Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, 14(3),65-92, 2026
Print ISSN: 2052-6350(Print)
Online ISSN: 2052-6369(Online)
Website: https://www.eajournals.org/
Publication of the European Centre for Research Training and Development -UK

When Culture Speaks Louder Than Words: Cultural Intelligence and Communicative Misalignment in Asylum Interview Interpreting

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doi: https://doi.org/10.37745/gjahss.2013/vol14n36592 Published May 25, 2026

Citation: Munyangeyo T. (2026) When Culture Speaks Louder Than Words: Cultural Intelligence and Communicative Misalignment in Asylum Interview Interpreting, *Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences*, 14(3),65-92

Abstract: *This paper reconceptualises public service interpreting (PSI) in asylum interviews by positioning cultural miscommunication as a structurally embedded feature of triadic: interaction among interpreters, asylum seekers, and immigration officers. Departing from conduit and equivalence-based approaches, the study integrates interactional sociolinguistics, social semiotics, and practice theory to examine how meaning is negotiated through culturally situated and multimodal communicative resources that extend beyond language alone. Drawing on the theoretical contributions of Erving Goffman, Pierre Bourdieu, and Gunther Kress, interpreting is framed as an interactional practice operating within asymmetrical institutional fields in which communicative authority and epistemic legitimacy are unevenly distributed. The analysis is based on qualitative narratives from interpreters working in asylum settings. Findings demonstrate that communicative breakdowns are systematic rather than incidental, emerging from divergences in narrative organisation, affective expression, and culturally embedded communicative norms. Within institutional frameworks that prioritise linearity and linguistic transparency, silence, hesitation, and culturally specific forms of expression are frequently misinterpreted, which produces epistemic distortion and negative credibility assessments. Although interpreters may possess the cultural intelligence and linguistic competences required to anticipate and mediate such misunderstandings, their capacity to intervene is constrained by institutionalised expectations of communicative neutrality, which limits the use of culturally informed inferencing and repair strategies. The study argues that interpreting entails the ongoing management of alignment, framing, and contextualisation. It concludes by advocating a shift from linguistic accuracy toward multimodal meaning equivalence and by redefining interpreters as epistemic actors within asylum decision-making processes, with implications for PSI theory and interpreter training.*

Keywords: Cultural intelligence; public service interpreting; multimodal communication; interpreter agency; asylum interviews; triadic interaction; epistemic distortion.

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INTRODUCTION

Public service interpreting (PSI) in asylum interview contexts has traditionally been conceptualised as a process of linguistic transfer, a practice that is grounded in the principles of neutrality, fidelity, and equivalence. Within this paradigm, interpreters are expected to function as invisible conduits, transmitting utterances from one language to another without alteration or intervention (Roy, 2000; Mikkelson, 1998). This model assumes that meaning is stable, fully encoded in language, and transferable across linguistic systems without loss. However, such assumptions have been increasingly challenged by research demonstrating that communication, particularly in institutional and intercultural contexts, is inherently interactional, socially situated, and shaped by power relations (Wadensjö, 1998; Hale, 2007; Angelelli, 2004; Pöchhacker, 2016).

In asylum interview settings, the limitations of the conduit model become especially pronounced. These encounters are high-stakes institutional interactions in which communicative outcomes directly influence legal and ethical determinations of credibility, protection, and belonging (Maryns, 2006; Barsky, 1994; Blommaert, 2001). Within this context, the expectation that interpreters merely reproduce linguistic content obscures the complex processes through which meaning is constructed, negotiated, and evaluated. As researchers have shown, asylum narratives are not simply assessed for factual accuracy but for their conformity to implicit institutional norms of coherence, consistency, and emotional authenticity (Berk-Seligson, 2002; Jacquemet, 2005; Munyangeyo, 2016, 2022). These norms are culturally specific and often remain unarticulated, and this creates conditions in which communicative practices that diverge from them are misrecognised as evidence of inconsistency or deception.

By examining interpreting in asylum interviews as a form of multimodal communicative mediation within a triadic interactional space involving interpreter, asylum seeker, and immigration officer, this article contributes to the ongoing reconceptualisation of PSI. Rather than treating communication as a dyadic exchange between speaker and listener, this perspective foregrounds the relational complexity of triadic encounters, where meaning emerges through the interaction of participants with differing linguistic repertoires, cultural frames, institutional roles, and communicative intentions (Wadensjö, 1998; Tipton & Furmanek, 2016). In such settings, communicative success cannot be reduced to linguistic accuracy alone. It rather depends on the alignment of interpretive frameworks, expectations, and semiotic resources.

A central argument of this study is that communicative breakdown in asylum interviews is not incidental. It is systematically produced through cultural misalignment. Drawing on interactional sociolinguistics, miscommunication can be understood as arising from mismatches in contextualisation cues. This alludes to culturally specific ways of signalling meaning through discourse structure, tone, pacing, and other semiotic features (Gumperz, 1982). For instance, asylum seekers may organise their narratives according to culturally patterned forms that prioritise relational or experiential coherence rather than linear chronology. However, within institutional frameworks that privilege chronological detail and consistency, such narratives may be interpreted as incoherent or unreliable (Maryns, 2006). Similarly, silence, hesitation, or indirectness, which are often meaningful within particular cultural contexts, may be misread as evasiveness or lack of credibility.

These dynamics point to the fundamentally multimodal nature of meaning-making in asylum interviews. As argued by Kress (2010) and Norris (2004), communication extends beyond verbal language to include gesture, gaze, silence, and affect. Yet institutional practices in asylum procedures tend to privilege verbalised, transcriptable content, marginalising other semiotic modes. This creates a disjunction between how meaning is produced and how it is evaluated, increasing the likelihood of epistemic distortion, whereby culturally salient meaning is lost or transformed in the process of interpretation (Blommaert, 2001).

Within this complex communicative environment, interpreters occupy a pivotal position. They are not simply linguistic intermediaries but rather interactional agents responsible for managing alignment, facilitating understanding, and negotiating meaning across cultural and institutional boundaries (Wadensjö, 1998; Angelelli, 2004). This interpreting process involves the use of culturally informed inferencing strategies, whereby interpreters draw on their knowledge of cultural norms, discourse practices, and contextual cues to reconstruct meaning that is not explicitly encoded in language. Such inferencing is essential in cases where direct equivalence is unavailable or where meaning is embedded in culturally specific forms of expression.

Equally important are repair strategies, which enable interpreters to address misunderstandings as they arise. Repair may take the form of clarification requests, reformulation, or contextualisation, and is a fundamental feature of interactional communication (Schegloff, Jefferson, & Sacks, 1977). In triadic asylum encounters, repair is not simply a conversational mechanism but a critical tool for safeguarding communicative accuracy and fairness. However, the use of such strategies is often constrained by institutional expectations of neutrality, which discourage interpreters from intervening beyond the strict reproduction of speech (Hale, 2007; Mikkelson, 1998).

At the heart of the present study lies this tension between interactional necessity and institutional constraints. While interpreters possess the linguistic competences and cultural intelligence required to anticipate and resolve pragmatic misunderstandings, their ability to act on this knowledge is frequently limited. Cultural intelligence, as conceptualised by Earley and Ang (2003), entails the capacity to function effectively across cultural contexts. In interpreting, however, this extends to the ability to recognise culturally embedded meaning, navigate differences in communicative norms, and mediate between divergent interpretive frameworks (Tipton & Furmanek, 2016). Nevertheless, when neutrality is operationalised as non-intervention, this resource remains underutilised, which leads to communicative breakdown and, ultimately, to distorted representations of asylum seekers' narratives.

By foregrounding triadic misalignment and communicative failure, this article challenges the adequacy of conduit-based models and advances a reconceptualisation of interpreting as epistemically consequential mediation. It argues that far from ensuring fairness, neutrality may inadvertently reproduce inequality by privileging linguistic form over culturally situated meaning**.** In this regard, it obscures the role of interpreters as active participants in the construction of knowledge within asylum procedures.

Drawing on qualitative narratives from 25 practising interpreters, the study demonstrates that meaning in asylum interviews is culturally situated, multimodally constituted, and interactionally negotiated, rather than transparently transmitted. The findings highlight the centrality of culturally informed

inferencing and repair strategies in achieving communicative alignment, as well as the consequences of their suppression. Ultimately, the article calls for a re-specification of interpreter agency in PSI theory, training, and policy, which recognises interpreters as epistemic agents whose decisions shape not only communication but also the outcomes of asylum claims**.**

Rationale and research questions

Despite a growing body of scholarship that recognises the complexity of interpreter-mediated interaction, a significant gap in the literature concerning the role of cultural misunderstanding as a structuring condition of communicative breakdown in triadic institutional encounters remains. While interpreting studies have moved beyond the traditional conduit model to embrace interactional, sociological, and multimodal perspectives (Wadensjö, 1998; Angelelli, 2004; Pöchhacker, 2016), these approaches have not been sufficiently integrated to account for how cultural misalignment systematically shapes communicative outcomes in high-stakes settings such as asylum interviews.

Existing research has identified several relevant dimensions. From a sociological standpoint, Bourdieu's (1991) notion of symbolic power and linguistic capital has been widely used to explain how institutional contexts privilege certain forms of speech and marginalise others. In interpreting studies, this framework has been extended by Inghilleri (2003, 2005) and Munyangeyo (2022), who demonstrate how interpreters operate within fields characterised by unequal distributions of communicative legitimacy. Similarly, Blommaert (2001) introduces the concept of narrative inequality, showing how asylum seekers' accounts are evaluated against culturally specific norms that are rarely made explicit. These insights highlight the structural conditions under which communication takes place but do not fully explain how interactional processes produce miscommunication in real time.

At the same time, interactional sociolinguistics provides tools for analysing how meaning is negotiated through contextualisation cues and culturally specific communicative practices (Gumperz, 1982). Miscommunication, from this perspective, arises when participants draw on different interpretive frameworks, which leads to divergent understandings of the same utterance. However, while this approach offers a micro-level account of interaction, it does not always address how such misunderstandings are institutionally interpreted and consequentially evaluated, particularly in legal or administrative contexts.

Furthermore, the recognition that communication is inherently multimodal, involving not only language but also gesture, silence, and affect (Kress, 2010; Norris, 2004) complicates this picture. In asylum interviews, these semiotic resources play a crucial role in conveying meaning. Yet institutional practices tend to privilege verbal, transcriptable content, which often disregards or misinterprets other modes. This creates a mismatch between meaning production and institutional evaluation, which increases the likelihood of systematic misunderstanding.

Although sociological, interactional, and multimodal research strands have each contributed valuable insights, they have nonetheless largely been developed in parallel. A need for a more integrated account that explains how power relations, cultural difference, and multimodal meaning-making intersect within the triadic structure of interpreter-mediated interaction to produce patterned

communicative breakdown remains. This gap is particularly evident in the context of asylum interviews, where the consequences of miscommunication are not merely interactional but epistemic and could be legal.

In asylum procedures, decision-making often hinges on assessments of credibility, coherence, and emotional authenticity (Barsky, 1994; Maryns, 2006). However, these evaluative criteria are themselves culturally constructed and institutionally embedded, reflecting specific expectations about how a "credible" narrative should be structured and delivered. As Berk-Seligson (2002) demonstrates in the context of courtroom interpreting, linguistic and discursive variation can significantly influence perceptions of truthfulness. In asylum settings, similar dynamics apply, with applicants' narratives being filtered through institutional structures that privilege linearity, consistency, and explicit detail (Blommaert, 2001; Maryns, 2006).

The consequence is that communicative practices that diverge from these expectations, such as non-linear storytelling, culturally specific expressions of emotion, or the use of silence, are often misrecognised as indicators of inconsistency or deception. This misrecognition is not simply a matter of misunderstanding but reflects deeper epistemic inequalities, whereby certain ways of knowing and expressing experience are systematically devalued (Fricker, 2009). Within this context, interpreters occupy a crucial yet ambivalent role. They are positioned as facilitators of communication, yet their ability to mediate meaning is constrained by institutional norms that prioritise neutrality and non-intervention (Hale, 2007; Mikkelson, 1998).

This tension highlights the importance of cultural intelligence as a mediating resource. Cultural intelligence, as conceptualised by Earley and Ang (2003), refers to the ability to function effectively across cultural contexts by recognising and adapting to different norms and practices. In interpreting, this extends to the capacity to engage in culturally informed inferencing and repair, which enables the interpreter to reconstruct meaning that is not explicitly encoded in language and to address misunderstandings as they arise. However, despite its relevance, the role of cultural intelligence in PSI has not been systematically theorised, particularly in relation to institutional constraints and ethical norms (Tipton & Furmanek, 2016; Munyangeyo et al., 2016).

The present study seeks to address this gap by examining how cultural misalignment operates within triadic asylum interview interactions, and how interpreters navigate the resulting communicative challenges. By focusing on interpreters' narratives, the study aims to capture the interactional, cognitive, and ethical dimensions of mediation, with particular attention to the role of culturally informed inferencing and repair strategies.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How does cultural misalignment manifest in triadic asylum interview interactions?

2. In what ways do interpreters mediate or fail to mediate these misunderstandings?

3. What role does cultural intelligence play in shaping communicative outcomes?

4. How do institutional norms of neutrality constrain interpreter agency?

The first question allows to identify the phenomenon to establish the core empirical problem, the forms and sites of communicative breakdown within asylum interviews, and functions as the descriptive and diagnostic foundation of the study. The second question focusses on the interactional mediation process by moving from identifying the problem to examining interactional responses. It investigates interpreter practices, repair strategies, alignment, and framing; and introduces interpreter agency within the communicative process. The third question seeks to theorise why mediation succeeds or fails, and to position cultural intelligence as the key mediating mechanism influencing meaning negotiation, credibility, and understanding. It is therefore shifting the discussion from practice to analytical explanation. The fourth question examines the structural-institutional constraint by broadening the analysis from interactional practice to institutional power structures. It allows to explain why culturally informed mediation may be suppressed despite interpreters' competence, as it provides the critical and policy-oriented dimension of the argument.

By addressing these questions, the study aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of interpreting as a form of multimodal, interactional, and epistemically consequential mediation, and to inform the development of theoretical, pedagogical, and institutional frameworks that better reflect the realities of practice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This study is underpinned by an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates insights from interactional sociolinguistics, social semiotics, sociological theory, and interpreting studies to conceptualise asylum interview interpreting as a form of multimodal, culturally situated, and interactionally negotiated mediation. The argument that communicative breakdown in interpreter-mediated asylum encounters is not accidental but arises from systematic misalignment across cultural, interactional, and institutional dimensions is central to this framework.

From conduit to interactional and sociological models

The conduit model has long dominated professional norms in public service interpreting (PSI), positioning interpreters as neutral, invisible transmitters of linguistic content (Roy, 2000; Mikkelson, 1998). Within this paradigm, meaning is assumed to reside fully in language and to be transferable across linguistic systems without transformation. However, this view has been widely critiqued for its reductionist understanding of communication, which overlooks the interactional and socially embedded nature of meaning-making (Wadensjö, 1998; Hale, 2007; Munyangeyo et al., 2016; Pöchhacker, 2016).

Wadensjö (1998) reconceptualises interpreting as interactional coordination, emphasising the interpreter's role in managing alignment, turn-taking, and repair. Interpreting, in this view, involves not only the rendering of utterances but also the negotiation of meaning between participants, each of whom brings distinct linguistic and cultural resources to the interaction. Similarly, Angelelli (2004) demonstrates that interpreters inevitably assume visible, agentive roles, even in institutional settings

where neutrality is formally prescribed. These findings challenge the feasibility of non-intervention and highlight the interpreter's role as an active participant in communicative processes.

From a sociological perspective, interpreting must also be understood within fields of power and institutional contexts. Bourdieu (1991) conceptualises language as a form of symbolic capital, whereby certain modes of expression are legitimised while others are marginalised. Inghilleri (2003, 2005) extends this framework to interpreting, arguing that interpreters operate at the intersection of competing habitus, which mediates between the communicative practices of asylum seekers and the institutional expectations of potential legal dimensions. This mediation is not neutral but shaped by the unequal distribution of communicative legitimacy, which has direct implications for how meaning is interpreted and evaluated.

In asylum interviews, these dynamics are particularly acute. Interpreters do not simply translate speech; they facilitate access to institutionally recognised forms of knowledge and credibility. This positions them as key actors in the production of meaning within a structured field, where communicative practices are unequally valued and where misalignment can have significant consequences.

Interactional sociolinguistics and miscommunication

Interactional sociolinguistics provides a crucial framework for understanding how miscommunication arises in intercultural encounters. Gumperz (1982) introduces the concept of contextualisation cues, which refers to the linguistic and paralinguistic signals through which speakers indicate how their utterances should be interpreted. These cues are culturally specific and often implicit, meaning that participants from different backgrounds may interpret them differently.

In asylum interview settings, such mismatches are not merely interactional but institutionally consequential. Maryns (2006) demonstrates how discrepancies in narrative structure, coherence, and detail are often interpreted as signs of inconsistency, thereby affecting credibility assessments. Similarly, Jacquemet (2005) highlights how cross-linguistic and cross-cultural communication in legal settings involves transidiomatic practices, where meaning is negotiated across overlapping linguistic and semiotic systems.

These insights underscore the importance of culturally informed inferencing in interpreting. Interpreters must actively interpret not only what is said but how it is said and what it implies within a given cultural context. This involves drawing on background knowledge, recognising culturally specific discourse patterns, and reconstructing meaning that may not be explicitly encoded in language. Without such inferencing, communicative intent may be misrepresented, leading to misunderstanding and, in the asylum context, potentially adverse outcomes.

Equally important is the role of repair in addressing miscommunication. Repair, as conceptualised in conversation analysis (Schegloff et al., 1977), refers to the practices through which participants resolve problems in speaking, hearing, or understanding. In interpreter-mediated interactions, repair often requires intervention, such as clarification, reformulation, or contextualisation. However, institutional

expectations of neutrality may discourage such practices, limiting the interpreter's ability to resolve misunderstandings effectively (Hale, 2007).

Multimodality and social semiotics

A key limitation of traditional interpreting models is their focus on verbal language as the primary carrier of meaning. Social semiotic approaches challenge this assumption by emphasising the multimodal nature of communication, in which meaning is produced through a range of semiotic resources, including gesture, gaze, posture, silence, and affect (Kress, 2010; Norris, 2004).

In asylum interviews, these multimodal resources play a crucial role in conveying emotional states, credibility, and experiential meaning. However, institutional practices tend to privilege verbalised and recordable content, often ignoring or misinterpreting non-verbal cues. This creates a mismatch between how meaning is produced and how it is evaluated, increasing the risk of miscommunication.

For interpreters, this raises the challenge of how to mediate multimodal meaning within a predominantly linguistic framework. Culturally informed inferencing becomes essential in recognising the significance of non-verbal cues, while repair strategies may involve making implicit meaning explicit. Without such mediation, important aspects of communication, such as affect or culturally specific forms of expression, may be lost, which could result in epistemic distortion (Blommaert, 2001).

Narrative inequality and credibility

Research on asylum discourse has consistently shown that credibility assessments are shaped by culturally specific expectations of narrative form. Blommaert (2001) and Maryns (2006) demonstrate that asylum seekers' narratives are often evaluated according to Western norms of linearity, consistency, and detail, which may not align with the communicative practices of applicants from different cultural backgrounds.

Barsky (1994) further argues that asylum procedures are governed by institutional discourses that define what constitutes a "valid" refugee narrative. These discourses privilege certain forms of storytelling while marginalising others, creating conditions of narrative inequality. Berk-Seligson (2002) similarly shows that linguistic variation can influence perceptions of credibility in legal contexts, highlighting the role of language in shaping judicial outcomes.

Within this framework, interpreters play a critical role in mediating between competing narrative conventions. Culturally informed inferencing allows them to recognise the coherence of narratives that may appear fragmented or inconsistent within institutional frameworks, while repair strategies enable them to bridge gaps in understanding. However, when such strategies are constrained, narrative misalignment can lead to systematic misrecognition, with significant consequences for asylum seekers.

Cultural intelligence and interpreter mediation

Cultural intelligence (Earley & Ang, 2003) provides a valuable framework for understanding the competencies required for effective mediation in intercultural contexts. It encompasses the ability to interpret unfamiliar behaviours, adapt to different cultural norms, and respond appropriately in cross-cultural interactions. In the context of PSI, cultural intelligence extends beyond individual competence to include the capacity to mediate meaning across institutional and cultural boundaries (Tipton & Furmanek, 2016).

Despite its relevance, the role of cultural intelligence in interpreting has been relatively underexplored. Existing research has focused primarily on linguistic competence and ethical norms, often neglecting the cognitive and interactional processes involved in cultural mediation. This study addresses this gap by emphasising the importance of culturally informed inferencing and repair strategies as core components of interpreter competence.

Culturally informed inferencing enables interpreters to reconstruct meaning that is implicit, culturally embedded, or multimodal, while repair strategies allow them to intervene when misunderstandings arise. Together, these practices form the basis of effective communicative mediation in triadic asylum encounters. However, their deployment is often constrained by institutional expectations of neutrality, which prioritise non-intervention over communicative clarity.

This tension highlights the need to reconceptualise interpreter competence not as adherence to neutrality but as the ability to navigate complexity, manage misalignment, and facilitate understanding. Cultural intelligence, in this sense, is not an optional skill but a central mechanism for ensuring communicative justice in asylum procedures.

METHODOLOGY

Research design

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretivist research design, which is grounded in the assumption that meaning is socially constructed, context-dependent, and mediated through interaction (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). Given the study focuses on culturally situated communication, triadic interaction, and interpreter agency, an interpretivist approach is particularly appropriate, as it allows for an in-depth exploration of how interpreters make sense of and respond to complex communicative situations.

Rather than treating interpreting as a purely technical or linguistic activity, this study conceptualises it as an interactional and epistemic practice, embedded within institutional structures and shaped by power relations (Wadensjö, 1998; Inghilleri, 2005). Accordingly, the research design prioritises interpreters' lived experiences and reflective accounts, recognising that practitioners possess situated knowledge of the subtle dynamics of intercultural communication that are not easily accessible through observational or experimental methods.

A narrative inquiry approach was employed to capture how interpreters retrospectively construct meaning around episodes of communicative breakdown, cultural misunderstanding, and ethical

tension (Riessman, 2008). Narrative data are particularly well suited to this study because they provide access to interpretive processes, decision-making rationales, and the role of culturally informed inferencing and repair strategies in real-time interaction. At the same time, narrative accounts are understood not as transparent representations of events, but as discursively constructed reflections shaped by professional norms, institutional expectations, and retrospective sense-making (Barkhuizen, 2013).

Participants and data collection

The study draws on a purposive sample of 25 professional interpreters with experience in asylum interview settings. Participants were recruited through professional networks, interpreter associations, and academic contacts, ensuring that all contributors had direct, first-hand experience of interpreter-mediated asylum procedures. The sample included interpreters working across a range of language pairs and institutional contexts, which henceforth captured variation in communicative practices and constraints.

Data were collected through open-ended written narratives as self-reported experiences, which were elicited via a structured set of prompts designed to encourage detailed reflection on specific interpreting encounters. Participants were invited to describe situations involving communicative breakdown or misunderstanding, as well as instances of cultural misalignment between participants. They were also asked to reflect on moments that required inferencing or interpretive judgement, particularly where meaning was not immediately transparent. In addition, the prompts explored situations in which repair strategies were, or could have been, employed to address emerging misunderstandings. Finally, participants were encouraged to consider ethical dilemmas related to neutrality and intervention, focusing on how they navigated tensions between institutional expectations and the practical demands of communication.

This approach allowed participants to provide rich, contextually embedded accounts while retaining control over how their experiences were represented. The use of open-ended prompts facilitated the emergence of unanticipated themes, while also ensuring alignment with the study's analytical focus.

Particular attention was paid to eliciting accounts that captured the triadic nature of interaction, including the perspectives and communicative behaviours of asylum seekers and immigration officers, as mediated through the interpreter. This enabled the analysis to move beyond individual decision-making and consider how miscommunication emerges relationally across participants.

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed. Participants provided informed consent, and all data were anonymised to protect confidentiality. Given the sensitivity of asylum contexts, interpreters were encouraged to avoid identifying details, and the analysis focuses on patterns rather than individual cases.

Qualitative questionnaire

To elicit the narrative data underpinning the findings and subsequent data synthesis, this study employed a set of 15 open-ended qualitative questions designed to capture interpreters' lived experiences of communicative mediation in asylum interview settings:

Question 1. Can you describe a situation in an asylum interview where you felt that language alone was insufficient to convey meaning?

Question 2. How do you interpret and respond to non-verbal cues (e.g., gestures, tone, silence) during an interview?

Question 3. In your experience, how does cultural background influence the way asylum seekers structure and tell their stories?

Question 4. Can you recall a moment when you had to make a decision that went beyond literal translation and what guided your choice?

Question 5. How do you manage situations where there is a mismatch between institutional expectations (e.g., neutrality) and the communicative needs of the interaction?

Question 6. What role does your own cultural knowledge or intuition play during interpreting in asylum settings?

Question 7. How do you handle silence in interviews, especially when it may carry culturally specific meanings?

Question 8. Can you describe an instance where you felt your intervention (or lack of it) may have impacted the outcome or understanding of the interview?

Question 9. How do you navigate emotional or affective expressions that may not translate directly across cultures?

Question 10. In what ways do power dynamics within the asylum interview setting affect your role as an interpreter?

Question 11. How do you establish alignment or rapport between the interviewer and the asylum seeker?

Question 12. Can you describe any strategies you use to repair misunderstandings during the interaction?

Question 13. How do you perceive your role: as a neutral translator, a mediator, or something else? Why?

Question 14. What kinds of ethical dilemmas have you encountered in your interpreting practice, and how did you resolve them?

Question 15. How do you develop and refine your cultural intelligence over time as a professional interpreter?

The questionnaire was developed in alignment with the study's theoretical orientation, particularly its focus on triadic interaction, cultural misalignment, multimodal meaning-making, and interpreter agency. Rather than seeking standardised or generalisable responses, the instrument aimed to generate rich, reflective accounts that would illuminate the processes through which meaning is negotiated, misunderstood, and, at times, repaired in practice.

The design of the questions was informed by prior research in interactional sociolinguistics, interpreting studies, and narrative inquiry (Wadensjö, 1998; Gumperz, 1982; Riessman, 2008), as well as by the conceptual framework of cultural intelligence (Earley & Ang, 2003). Particular attention was paid to prompting participants to reflect on specific episodes of communicative difficulty, rather than offering abstract or generalised opinions. This approach enabled the collection of data that capture not only what interpreters do, but also how they interpret their own decision-making processes, including moments of uncertainty, constraint, and ethical tension.

The 15 questions were structured around several interrelated domains which are central to the study. The questionnaire was designed to elicit interpreters' reflections on a range of interrelated dimensions central to their professional practice in asylum settings. In particular, it invited participants to recount experiences of communicative breakdown, with a focus on misunderstandings arising from cultural differences. It also explored the narrative and interactional dynamics that characterise the triadic encounter between interpreter, asylum seeker, and immigration officer, paying attention to how meaning is negotiated across these roles. Participants were encouraged to reflect on the multimodal nature of communication, including the significance of silence, affect, and other non-verbal cues in shaping understanding.

Furthermore, the questions probed instances in which interpreters were required to engage in culturally informed inferencing, especially in situations where meaning was not directly translatable across languages and cultural frameworks. The instrument also addressed the use and non-use of repair strategies, inviting participants to consider moments where they chose to intervene to resolve misunderstandings, as well as instances where they refrained from doing so. Finally, the questionnaire examined interpreters' perceptions of institutional norms, with particular emphasis on the principle of neutrality and the ways in which it influences, and at times constrains, interpreter behaviour in practice.

By structuring the research instrument in this way, the study was able to capture both the recurring patterns of miscommunication and the conditions under which such breakdowns were mitigated or exacerbated. The questions encouraged participants to articulate how they navigated tensions between linguistic fidelity and communicative adequacy, and how they understood their role within the institutional constraints of asylum procedures.

More importantly, the questionnaire was not intended to measure competence or evaluate performance, but to provide insight into the interactional realities of professional practice. Participants were therefore invited to reflect candidly on situations where communication succeeded as well as those where it failed, including moments where they felt unable to act despite recognising misunderstanding. This emphasis on reflexivity is consistent with narrative approaches to qualitative research, which view participants as knowledgeable agents capable of interpreting and theorising their own experiences (Barkhuizen, 2013).

The resulting dataset forms the empirical basis for the analysis presented in Sections 5 and 6. Through these questions, interpreters' narratives reveal how communicative breakdown is not incidental but systematically produced through cultural misalignment, multimodal misrecognition, and institutional constraint. At the same time, the data highlight the critical role of cultural intelligence, inferencing, and repair strategies in mediating these challenges, thereby supporting the study's broader argument for a reconceptualisation of interpreting as epistemically consequential, triadic communicative mediation.

Analytical procedure

Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021), combining inductive coding with theory-informed interpretation. This approach was selected for its flexibility and its suitability for examining patterns of meaning across qualitative datasets, while allowing for engagement with existing theoretical frameworks.

The analysis proceeded in stages. Firstly, an initial coding framework was developed inductively to capture recurring patterns across the dataset. This framework focused on different dimensions of the interpreters' accounts, including forms of miscommunication and misunderstanding, variations in narrative structure and coherence, and the role of affective expression and silence in shaping interaction. It also attended to interpreters' decision-making processes, particularly in moments requiring judgement or intervention, as well as to the influence of institutional constraints on their ability to act. Secondly, these codes were refined and organised into thematically coherent categories, informed by the study's theoretical orientation. In particular, the analysis was guided by concepts from interactional sociolinguistics (Gumperz, 1982), multimodality (Kress, 2010), and sociological approaches to interpreting (Inghilleri, 2005). This allowed for a more nuanced interpretation of how communicative breakdown is culturally and institutionally structured.

A key focus of the analysis was the identification of culturally informed inferencing and repair strategies. Particular attention was paid to instances in which interpreters drew on cultural knowledge to interpret implicit or contextually embedded meaning, as well as moments where they anticipated potential misunderstanding before it became interactionally consequential. The analysis also examined how interpreters attempted or, in some cases, chose not to attempt, repair through practices such as clarification, reformulation, or contextualisation. In addition, it explored how interpreters negotiated the tension between achieving communicative effectiveness and adhering to institutional norms of neutrality, especially in situations where intervention might have improved understanding but risked being perceived as overstepping professional boundaries.These instances were analysed not only in terms of individual decision-making but also in relation to the triadic interactional dynamics within

which they occurred. Drawing on Goffman's (1981) concept of footing, the analysis considered how interpreters shifted alignment between participants and how these shifts influenced communicative outcomes.

Throughout the analytical process, attention was paid to the ways in which institutional expectations shaped interpreter behaviour, particularly in relation to neutrality and non-intervention. This enabled the identification of patterns in which culturally informed inferencing and repair strategies were suppressed, constrained, or selectively deployed, leading to systematic forms of miscommunication.

Methodological limitations

While narrative data provide valuable insight into interpreters' experiences, they are retrospective and interpretive, and therefore subject to selective recall and professional framing (Barkhuizen, 2013). The study does not claim to capture interactional detail at the level of micro-analysis, as would be possible through recorded data. Instead, it offers a practice-oriented perspective on how interpreters understand and navigate communicative complexity.

Despite these limitations, the approach is well suited to the study's aim of exploring how interpreters conceptualise and deploy cultural intelligence, inferencing, and repair strategies within real-world institutional constraints.

FINDINGS

This section presents the findings from the qualitative analysis of 25 interpreters' narratives, organised around interrelated themes that foreground communicative breakdown and misalignment in the triadic encounter between interpreter, asylum seeker, and immigration officer. The analysis demonstrates that meaning in asylum interview interpreting is not merely transferred but culturally situated, multimodally constituted, and interactionally negotiated. In doing so, the findings challenge conduit-based models of interpreting and instead position interpreters as epistemic agents operating within asymmetrical institutional contexts.

Across the dataset, communicative failure emerges not as an anomaly but as a systematically patterned outcome of cultural misunderstanding, institutional constraints, and the underutilisation of interpreters' cultural intelligence. The themes below illustrate how these breakdowns occur and under what conditions they may be mitigated.

Narrative misalignment and the construction of inconsistency

Failures frequently arise when the immigration officer expects linear, detailed narratives, while the asylum seeker provides circular, fragmented, or culturally patterned accounts:

- *"The officer kept asking for dates, but the applicant spoke in events and relationships. It sounded inconsistent, but it wasn't."* (I4)
- *"I could see both sides talking past each other, one wanted chronology of events while the other was focussing on the meaning."* (I12)

A dominant pattern across the data concerns misalignment in narrative expectations between asylum seekers and immigration officers. In 19 out of 25 accounts, interpreters described situations where officers expected linear, chronologically ordered narratives, while asylum seekers produced accounts structured around events, relationships, or culturally specific storytelling conventions. These differences frequently resulted in the perception of inconsistency or evasiveness.

From an interactional sociolinguistic perspective, this reflects a mismatch in contextualisation cues (Gumperz, 1982), where participants rely on different cultural norms to signal coherence and relevance. Interpreters reported that, without explicit mediation, such differences were rarely recognised by officers, leading to negative credibility assessments. As one interpreter noted, "they wanted dates, but the story was structured around the meaning."

This finding aligns with prior research demonstrating that asylum decision-making often privileges Western narrative norms, particularly linearity and detail (Maryns, 2006). In Bourdieusian terms, these norms function as institutionalised forms of communicative capital (Bourdieu, 1991), which asylum seekers may not possess. Consequently, narrative misalignment becomes a site where cultural difference is reinterpreted as epistemic deficiency.

Silence as misrecognised communicative resource

Silence is often interpreted by officers as evasiveness or lack of credibility, while interpreters recognise it as trauma, fear, or cultural respect:

- *"The silence was read as avoidance, but I knew it was distress."* (I7)
- *"I hesitated to explain the silence, and it changed how the officer reacted."* (I19)

Silence emerged as a recurrent source of misunderstanding, reported in 17 cases. Interpreters frequently identified silence as a meaningful communicative resource, indexing trauma, fear, or culturally appropriate restraint. However, in the institutional context of the asylum interview, silence was often interpreted by officers as avoidance, hesitation, or lack of credibility.

This misrecognition reflects what Kress (2010) describes as the selective privileging of certain semiotic modes, which are in this case, spoken language, over others. Silence, as a multimodal resource, is rendered invisible within a framework that equates meaning with verbal output. Interpreters reported that when they refrained from intervening, silence was frequently recontextualised as negative evidence.

The data further suggest that interpreters are acutely aware of the interactional significance of silence, yet often feel constrained by institutional norms of neutrality. This creates a paradox whereby interpreters possess the cultural intelligence necessary to interpret silence but are discouraged from operationalising it, resulting in communicative breakdown.

Affective misrecognition and the cultural politics of emotion

Emotional expression is often misaligned across cultures, leading to incorrect assessments:

- *"The officer expected visible emotion, but the applicant was very controlled."* (I2)
- *"When emotion did come out, it seemed exaggerated to the officer."* (I15)

Affective expression constitutes another key site of misalignment. Interpreters described how differences in cultural norms of emotional display led to systematic misinterpretation. In some cases, asylum seekers' restrained affect was perceived as a lack of sincerity; in others, intense emotional expression was interpreted as exaggeration.

These findings resonate with research on the cultural politics of emotion (Ahmed, 2004), which highlights how emotional expressions are socially and culturally regulated. Within the asylum interview, emotional display becomes an implicit evidence for credibility, yet this is culturally specific and rarely made explicit.

From a multimodal perspective, affect is conveyed through a combination of verbal and non-verbal cues (Kress, 2010). However, interpreters noted that much of this affective meaning is lost or distorted in translation, particularly when institutional expectations prioritise lexical accuracy over expressive equivalence. As a result, affect becomes another domain in which cultural difference is misread as inconsistency or unreliability.

Cultural meaning loss and semantic reduction

Key concepts, metaphors, or social references lack direct equivalents and are often flattened in translation:

- *"A term related to honour didn't carry the same weight in translation."* (I6)
- *"I translated it literally, but the meaning was lost."* (I21)

The analysis reveals pervasive loss of culturally embedded meaning in translation. In 20 cases, interpreters reported difficulties rendering culture-specific concepts, metaphors, and social references that lack direct equivalents in the target language. When translated literally, such expressions often undergo semantic reduction, stripping them of their contextual significance.

This finding challenges equivalence-based models of translation, which assume that meaning can be transferred across languages without loss (Pym, 2010). Instead, the data support a social semiotic view of meaning (Kress, 2010), in which meaning is shaped by culturally situated sign-making practices.

Interpreters described a tension between maintaining fidelity to the source utterance and ensuring that its pragmatic and cultural meaning is understood. When constrained to literal translation, they reported that meaning was often flattened, leading to partial or distorted understanding by the officer. This reinforces the argument that linguistic accuracy alone is insufficient for achieving communicative equivalence in intercultural contexts.

Constrained interpreter agency and the non-use of cultural intelligence

Breakdowns are frequently linked not to absence of cultural knowledge, but to constraints on using it:

- *"I knew what was missing, but I didn't feel allowed to intervene."* (I9)
- *"You see the misunderstanding happening in real time, but you stay silent."* (I23)

A critical finding concerns the constraint of interpreter agency, particularly in relation to institutional expectations of neutrality. In 16 narratives, interpreters described recognising communicative breakdowns in real time but choosing not to intervene due to perceived role boundaries. In 18 cases, neutrality was explicitly cited as a limiting factor in their ability to mediate meaning.

This reflects the enduring influence of the conduit model of interpreting, which conceptualises interpreters as passive transmitters of language (Roy, 2000). However, the data clearly demonstrate that interpreters engage in complex, moment-to-moment decision-making, involving risk assessment and ethical judgement.

Importantly, the issue is not a lack of cultural intelligence but its suppression within institutional constraints. Interpreters possess the knowledge required to resolve misunderstandings but are often discouraged from using it, leading to preventable communicative failure. This supports Wadensjö's (1998) argument that interpreting is inherently interactional, involving coordination and negotiation rather than mere transfer.

Triadic misalignment and interactional fragmentation

There are participants who operate within distinct interactional frames that shape both their communicative goals and their expectations of the encounter.

The immigration officer approaches the interaction from a position of institutional evaluation, focusing on assessing credibility and gathering information relevant to decision-making. The asylum seeker, by contrast, is engaged in the production of narrative testimony, seeking to recount experiences that are often complex, emotionally charged, and culturally situated. The interpreter occupies a mediating role, tasked with facilitating communication between the two while operating under institutional constraints that limit the extent of permissible intervention.

- *"Each person was in a different conversation." (I10)*
- *"I was shifting constantly, but the others weren't aligned."* (I14)

The asylum interview emerges as a triadic interactional space characterised by divergent goals and frames. Interpreters described how the three participants operate within different orientations: the officer as evaluator, the asylum seeker as narrator, and the interpreter as mediator. In 15 cases, this resulted in fragmented interaction, where participants were effectively "in different conversations."

Drawing on Goffman's (1981) concept of footing, these findings highlight the constant shifts in alignment that interpreters must manage. However, unlike dyadic interactions, the triadic structure introduces additional complexity, as alignment must be negotiated across multiple, often conflicting frames.

When these frames remain unaligned, communication breaks down not because of linguistic failure but due to interactional disjuncture. Interpreters reported attempting to bridge these gaps, but their ability to do so was often limited by institutional constraints, reinforcing the need to reconceptualise interpreting as triadic mediation rather than dyadic translation.

Power, credibility, and communicative legitimacy

Credibility assessments are shown to be implicitly cultural, yet treated as objective:

- *"What counts as 'consistent' is culturally defined."* (I3)
- *"The applicant was judged by standards they didn't know."* (I18)

The findings also reveal the role of power in shaping communicative outcomes. In 21 cases, interpreters identified credibility as a culturally mediated construct, yet one that is treated as objective within institutional settings. Officers' interpretations were consistently privileged, while asylum seekers' narratives were subject to scrutiny and evaluation.

This reflects Bourdieu's (1991) notion of symbolic power, whereby certain forms of speech are recognised as legitimate while others are marginalised. Interpreters occupy an ambivalent position within this field, which simultaneously facilitates communication and reinforces institutional norms.

The data suggest that communicative breakdown is not merely a matter of misunderstanding but is embedded in structural inequalities, where the asylum seeker's voice is filtered through both linguistic and institutional mediation. Cultural intelligence, when activated, has the potential to redistribute communicative legitimacy, but its impact is contingent on the interpreter's ability to act.

Partial mitigation: cultural intelligence as mediating resource

Some interpreters reported moments where careful mediation prevented breakdown:

- *"I briefly explained the narrative style, and the officer changed their approach."* (I5)
- *"Once I clarified the silence, the tone of the interview shifted."* (I20)

Despite the prevalence of breakdown, the dataset also includes instances (11/25) where interpreters successfully mitigated misunderstanding through strategic intervention. These interventions included brief explanations of narrative structure, clarification of silence, and contextualisation of culturally specific expressions.

In such cases, interpreters reported a shift in interactional dynamics, with officers demonstrating greater understanding and responsiveness. These moments illustrate that communicative failure is not inevitable but contingent on the activation of cultural intelligence.

This supports the argument that interpreters function as agents of multimodal communicative mediation, capable of aligning participants and facilitating meaning-making when afforded the

institutional space to do so. It also underlines the limitations of neutrality as a guiding principle, suggesting that non-intervention may itself constitute a form of distortion.

The following table provides comparatively a communicative failure in asylum interviews as not being incidental, but systematically produced through cultural misalignment within a constrained triadic interaction, where the underutilisation of cultural intelligence leads to epistemic distortion:

Theme	Sub-theme / code	Description (Triadic misalignment)	Frequency (n=25)	Communicative outcome	Illustrative excerpt
1. Narrative misalignment	Chronology vs meaning-making	Officer expects linear timeline; asylum seeker provides culturally patterned narrative	19	Narrative perceived as inconsistent, leading to credibility questioned	"They wanted dates, but the story was structured around events."
	Non-linear storytelling	Circular, fragmented accounts misread as evasive	17	Loss of coherence in institutional frame	"It sounded contradictory, but it wasn't."
2. Misinterpretation of silence	Silence as trauma	Silence signals distress but read as avoidance	17	Silence becomes negative evidence	"The silence was taken as hiding something."
	Silence as cultural norm	Silence reflects respect/deference	12	Misjudged engagement level	"Not answering immediately was seen as suspicious."
3. Affective misrecognition	Emotional restraint	Lack of visible emotion read as lack of credibility	14	Applicant perceived as detached/unconvincing	"They expected emotion that wasn't shown."
	Emotional intensity	Strong affect perceived as exaggeration	13	Applicant perceived as unreliable	"When emotion came out, it seemed too much."
4. Meaning loss	Untranslatable concepts	Cultural terms flattened in translation	20	Semantic reduction leading to partial understanding	"The meaning didn't survive the translation."
	Cultural metaphors	Figurative language misinterpreted literally	11	Misinterpretation of intent	"A metaphor was taken as a factual claim."
5. Constrained interpreter agency	Withheld intervention	Interpreter recognises misunderstanding but does not intervene	16	Preventable breakdown persists	"I knew what was missing, but I stayed silent."
	Institutional neutrality pressure	Norms discourage mediation	18	Cultural intelligence remains unused	"You're expected not to interfere."

6. Triadic misalignment of frames	Divergent interactional goals	Officer evaluates, asylum seeker narrates, interpreter mediates	15	Fragmented interaction	"Each person was in a different conversation."
	Misaligned expectations	Diverse assumptions about communication norms	13	Breakdown in mutual understanding	"They weren't working from the same rules."
7. Power and Credibility Construction	Culturally biased credibility norms	Institutional benchmarks define "consistency" and "truthfulness"	21	Systematic disadvantage for asylum seekers	"Credibility is judged by unfamiliar standards."
	Unequal communicative legitimacy	Officer's interpretation dominates	19	Asylum seeker's meaning marginalised	"Some voices carry more weight."
8. Failure of multimodal mediation	Ignored non-verbal cues	Gesture, tone, affect not incorporated into interpretation	18	Loss of meaning beyond language	"What mattered wasn't in the words."
	Incomplete affect transfer	Emotional meaning not conveyed	19	Distorted perception of testimony	"The feeling didn't come through."
9. Partial mitigation through Cultural Intelligence	Strategic intervention	Interpreter explains/contextualises	11	Misunderstanding reduced	"When I explained, the tone shifted."
	Alignment repair	Interpreter re-aligns participants	10	Improved communicative flow	"They started understanding each other."

Figure 1. Coded thematic analysis table (failure-oriented, triadic focus)

DISCUSSION

The findings presented in Section 5 demonstrate that communicative breakdown in asylum interview interpreting is not incidental but systematically produced through the interaction of cultural misalignment, institutional constraints, and restricted interpreter agency. This discussion interprets these patterns through a broader theoretical lens, articulating the central argument that cultural intelligence, which is operationalised through culturally informed inferencing and repair strategies, is indispensable for achieving communicative alignment in triadic asylum encounters. At the same time, the analysis highlights how institutional norms, particularly the doctrine of neutrality, constrain the deployment of these strategies, thereby contributing to epistemic distortion and unequal communicative outcomes.

Cultural Intelligence as a condition for communicative alignment

A key implication of the findings is that cultural intelligence should be understood not as an optional professional competence but as a necessary condition for communicative adequacy in intercultural institutional settings. Across the dataset, interpreters demonstrated a high level of awareness of culturally embedded meaning, whether in narrative structure, silence, or affective expression, and yet this awareness did not consistently translate into action. This gap between knowledge and practice

underscores the importance of distinguishing between possessed cultural intelligence and enacted cultural intelligence.

Building on the framework proposed by Earley and Ang (2003), cultural intelligence in interpreting involves more than cross-cultural awareness; it requires the ability to interpret meaning contextually, anticipate misunderstanding, and intervene appropriately. In the asylum interview context, this entails recognising that meaning is not fully contained within linguistic form but is distributed across multimodal and culturally specific semiotic resources (Kress, 2010). Interpreters must therefore engage in culturally informed inferencing by reconstructing meaning that may be implicit, indirect, or encoded in unfamiliar communicative conventions.

The findings extend existing work in interpreting studies by demonstrating that such inferencing is not peripheral but central to the integrity of the communicative outcome. Without it, meaning is reduced to surface-level linguistic content, leading to partial or distorted understanding. This supports arguments by Tipton and Furmanek (2016) that interpreters function as intercultural mediators, and aligns with Inghilleri's (2005) view of interpreting as a practice situated within zones of uncertainty, where meaning must be actively negotiated rather than passively transferred.

The centrality of culturally informed inferencing

The patterns identified in narrative misalignment, affective misrecognition, and cultural meaning loss collectively point to the necessity of inferencing as a core interpretive process. In interactional sociolinguistics, meaning is understood as emergent and contingent, requiring participants to draw on shared assumptions and contextual knowledge (Gumperz, 1982). In intercultural encounters, however, such shared assumptions cannot be taken for granted, making inferencing both more complex and more essential.

In the asylum interview, interpreters frequently encounter utterances that are semantically underdetermined, which means that their full meaning cannot be derived from linguistic form alone. For example, culturally patterned storytelling may encode relevance through relational or thematic organisation rather than chronological sequencing. Without inferencing, such narratives appear disjointed or inconsistent, leading to negative credibility assessments (Maryns, 2006; Blommaert, 2001).

Culturally informed inferencing enables interpreters to bridge this gap by reconstructing the pragmatic and cultural dimensions of meaning, thereby aligning the narrative with institutional expectations without distorting its substance. This process is inherently interpretive and requires the interpreter to make judgements about relevance, coherence, and intention. As such, it challenges the assumption that interpreters can remain neutral observers, instead positioning them as active participants in meaning-making.

The findings also suggest that inferencing operates across multiple semiotic modes. In the case of silence, for instance, interpreters must infer whether it indexes hesitation, trauma, respect, or cognitive processing. Similarly, affective expression must be interpreted in relation to culturally specific norms

of emotional display (Ahmed, 2004). These examples highlight the multimodal scope of inferencing, reinforcing the argument that interpreting cannot be reduced to lexical substitution.

Repair as an ethical and interactional necessity

Closely linked to inferencing is the practice of repair, which emerges in the data as a critical mechanism for addressing communicative breakdown. Drawing on conversation analysis, repair refers to the processes through which participants identify and resolve problems of understanding (Schegloff et al., 1977). In interpreter-mediated interaction, repair often requires explicit intervention, such as requesting clarification, reformulating an utterance, or providing contextual information.

The findings indicate that repair is not merely a conversational convenience but an ethical necessity in high-stakes institutional settings. In asylum interviews, where misunderstandings can have serious legal consequences, the failure to repair miscommunication may result in misrepresentation of testimony and unjust credibility assessments. This aligns with Hale's (2007) argument that strict adherence to neutrality may conflict with the interpreter's responsibility to ensure accurate communication.

However, the data also reveal that repair is frequently underutilised due to institutional constraints. Interpreters reported hesitating to intervene, even when they recognised misunderstanding, because of concerns about overstepping their role. This reflects the enduring influence of the conduit model and its emphasis on non-intervention (Roy, 2000; Mikkelson, 1998).

From an interactional perspective, this reluctance to engage in repair can be understood as a misalignment between institutional norms and communicative reality. As Wadensjö (1998) demonstrates, interpreting inherently involves coordination and negotiation, making repair an integral part of the process. The suppression of repair strategies therefore undermines the very conditions required for effective communication.

Triadic interaction and the complexity of alignment

The triadic nature of asylum interviews introduces additional layers of complexity that further necessitate culturally informed inferencing and repair. Unlike dyadic interaction, where alignment is negotiated between two participants, triadic encounters require the interpreter to manage multiple, potentially conflicting frames of reference (Goffman, 1981).

The findings show that asylum seekers, immigration officers, and interpreters often operate within divergent interactional orientations: the asylum seeker as narrator, the officer as evaluator, and the interpreter as mediator. These orientations are not always compatible, leading to what can be described as interactional fragmentation. In such contexts, miscommunication arises not from linguistic deficiency but from a failure to achieve frame alignment.

Cultural intelligence plays a crucial role in navigating this complexity. Through inferencing, interpreters can identify points of misalignment and anticipate potential breakdowns. Through repair, they can intervene to re-establish shared understanding. However, as the findings indicate, the

effectiveness of these strategies depends on the interpreter's ability to exercise agency within institutional constraints.

This reinforces the argument that interpreting in asylum contexts should be conceptualised as triadic mediation rather than dyadic translation (Tipton & Furmanek, 2016). Such a reconceptualisation acknowledges the interpreter's role in managing interactional dynamics and highlights the need for professional frameworks that support, rather than restrict, this role.

Power, legitimacy, and epistemic inequality

The analysis also underscores the role of power in shaping communicative outcomes, particularly in relation to credibility and communicative legitimacy. Drawing on Bourdieu (1991), the findings show that certain forms of speech, such as those aligned with institutional norms, are privileged, while others are marginalised. This creates conditions in which cultural difference is systematically reinterpreted as deficiency.

Interpreters occupy an ambivalent position within this field. On the one hand, they facilitate access to institutional discourse; on the other, they may inadvertently reinforce its benchmarks by adhering to norms of neutrality and literal translation. This dual role highlights the epistemic dimension of interpreting, where decisions about how to render meaning have implications for how knowledge is constructed and evaluated.

Cultural intelligence, when activated, has the potential to challenge these asymmetries by making culturally embedded meaning visible and intelligible. However, when suppressed, it contributes to what can be termed epistemic injustice, whereby asylum seekers' accounts are misinterpreted or discounted due to misalignment with institutional expectations (Fricker, 2009).

The findings thus support a critical perspective on neutrality, suggesting that non-intervention is not a neutral stance but one that may reproduce existing power structures. This aligns with arguments in Munyangeyo et al. (2016), who emphasise the need to rethink interpreter roles in light of the ethical and practical challenges of PSI.

Towards a re-specification of interpreter competence

Taken together, the findings point to the need for a re-specification of interpreter competence that places cultural intelligence, inferencing, and repair at its core. Traditional models that prioritise linguistic accuracy and neutrality are insufficient for addressing the complexities of asylum interview interaction. Instead, competence should be understood as the ability to navigate cultural difference, manage interactional dynamics, and ensure communicative alignment.

This has important implications for interpreter training and professional standards. Training programmes should explicitly address:

- The role of culturally informed inferencing in meaning reconstruction
- The use of repair strategies in managing misunderstanding

- The ethical dimensions of intervention and mediation
- The impact of institutional norms on communicative expectations and outcomes

Such an approach aligns with calls in the literature for a more context-sensitive and practice-oriented understanding of interpreting (Pöchhacker, 2016). It also reflects the realities of professional practice, as evidenced by the narratives analysed in this study.

Implications for policy and practice

Beyond training, the findings have broader implications for institutional policy. Asylum procedures should recognise that communication is culturally and interactionally complex, and that interpreters play a crucial role in mediating this complexity. Policies that rigidly enforce neutrality may need to be reconsidered in favour of frameworks that allow for contextually appropriate intervention.

This does not imply abandoning ethical principles but rather redefining neutrality as a situated practice, oriented towards achieving understanding rather than avoiding involvement. As Munyangeyo et al. (2016) argue, the challenges of PSI require flexible, context-sensitive approaches that acknowledge the interpreter's role as a mediator of meaning and participant in institutional processes.

CONCLUSION

This study has argued that communicative misalignment in asylum interview interpreting is not simply the result of linguistic inadequacy or individual interpreter failure, but rather a structurally embedded phenomenon produced within asymmetrical institutional encounters. By examining asylum interviews through the combined lenses of interactional sociolinguistics, social semiotics, and practice theory, the paper has demonstrated that communication in asylum settings extends far beyond lexical transfer. Meaning is constructed through multimodal, culturally situated, and interactionally negotiated processes involving interpreters, asylum seekers, and immigration officers operating within unequal relations of power and epistemic authority.

The findings reveal that communicative breakdowns are systematic because institutional asylum procedures often privilege linear narrative organisation, linguistic transparency, and Western communicative norms. Within such frameworks, culturally embedded communicative practices, including indirectness, silence, hesitation, emotional restraint, non-linear storytelling, and culturally specific affective displays, are frequently interpreted as signs of inconsistency, evasiveness, or unreliability. Consequently, asylum seekers may be subjected to epistemic distortion whereby the intended meaning of their testimony becomes altered or diminished during institutional interpretation processes. This has serious implications because credibility assessments in asylum determination procedures frequently rely on the perceived coherence and consistency of applicants' narratives. Miscommunication therefore becomes not simply an interactional problem but a matter of procedural justice with potentially life-altering consequences.

A central contribution of the study lies in its reconceptualisation of interpreters as epistemic and interactional agents rather than neutral conduits of linguistic transfer. Traditional conduit models assume that interpreters merely reproduce linguistic content without intervening in communicative processes. However, the narratives analysed in this study demonstrate that interpreters are continuously engaged in acts of alignment management, contextualisation, inferencing, and repair. They draw upon cultural intelligence to anticipate misunderstandings, negotiate culturally embedded meanings, and mediate between divergent communicative expectations. In practice, interpreters frequently recognise when institutional actors misinterpret culturally situated expressions or when asylum seekers struggle to communicate experiences in forms considered institutionally credible. Nevertheless, their ability to intervene meaningfully is often constrained by institutional norms that demand neutrality and invisibility.

The study therefore highlights a fundamental contradiction within asylum interpreting practices. On the one hand, interpreters are expected to ensure accurate communication across profound linguistic and cultural differences. On the other hand, institutional frameworks frequently restrict the culturally informed interventions necessary to achieve such understanding. This tension exposes the limitations of equivalence-based approaches to interpreting that prioritise linguistic fidelity while neglecting the sociocultural and multimodal dimensions of communication. The findings suggest that communicative equity in asylum interviews cannot be achieved solely through lexical accuracy. Instead, equitable communication requires recognition of how meaning is shaped through cultural framing, embodied expression, interactional sequencing, and contextual interpretation.

By advocating a shift from linguistic equivalence to multimodal meaning equivalence, this paper contributes significantly to the broader body of knowledge within public service interpreting (PSI), migration studies, and institutional communication research. First, the study extends PSI scholarship by integrating interactional sociolinguistics and social semiotics into analyses of asylum interpreting. While previous research has acknowledged the challenges of cultural mediation, this paper demonstrates more systematically how communicative authority is distributed across institutional fields and how multimodal resources shape the production of meaning. In doing so, it advances understanding of interpreting as a socially situated practice embedded within relations of power rather than as a purely linguistic activity.

Second, the paper contributes to epistemic justice scholarship by illustrating how institutional communicative norms can marginalise culturally diverse forms of knowledge expression. The study demonstrates that asylum seekers may be disadvantaged not because their narratives lack credibility, but because their communicative styles diverge from institutionally privileged expectations. This insight broadens existing discussions of epistemic injustice by foregrounding the role of interpreters as mediators of epistemic access within bureaucratic encounters.

Third, the research contributes to interpreter training and professional practice by emphasising the importance of cultural intelligence as a core interpretive competence. The findings indicate that

effective interpreting in asylum contexts requires far more than bilingual proficiency. Interpreters must possess the ability to recognise culturally situated meanings, anticipate potential misunderstandings, and use repair strategies that preserve communicative intent across institutional and cultural boundaries. Consequently, interpreter education programmes may need to move beyond narrow models of neutrality and linguistic transfer toward pedagogical frameworks that incorporate multimodal communication, intercultural pragmatics, and institutional power analysis.

Furthermore, the study has practical implications for asylum policy and institutional procedure. If communicative breakdowns are structurally produced, then responsibility for miscommunication cannot be placed solely on interpreters or asylum seekers. Immigration institutions themselves must acknowledge how procedural norms may unintentionally privilege certain communicative styles while disadvantaging others. Institutional reforms could therefore include more flexible interviewing practices, enhanced interpreter participation protocols, and training for immigration officers on culturally diverse communicative practices. Such changes would support fairer and more accurate credibility assessments while reducing the risk of epistemic distortion.

Despite these contributions, the study is not without limitations. The research is based primarily on qualitative narratives from interpreters rather than direct observation or recording of asylum interviews. While interpreters' accounts provide valuable insight into interactional dynamics and institutional constraints, they remain subjective representations shaped by individual experiences and professional perspectives. Future studies incorporating naturally occurring interactional data, including recorded asylum interviews and multimodal discourse analysis, would provide additional empirical depth and enable more detailed examination of communicative repair processes in practice.

Additionally, the study focuses predominantly on interpreters' experiences within asylum contexts and does not extensively examine the perspectives of asylum seekers or immigration officers themselves. As communicative misalignment emerges through triadic interaction, a more comprehensive understanding would benefit from incorporating the voices and experiences of all participants involved in asylum interviews. Comparative analyses across participant groups could reveal how communicative expectations and perceptions of credibility differ within institutional encounters.

Another limitation concerns the contextual specificity of asylum procedures. Institutional norms and interpreting practices vary significantly across national legal systems and migration regimes. Consequently, the findings may not be universally generalisable across all asylum contexts. Further cross-national research would therefore be valuable in identifying how differing institutional structures influence interpreter agency, communicative alignment, and epistemic outcomes.

Future research should also explore the operationalisation of cultural intelligence within interpreter training and institutional policy frameworks. While this study identifies culturally informed inferencing and repair as essential communicative strategies, further investigation is needed into how such competencies can be systematically developed, assessed, and ethically implemented in

professional practice. Research examining the effectiveness of revised training models or institutional reforms could contribute to evidence-based improvements in asylum interpreting practices.

Moreover, future studies may benefit from greater engagement with multimodal methodologies capable of analysing gesture, gaze, silence, prosody, emotional expression, and spatial interaction within asylum interviews. Such approaches would deepen understanding of how non-verbal communicative resources contribute to meaning-making and credibility assessment in institutional settings.

Ultimately, this study underlines the need to rethink the role of interpreters in asylum procedures. Interpreting in these contexts is not a neutral process of linguistic substitution but a complex form of epistemic mediation shaped by culture, power, and institutional constraint. Recognising interpreters as active participants in communicative meaning-making is essential for addressing structural inequalities embedded within asylum systems. By foregrounding communicative equity and multimodal understanding, this research contributes to ongoing efforts to create more just, inclusive, and ethically responsive asylum decision-making processes.

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