrained bilinguals to fully trained and academically recognized interpreters. The paper aims to position PSI in the broader problem-solving effort of the refugee and immigration crisis in Greece since 2015.

**Keywords:** Public Service Interpreting; asylum and immigration procedures; social justice;

## 1 Introduction

The paper discusses the collaborative initiative between the Department of Foreign Languages, Translation and Interpreting at Ionian University (DFLTI) and the Greek Ministry of Migration and Asylum (MOMA) to enhance the interpreting services by establishing a register of public service interpreters. Interpreting is a complex activity that requires more than mere proficiency in two languages. It involves communication, speech production, language usage, creative problem-solving, and decision-making skills, as well as complex information processing. Public Service Interpreting (PSI) is a multifaceted task that requires specific skills and knowledge (Vlachopoulos and Ioannidis, 2022, 157-169). According to Wadensjö (1998), PSI encompasses "interpreting in public services to facilitate communication between staff and lay people meeting for a specific purpose" (p. 49). The role of PSIs in refugee settings presents notable difficulties while also being fundamental to the fair and just management of vital matters for both non-citizens and government bodies.

The implementation of a PSI registry in Greece - initially for asylum purposes and immigration registering - is a significant stride towards the integration of a registry of qualified and accredited interpreters extending to the public sector in Greece. Additionally, it serves as a crucial milestone in managing crises related to the language and communication necessities of, among others, asylum seekers. Given the continuous influx of asylum seekers since 2015 (and the related problems it has created), and the reliance of the Greek Ministry of Migration and Asylum on contracted providers for all relevant interpreting services, including interviews for asylum seekers, an interpreter register could offer a suitable and long-term solution for the Ministry's enhanced interpreting needs, as well as for other public sector services.

This paper presents an outline of the project, which aspires to design an accreditation and management system for providing interpreting services at authorities as a crucial element for promoting social justice by giving non-

Greek speakers a voice and allowing the authorities to make fair judgements. In this context, A public service interpreter is a professional language service provider who aims to facilitate the access of speakers of other languages to the provision of a service by balancing the power relationship between the state and the citizen. To this end, s/he conveys information through spoken or sign language alternately to both parties (Grbić and Pöllabauer, 2006), with linguistic competence, accuracy, completeness, neutrality, impartiality, and confidentiality.

The objective of the PSI is to enable equal access to public services; the interpreter conveys information alternately in spoken or sign language to both parties with linguistic competency, accuracy, completeness, impartiality, and confidentiality. This is achieved through interactivity in a triadic (foreigner-interpreter-agent) public service setting, resulting in a structured final message.

## **2 The path we chose: Professionalization step by step through training and accreditation**

The project has been designed as follows: First, the groundwork needed to be laid: It is more than obvious that in a field with multiple terminologies as in the realm of interpreting before authorities, the clarification of terminology is crucial. Not only does it define the focus of the research, the focus of the service to be provided, but it also sets the framework for a process of professionalization in the field. We have chosen the term PSI - rather than other terms used internationally (community interpreting, institutional interpreting, etc.) - because we are convinced that this term clearly defines the boundaries of the field of professional PSI.

Since lifelong learning, ensuring progression within the register from lower to higher levels requiring more skills and knowledge, is a prerequisite for an accreditation and training system, other relevant systems have been studied and best practices have been evaluated. The need for professionalization equates to the need for an accreditation system that provides credibility and gives the interpreter 'a licence and a mandate' (Skaaden & Felberg, 2012: 8).

When creating the accreditation system in the form of a dynamic registry to enhance the professionalism of PSI, the team carried out a survey tailored to agents who have hands-on experience in asylum procedures as well as a series of interviews. In the first phase of the project, a PSI register was set up. It contained defined profiles for each level of the system. Moving forward, the next stage will be to devise a code of ethics to endorse, enhance, and sustain an empowering and ethical environment for PSI. Ethics is regarded as fundamental to interpreting and serves as a foundation for training PSI (Vlachopoulos and Ioannidis, 2022, 173). Subsequently, a legal framework will be developed to integrate it into the immigration and asylum procedures. The next step will be a language test for candidates who will be evaluated on their language proficiency, including foreign languages in demand within the public sector, as well as Modern Greek. The candidates will then undertake instruction specifically focused on interpreting ethics; the aim of this introductory training on interpreting ethics is to acquaint PSI register candidates with the distinction between interpreting and other language services, including translation and other forms of intercultural information brokering and to prepare them for linguistic, cultural, interpersonal and legal challenges they might encounter in their line of work.

## **3 The situation in Greece today: Mapping the field<sup>1</sup>**

The provision of interpreting services in asylum and immigration settings needed to be assessed. Our analysis had three objectives. Firstly, to draw objective conclusions on how public servants in the asylum and immigration context perceive interpreters and their collaboration with them. Secondly, to identify measures that can be taken to enhance language service provision in the asylum context. Lastly, to gather data on the language requirements of different departments. The processed data showed that Arabic, Farsi, Urdu, Dari, Punjabi, Somali, Sorani, Kurmanji, both English and French (as *linguae francae*) are the languages that are currently in high demand.

In this context, the research team decided to gather and analyze data from three sources. Initially, quantitative data related to asylum seekers in Greek competent authorities were collected and analyzed, which were sought on the official website of the Ministry of Migration and Asylum. The second source also includes quantitative data resulting from the responses to a questionnaire designed and compiled by the research team; the questionnaire was distributed to and answered by employees in Greek public services related to asylum. Finally, the third source

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<sup>1</sup> For a comprehensive image of the interpreting needs throughout the Greek public sector see Vlachopoulos (2016) and Kozobolis (2022).

includes qualitative data resulting from interviews conducted by members of the research team with employees of Greek public services related to asylum and immigration proceedings. The combination of data from different sources aimed to triangulate them in order to achieve the extraction of results that could be considered reliable.

The results provide a detailed description of the asylum, refugee and immigration situation in Greece regarding the provision of language services (specifically interpreting) in relevant public services - a description that has taken into account both the developments in asylum and immigration studies (Profanter & Owtram, 2013) and the developments in the legal framing of minority and less spoken languages in Europe (Τσίγκου & Λίβαζ 2019). Firstly, it is very important that the perception that the provision of language services by trained interpreters is urgent has now emerged among public officials in this field, in order to achieve the optimal outcome during interpreter-mediated meetings. Furthermore, the difficulties and challenges faced by language service providers in their work have become quite understandable.

On the other hand, there is still much ground to be covered. Despite a clear willingness on the part of public service officials to understand the importance of providing professional language services to their users and the difficulties and challenges interpreters face, there is often mistrust towards interpreters, mainly due to their language deficiencies in both the source (the language of the beneficiaries) and the target language (Greek). Mistrust also stems from interpreters' practices and behaviours, especially those associated with ethical violations (e.g. direct conversation with beneficiaries without informing public officials, interpreters adding their personal thoughts and proposals, etc.).

It is evident that a framework must be established to regulate the provision of language services in the public sector, with an initial focus on sectors challenged by the refugee and immigration crises.

#### 4 Towards the creation of a register of public service interpreters in Greece

Taking into account the registers and certification systems of interpreters in other countries, as well as the Greek reality, where there is no tradition of certification exams for either translators or interpreters, and drawing on the practices of professional associations in Greece and abroad as to the way they differentiate their members, we propose the creation and implementation of a Greek Register of Public Service Interpreters. This register will comprise multiple tiers. The proposed register aims at guaranteeing minimum quality standards for public service interpreting; it is founded on the following principles: (a) structural simplicity and flexibility, (b) inclusion of different professionals that work as interpreters without having studied interpreting, (c) professionalization of public service interpreting (PSI) and (d) a possibility for ascending through the ranks of the register and reaching the highest category through continuous improvement and lifelong learning. As can be seen in table 1, each category of the register matches specific qualifications and an interpreter will be able to rise to the next level/category after meeting the specific requirements of the said tier. The promotion of interpreters into the next tier requires work experience as well as training credentials. The best way to motivate interpreters to add new qualifications, so as to climb the register ladder, is to associate upper register tiers with higher remuneration. Finally, a gradual implementation of the register is proposed, so that all necessary conditions are met progressively (categories D and A at an initial stage, categories C and B after a transitional stage of 3 years).

Category	Educational qualifications	Professional experience
<b>D</b>	language proficiency test and short seminar on ethics in PSI; or a university degree in translation, foreign or applied languages with Greek as the mandatory language and short seminar on ethics in PSI;	no prerequisites for proof of work experience
<b>C</b>	such as Category D and general seminar on public service interpreting (30 ECTS)	at least 40 hours of public service interpreting gained within the context of the Register
<b>B</b>	such as Category C and specialized seminar on interpreting techniques (30 ECTS)	at least 160 hours of public service interpreting gained within the context of the Register

A	<p>an undergraduate or postgraduate degree in public service interpreting and language proficiency test in case of a degree issued in a country other than Greece; or</p> <p>an undergraduate or postgraduate degree in conference interpreting with Greek as the mandatory language and a short seminar on ethics in PSI; or</p> <p>any bachelor's degree, language proficiency test in case of a degree issued in a country other than Greece and a short seminar on ethics in PSI; or</p> <p>such as category B (not at the initial stage)</p>	<p>no prerequisites for proof of work experience</p> <p>no prerequisites for proof of work experience</p> <p>at least 150 days of conference interpreting</p> <p>at least 320 hours of public service interpreting within the framework of the Register and/or 40 days of conference interpreting or combination</p>
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Table 1: The Hellenic Register of Public Service Interpreters

#### 4. From grey zone to a win-win situation

The project timeframe is limited to one year. Currently, the tasks of designing language tests, conducting the tests, and training successful candidates remain. The Greek register for Public Service Interpreters will establish the professional identity by providing a tool that supports interpreters in lesser-spoken languages. This will give professional status to individuals currently working in a grey area.

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