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Seeking asylum and seeking identity in a mediated encounter

The projection of selves through discursive practices*

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The paper explores the professional practice of "cultural mediation" in the Italian context. This activity is taken here as a vantage point from which the dynamics of identity projections can be observed, as they emerge from a real-life interaction. The analysis is carried out on a recorded and transcribed encounter involving three participants: a service provider working for a Foreigners Advice Bureau run by the municipal authorities of a major Italian city; a French-speaking asylum seeker from Cameroon; and a Moroccan mediator. The encounter is characterised by a high degree of interactional heterogeneity; triadic configurations where the mediator acts as "interpreter" alternate with parallel conversations and with long dyadic exchanges between the mediator and the service user, in the absence of the service provider. Within this changeable participation framework, the interlocutors' discursive choices are closely examined. The theoretical framework brings together two complementary paradigms, a linguistic-interactional and a socio-psychological one. The resulting discussion, which revolves around the concepts of "role", "discourse", "position" and "narrative", reveals cultural mediation as an area of instability, where competing identities are interactively constructed and reconstructed.

Keywords: cultural mediation, asylum seeking, role, discourse, positioning, narrative, identity

> "To be a foreigner *in* one's own language"
> (Deleuze & Guattari, *Kafka. Pour une littérature mineure*)

1.   Introduction: Defining the "cultural mediation zone"

Variously known in English-speaking countries as community interpreting, public service interpreting and cultural interpreting, the professional activity enabling

communication between institutional service providers and immigrants is subsumed in Italy under the broad category of "cultural mediation".[1] As they opted for the creation of a separate profile from the interpreting one — which, with few exceptions,[2] is confined to conference and business settings — Italian policy-makers have subscribed to ill-informed and untenable views, such as the ones expressed in the following quotation. The text appeared, as recently as 2003, on the official website of the Italian Ministry for Employment and Welfare Policies:

> The cultural mediator is a foreigner who, by virtue of specific training, has acquired professional competence in the field of intercultural communication. He differs from the Italian service provider, from the mere translation professional who is not necessarily trained for cultural empathy, and from the *ad hoc* mediator, be it a voluntary worker, relative, friend or fellow countryman. Coming from the same countries of origin as the migrants, he performs a double task: linguistic interpretation and cultural orientation. The mediator acts as a bridge between the migrants' needs and the provision of public services. To establish a true dialogue between foreign service users and service providers, what is required is a decoding of ideas and behaviours, in addition to the translation of words. (quoted in Mack 2005: 9; my translation)

Ignoring decades of scholarly reflection on the intrinsically cultural nature of all translation activity — be it written or oral — the text posits an implausible distinction between, on the one hand, the "translation of words" and, on the other, "the decoding of ideas and behaviours", with the latter process being, in this view, the prerogative of the cultural mediator who, unlike the "mere translation professional", is trained in "cultural empathy". While, in Italy, the tendency to dichotomize instrumental interpreting versus cultural mediation has undeniably brought to the fore the socio-cultural aspects of cross-lingual interaction, it has also diverted attention from the cultural mediator's use of language as the very means by which these aspects are conveyed. Without dwelling any further on the all-to-easy criticism which could be levelled against the theoretical premises of such a dichotomy, the above quotation will be used as a starting point to highlight some of the actual differences between the mediation and interpreting professions in the Italian landscape (see also Merlini 2007).

Firstly, the opening line unambiguously affirms the foreign origin of the cultural mediator. This requirement was implicitly made in the very first official document — a 1990 circular issued by the Ministry of Education — envisaging "in some schools, the use of mother tongue mediators to facilitate the integration of [foreign pupils] and implement initiatives aimed at enhancing their languages and cultures of origin". The reference becomes explicit in the Immigration Act of 1998, which lays down that all public administrations "should promote […] the

use within their structures of *foreigners with a regular residence permit* […] *acting as intercultural mediators* to facilitate relations between service providers and foreigners belonging to different ethnic, national, linguistic and religious groups" (my emphasis). In the guidelines issued by the Italian National Council for the Economy and Employment (CNEL) in 2000, entitled "Cultural mediation policies. Training and recruitment of cultural mediators",[3] the nationality requirement is complemented by a stated "preference for foreigners with a personal experience of immigration". Over and above the understandable difficulty of finding Italian native speakers with a knowledge of the immigrants' minority languages, the additional requisite clearly points to a less practical motivation. A quick look at the Italian literature on cultural mediation (see, for instance, Castiglioni 1997; Favaro 2001; Renzetti & Luatti 2001; Belpiede 2002) reveals an ideal aspiration towards the construction of an "in-between space", where mutually enriching exchanges between migrants and natives may bring about social change and cultural transformation. The mediators' belonging to the ethnic minorities and their understanding of the existential plight entailed by displacement, and in some cases even persecution, are naturally seen as crucial factors in their ability to act as "bridges".

This somewhat idyllic picture of cultural mediation, however, does not take into account the many variables which may come into play and make the image of an unstable and conflict-prone "mediation zone" a truer-to-life representation. This is, of course, particularly true in adversarial communicative contexts — such as police interrogations, immigration office interviews, asylum hearings, etc. — where cultural closeness and familiarity might engender in the immigrant the expectation that the mediator will act as an ally, advocating her/his interests against those of the institution. Meeting or disappointing such expectations would equally land the mediator in an uncomfortable situation, with either of the two parties resenting the "betrayal". Not even in more cooperative and friendly settings, such as the one described in the present study, can the risk of tensions be ruled out completely. Membership of the same community might, for instance, become an obstacle to the establishment of a trusting dialogue, as the immigrant may fear that the mediator will report confidential information within the community itself. Besides, no matter how far mediators have gone in putting their own migration experience and cultural background into perspective, they will still find it difficult to "contain and manage their identification processes with the individual immigrant" (Belpiede 2002: 39; my translation). In other words, mediators are bound to feel torn between rivalling needs: empathy for their fellow people; allegiance to the institution employing them; compliance with the neutrality principle of professional ethics. Here, the mediation zone comes to coincide with a psychological territory of inner alterity, where conflicting pulls lead to a continuous repositioning of the subject in her/his personal world and history.

An interesting observation concerns the neutrality principle. Whereas in the interviews conducted a few years ago in a number of Italian cities[4] almost all mediators acknowledged neutrality as a fundamental rule underlying their professional practice, no express mention of it is made in the CNEL guidelines. The only indirect reference, bar a generic allusion to some unspecified code of professional ethics, is the warning against "taking either the service users' or the service providers' place". This would point to the existence within the cultural mediators' "community" of a norm which does not derive from mandatory prescriptions but may possibly either result from socialization processes and training or spontaneously reflect the mediators' perception of their role in the host society. Since what Shlesinger wrote in 1989 about the scattered distribution of the interpreting profession, thought not to favour peer-to-peer transmission of normative models of behaviour,[5] may well apply to the current situation of the mediating profession, the second of the two explanations would sound equally if not more convincing. If the CNEL document gives no explicit instruction about neutrality, it, on the other hand, lists among the requisites for the job not only "a disposition to social work" but also "a capacity for empathy", which clearly leaves the mediator with the challenging task of setting the boundaries between empathy and undue advocacy. In this sense, the mediation zone could well be described as a "zone of uncertainty", where contradictory conditions may be perceived (see the use of Bourdieu's notion in Inghilleri 2005).

Going back to the above quotation, the second point worthy of note is the identification of two distinct spheres of activity, named "linguistic interpretation" and "cultural orientation". Though formulated in theoretically misleading terms, this distinction does reflect everyday practice, in that cultural mediators are seen not only to enable oral and written transactions[6] between the primary parties but also to act as autonomous service providers. The latter function, which is somewhat in contrast with the above-mentioned warning not to step into the institutional provider's role, seems justified by the very vagueness of the CNEL guidelines concerning the mediator's tasks.[7] If this vagueness may be understandable in a text which was intended to provide a general policy framework within which the local administrations would subsequently delineate more specific instructions, the reading of one of these locally produced documents is only marginally more clarifying and allows for an extremely wide interpretation of the mediator's duties. The following are the tasks listed in the 2004 public tender specifications[8] issued by the Council of the Italian city where the interaction analysed in the present study occurred:[9]

a. linguistic-cultural interpretation and translation of documents and information material,

b. involvement in front desk activities during office hours, participation in interviews and assistance in working out users' individual projects,

c. work on specific projects promoted by public institutions in cooperation with agencies, voluntary organizations and socially-active private associations,

d. accompanying users to other public offices and agencies, and to in- and out-of-town reception centres,

e. house calls,

f. assignments in other Italian cities and abroad to follow specific cases,

g. information and prevention activities aimed at reducing hazardous behaviour,

h. supporting socio-educational initiatives at a local level,

i. community work, both within a given ethnic community and in those city areas where groups of foreigners live and socialize. (my translation)

Considering the impressive array of activities envisaged by this and other local administrations, it is no wonder that the profile of this professional figure in Italy remains, for all practical purposes, still undefined.

The third and last comment prompted by the excerpt from the Ministry's website concerns the reference to "specific training". The CNEL guidelines recommend setting up vocational courses with a curriculum design structured on two levels, of 500 and 300 hours each. At the first level, teaching should include: psychology, cultural and social anthropology, communication theories and techniques, interpreting techniques (rather surprisingly, no mention is made of translation ones), immigration law, labour and social legislation, and information technology. The second level provides training in specific areas of activity, such as healthcare, emergency and social services, education, law enforcement, and employment. In reality, not only are course contents rather diversified, but interpreting does not seem to feature among the taught subjects — at least not in the courses attended until 2004 by cultural mediators interviewed in the above-mentioned surveys (see note 4). The frequent lack of interpreter training means that cultural mediation can be considered, in this respect, akin to "natural translation" — in the sense indicated by Harris and Sherwood (1978) — and that the convention of "translating in the first person" is not a normative model for mediators.

To sum up, the undefined contours of the cultural mediator's profile, the variety and complexity of tasks s/he is called upon to perform, the ill-traced confines between empathy and advocacy, the lack of technical instruction in interpreting and the absence of the "invisibility" norm account for an exceptionally wide room for manoeuvre, especially in the context of social services, frequently characterized by informal and cooperative interactions. This very freedom does not erase tensions; it simply shifts them onto a different, less visible, but no less critical arena.

Though worrying from the perspective of ensuring quality services, the mediators' leeway makes the mediation zone into a stimulating field of research. One reason for this is that discursive behaviour can be investigated as a manifestation of the identity, or rather identities, each individual mediator chooses to project, rather than as a response to externally imposed constraints.

Having thus defined the Italian cultural mediation zone, the following discussion will analyse a mediated encounter recorded at a Foreigners Advice Bureau and attempt an interpretation of the participants' and, in particular, of the mediator's use of language in interactive discourse, as a means of conveying information about themselves, their interlocutors and their social relationships. To this end, the theoretical approaches which have oriented and shaped this study will first be presented.

2. The theoretical framework: Roles, positions and narratives in discourse

As will soon become evident, Ian Mason's (2005) discussion of projected and perceived identities in dialogue interpreting has been of crucial import for this study. In addition to providing the principal theoretical references, Mason's article identifies an under-researched perspective within discourse-based approaches to interpreting, which has proved inspirational. Though fully acknowledging their groundbreaking contribution to introducing a new paradigm for the study of interpreting as "dialogic discourse-based interaction" — to use Pöchhacker's (2004: 79) formulation — Mason (2005: 40) observes how "a discoursal perspective (in the sense defined here) is not adopted in the major studies of dialogue interpreting published so far — e.g. Berk-Seligson (1990), Wadensjö (1992, 1998) — while Roy (2000) treats interpreting as a discourse process but is primarily concerned with aspects such as turn-taking and managing the flow of talk". The present study is precisely an attempt to explore, albeit within the narrow confines of one single communicative event, this other dimension of interpreted discourse and combine it with more traditional interactional investigations. The resulting synthesis will take the form of a multi-layered and synergic analysis, revolving around the key-concepts of roles, positions, identities and narratives.

The notion of "discourse" has traditionally been addressed from two main theoretical standpoints: linguistic and sociological.[10] Speaking about the former, Fairclough (1992: 3) notes that discourse is used to refer either to extended samples of spoken dialogue in contrast with written "texts", or to extended samples of both spoken and written language. In either case, the focus of analysis is on the organizational features of above-the-sentence units, such as turn-taking, conversational sequences, and textual structures. When its object of study is naturally occurring

talk, discourse analysis emphasizes the interaction between interlocutors, as well as their different use of language in different kinds of social situations (e.g. ordinary conversation, classroom talk, job interviews, medical consultations, etc.).

Social theory, on the other hand, uses discourse "to refer to different ways of structuring areas of knowledge and social practice. […] Discourses in this sense […] do not just reflect or represent social entities and relations, they construct or 'constitute' them; different discourses constitute key entities (be they 'mental illness', 'citizenship' or 'literacy') in different ways, and position people in different ways as social subjects" (Fairclough 1992: 3–4). While temporarily postponing the concept of positioning, a few more words will be spent on the "constitutive force" of discourses. Without fully subscribing to the methodological positions of Critical Discourse Analysis, Mason (2005) adopts a line of theorizing which, following Michel Foucault (1971) and Gunter Kress (1989), sees discourses as identity-shaping socio-textual practices. The author, to whom readers are referred for a more detailed argumentation, stresses a number of points worth recalling for the purposes of our analysis. Firstly, all participants in a communicative event construct and project an identity through their selection of any one discourse among the many alternatives available. Secondly, identity choices are subjected to a negotiation process and are, as a consequence, likely to evolve in the unfolding interaction. Thirdly, addressees are free to accept or reject the discourses and the identities constructed by speakers. Let us then see how these two perspectives, linguistic and sociological, can be brought to bear on the study of mediated events.

2.1 A linguistic-interactional perspective

In their introduction to a special issue of *Interpreting* devoted to healthcare settings, Pöchhacker & Shlesinger (2005: 160) observe that a major line of investigation in this field of interpreting practice — but the same can be said for community interpreting in general — has been the concern with the interactional roles assigned to and played by persons serving as interpreters. Although the notion of "role" was developed within social theory, it has come to be associated with the more linguistically oriented discourse paradigm, by such seminal work as Wadensjö's *Interpreting as Interaction* (1998). By showing the multiple interdependencies between pre-determined normative models and interactionally produced alignments, or footings, Wadensjö brought into light the linguistic devices through which the interpreter is shown to act as a full-fledged participant in the exchange. One of the most fertile concepts, taken up by a number of authors including the present one (see Merlini and Favaron 2005), is the concept of footing, which Wadensjö borrows from Goffman (1981) and further develops to account for three modes of listening and responding: "reporter", "recapitulator" and "responder". These inter-

actional stances have been broadly matched to three different roles, namely "detached translator", "involved translator",[11] and "fully ratified participant".

What follows is an oversimplified, but instrumentally useful, description of the characteristic traits of each role. Starting with the first one — also referred to by Bot (2005) as the "translation-machine model" — this is the closest to the "invisibility" principle of traditional views of interpreting. Here, interpreters will be seen to use their turns to provide close renditions of the primary speakers' utterances, which will normally be reported in the first person. Functional interventions, for instance requests for clarification, may occasionally alter the characteristic turn-taking sequence of speaker 1's utterance-translation-speaker 2's utterance. In the second role, that of involved translators, interpreters' room for manoeuvre expands. Though their contribution to the exchange remains largely of a translational nature, interpreters will be seen to reformulate primary speakers' utterances, editing them to varying degrees, through additions, deletions, shifts in focus, etc., while frequently using the third person to attribute authorship. Lastly, as fully ratified participants, interpreters will contribute to the exchange on their own behalf, by autonomously initiating topics or providing an immediate response when directly addressed by a primary speaker. In playing this role, they will thus exhibit the conversational power of selecting the next speaker and self-selecting as next primary speaker.

As regards first-person interpreting, it is worth reiterating that in the Italian context of cultural mediation this is not an available option for at least two reasons. Firstly, as already noted in Section 1, mediators are not trained to use it. Secondly, even if they were, and even if participants were to be previously informed about the convention, translation in the first person would still be a source of serious ambiguity, given the mediators' working practices. The very fact that they spend part of the time talking on their own to service users as independent informants and advisors would make the shift to a "non-person" extremely hard, if not impossible, to enact. The likely outcome — lacking the necessary conditions for the suspension of disbelief required by the invisibility fiction — would be the user's perception of the utterance as originating from the mediator her-/himself.[12]

Moving, thus, from interpreting to cultural mediation, an interesting model is the one suggested by Yvan Leanza (2005). Considering, at the same time, addressees, communicative context, and content and purpose of the interpreter's contributions, Leanza draws the following typology, which integrates Jalbert's (1998):

1. "translator": the interpreter minimizes her/his presence and simply facilitates communication;
2. "active translator": the interpreter engages either primary party to clarify minor points or linguistic details;

3. "cultural informant": the interpreter addresses the service provider to inform her/him about the service user's cultural norms and values;
4. "advocate": the interpreter addresses the service provider to defend and promote the service user's interests;
5. "culture broker" or "cultural mediator": the interpreter negotiates between two conflicting value systems and helps parties arrive at a shared model;
6. "bilingual professional": the interpreter leads the interview with the service user and reports to the service provider;
7. "monolingual professional": the interpreter expresses her/his views on the matter at hand to the service provider, acting as her/his peer;
8. "welcomer": the interpreter welcomes service users before the service provider meets them;
9. "support": the interpreter meets the service users in the community, as a follow-up to the encounter.

Leaving aside, for the moment, Leanza's readings of these roles in terms of identity projections and transmission of minority vs. majority cultural values, a simplified typology will be proposed to account for the more operative aspects of mediating conduct. Being a synthesis of the roles discussed this far, the typology shown in Figure 1 consists of a regrouping of categories, but also adds one new role, that of *linguistic support*. The service users' partial comprehension of the majority language or, as in the case analysed in this study, the use of a vehicular language and the service providers' rough knowledge of it often lead to a situation in which the mediator steps in only to pre-empt or resolve communication breakdowns.
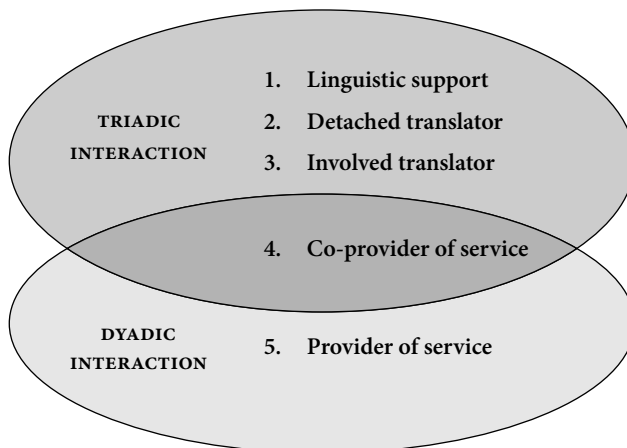

TRIADIC INTERACTION

1. Linguistic support
2. Detached translator
3. Involved translator
4. Co-provider of service

DYADIC INTERACTION

5. Provider of service

Figure 1. Cultural mediator's roles

Going from a less to a more active involvement on the part of the mediator, both in the interaction and in the provision of the service, roles 1 to 3 correlate with a bilingual and triadic conversational format, and role 5 with a monolingual and strictly dyadic one. Role 4 is an in-between category, characterized by long monolingual exchanges between the mediator and one of the primary parties, which may or may not be summarised for the benefit of the other party. More specifically, skipping role 1, which has already been explained, the *detached translator* corresponds, in our classification, to Leanza's "active translator", while our *involved translator* groups together his three categories of "cultural informant", "advocate" and "culture broker". The role of *co-provider* (role 4), which sees the mediator as a fully ratified participant in the interaction, includes Leanza's categories 6 and 7. Lastly, in role 5, which coincides with the categories of "welcomer" and "support", the mediator relates to users as an autonomous *service provider*.

2.2   A socio-psychological perspective

In Leanza's discussion, symbolic values are assigned to each role. These values, which have disappeared in our typology, account for the distinctions between the roles of cultural informant, advocate, culture broker, and bilingual and monolingual professional. Here, a different theoretical approach will be adopted to analyse the same distinctions in terms of identity projections. Following Mason's (2005: 35–36) suggestion, the concept of positioning has been found to provide an analytical instrument perfectly suited to our investigation. Borrowed from social psychology, the theory of positioning, which accommodates the second of the two discourse-analytical paradigms, will function as a higher-level interpretative framework, integrating the more functionally oriented role-typology. The two levels will intertwine in the description of the participants' interactional behaviour.

Moving from a critical discussion of role-theory, and in particular from Goffman's notions of "frame" (1974) and "footing" (1981), Davies and Harré (1990) suggest replacing them with a more flexible and dynamic conception of the relation between people and the conversations they engage in, namely "positioning". Whilst, in the two authors' view, roles account for formal and ritualistic alignments that exist prior to speaking and shape it — in other words, they are predetermined and transcendent to social interaction — positions convey a far more fluid and immanent sense of the multiple identities a person may project, stemming as they do from within the very act of conversing and being thus jointly produced by all participants. Davies and Harré (1990: 62) note:

> In role-theory the person is always separable from the various roles that they take up; any particular conversation is understood in terms of someone taking on a

certain role. The words that are spoken are to some extent dictated by the role and are to be interpreted in these terms. With positioning, the focus is on the way in which the discursive practices constitute the speakers and hearers in certain ways and yet at the same time is a resource through which speakers and hearers can negotiate new positions.

The authors start from the basic assumption that "every conversation is a discussion of a topic and the telling of, whether explicitly or implicitly, one or more personal stories" (1990: 48). In telling these stories, people make sense of their own lives and the lives of others, i.e. they position themselves (reflexive positioning) and others (interactional positioning) within unfolding narratives. Identity building is thus "an open question with a shifting answer depending upon the positions made available within one's own and others' discursive practices" (1990: 46). The constitutive force of discourse in the generation of the individual's subjectivity is particularly emphasised. The learning and use of certain discourses — which Davies and Harré (1990: 45–46) define as institutionalised uses of language and language-like sign systems — position people within distinct sets of world-views, images, metaphors and conceptions of being. For the purposes of our analysis, two aspects deserve special attention. The first is linked to the concept of reflexive positioning. In shifting between different discourses, people give rise to a multiplicity of selves. Each of these possible selves may contradict both the selves located in past story lines, and other present selves located in alternative story lines. As the authors observe, such discontinuities in the production and projection of self derive from a complex weaving together of a number of elements: (1) "the positions (and the cultural/social/political meanings that are attached to those positions) that are available within any number of discourses"; (2) "the emotional meaning attached to each of those positions which have developed as a result of personal experiences of being located in each position, or of relating to someone in that position"; (3) "the stories through which those categories and emotions are being made sense of"; and (4) "the moral system that links and legitimates the choices that are being made" (1999: 59). Points 1 and 2, in particular, will be seen to bear the utmost relevance in the interactional context under study. Moving from reflexive to interactional positioning, further cues for our analysis can be drawn from the following remarks:

> One speaker can position others by adopting a story line which incorporates a particular interpretation of cultural stereotypes to which they are 'invited' to conform, indeed are required to conform if they are to continue to converse with the first speaker in such a way as to contribute to that person's story line. Of course, they may not wish to do so for all sorts of reasons. Sometimes they may not contribute because they do not understand what the story line is meant to be, or they

> may pursue their own story line, quite blind to the story line implicit in the first speaker's utterance, or as an attempt to resist. Or they may conform because they do not define themselves as having choice […]. (1990: 50)

As it defines conformity to a speaker's story line in terms of a hearer's power of choice, or lack thereof, the theory of positioning addresses vital issues of power relations and perceptions. It also invites an additional reflection, i.e. that hearers may accept the story line being suggested not simply because they see themselves as powerless, but because they see potential advantages in adopting it, even though they do not share the cultural stereotypes it implies.

As a line of theorising, positioning shows many points of contact with narrative theory. Although an account of this vast field of studies goes well beyond the scope of the present paper, a final observation will be made, specifically pertaining to asylum seekers' narratives. Applying narrative theory to linguistically mediated contexts, Baker (2006: 31) highlights the dilemma with which translators and interpreters are confronted, when called upon to relay ontological narratives[13] clashing with public narratives. As a particularly emblematic case, Baker mentions the conflict between migrants' personal stories and the institutional narratives of the host country. Quoting from Barsky's latest account of stories from the Court of Appeal (2005: 226), she points out how the construction of an acceptable identity as claimants requires refugees to renounce their previous selves and adapt their stories to the narrative frameworks — read here discourses — of the adjudicating institution. As argued by Inghilleri (2003 and 2005), applicants may be helped by interpreters to align their personal narratives to the official ones. These interpreters may either improve on the asylum seekers' testimonies during the proceedings or, as in the case of the mediated encounter analysed here, offer advice concerning the appropriate course of action.

3.   Analysis of a mediated encounter at a Foreigners Advice Bureau

The paragraphs that follow will introduce the recorded data and situate them within the specific environment of a social services bureau operating in a large Italian city. Transcript analysis, which will follow the time progression of the encounter, will be preceded by a schematic overview of the whole event, broken down into phases. For evident reasons of length, only a selection of representative sequences will be shown and discussed. For the very same reason, only excerpts from triadic exchanges will reproduce the primary speakers' original utterances in French and Italian, followed by idiomatic translations into English. Excerpts from parallel and dyadic phases, on the other hand, will feature exclusively the English translation,

which in these cases has been kept as close as possible to the syntactic structure of the original utterances.

3.1   The context and the data

The place where data were recorded is a Foreigners Advice Bureau (*Ufficio Stranieri*) run by the Council of a major Italian city within its Department of Social Care. The city is a regional capital in the north of Italy, with a growing immigrant population accounting, in 2004, for around 5% of the total number of residents. The setting up of the Bureau, back in 1982, testifies to the local authorities' early recognition of the need to respond, in a coordinated and systematic way, to the changes that the city's social fabric was undergoing as a result of large influxes of foreigners coming from South America and Africa, in particular. The idea was to identify at an early stage the difficulties experienced by immigrants and provide, over and above emergency assistance, longer-term solutions which would encourage the integration of newcomers into the city's socio-economic life. This ambitious goal accounts for the Bureau's wide range of activities, from supplying information, to finding solutions to practical problems, to promoting research projects and initiatives. More specifically, the Bureau's employees help users apply for residence and work permits, and, in the case of asylum seekers, for refugee status; make arrangements for emergency accommodation; provide information on healthcare services; liaise between employers and regular immigrants looking for jobs; cooperate with vocational training and adult education institutions; and organise protection and support programmes for victims of prostitution and human trafficking. Employees are aided by qualified cultural mediators belonging to the one association or cooperative which has won the public tender and is providing the mediation service for the three-year period (see note 8). For the purposes of the present analysis, one point needs highlighting: this institutional context is not an adversarial but a cooperative one. The Bureau's staff are there to help, and are, so to say, on the immigrants' side.

Six encounters were recorded over a three-month period, from February to April 2004.[14] The one analysed here involved an Italian male employee (hereafter referred to as P, for service provider), a Moroccan male mediator (M), and a French-speaking male asylum seeker from Cameroon (U, for service user). P has a long experience in the job, is a dynamic and practical person, with extremely informal and direct manners, and exhibits a sympathetic attitude towards users. M, now in his early forties, left his country, Morocco, soon after graduating in French language and literature, went to Germany to attend a two-year sociology course, and then to Italy, where he has lived since 1989. In 1993, he took part in a training course for cultural mediators, organised jointly by an immigrants' association

and the regional authorities, and obtained the qualification. Interpreting was not taught in the course. U, a moto-taxi driver and trade union activist, has fled his country and has just arrived in Italy. Two days before the present encounter, he was at the Bureau to ask for emergency accommodation. On that occasion, U met P for a few minutes and talked to him with the help of a student interpreter (see Acknowledgment below). M, on the other hand, is meeting U for the first time in this encounter. U has been, in the meantime, to the police station and has come back to the Bureau to be assigned a temporary placement in a homeless shelter.

3.2   Narrating identities: Between construction and reconstruction

The encounter has been broken down into fourteen phases, corresponding to shifts in conversational formats. Table 1 clearly shows the high degree of interactional variance; triadic configurations, where the mediator acts as interpreter (phases I, VIII, X, XII, XIV), alternate with parallel conversations (phases II, IV, VI), and with long dyadic exchanges between the mediator and the service user, in the absence of the service provider (phases V, VII, IX, XI, XIII), with just one brief phase (III), where the service provider listens to the conversation but does not actively engage in it. What has been indicated as absence of the service provider is in fact a more dynamic situation. In the corresponding phases, the employee comes in and out of the room to consult with other colleagues or deal with the necessary paperwork. When momentarily in the room, he is a by-stander, with potential access to the ongoing talk. However, apart from being involved in other activities, his inadequate knowledge of French — particularly the regional variety spoken in Cameroon — enables him to catch no more than bits of information. The integration of the audio-recording with the notes taken down by the observer during the encounter has made it possible to mark out such extended dyadic phases in the transcript, yet not the employee's occasional comings and goings within them.

The pie chart in Figure 2 illustrates the frequency distribution of conversational formats. Out of a total 31 minutes and 55 seconds, triadic exchanges (white slice) account for 9 minutes and 2 seconds, corresponding to slightly less than a third of recorded time (28.5%). Dyadic exchanges in the absence of the service provider (dark grey slice) make up more than half the time (17 minutes and 2 seconds, equalling 53.5%). A significant proportion (17%) is accounted for by parallel conversations (light grey slice), during which P is busy speaking on the phone, and U and M keep on talking to each other. The remaining fraction (black slice) of just 22 seconds (1%) refers to talk in French going on while the employee is present and listening. If we add together the last three percentages, we see that for over two thirds of the time mediator and service user are engaged in monolingual conversation.

Table 1. Structure of the encounter

Phase	Minutes	Lines	Description of activities	Format
I	00:00–02:09	1–50	U introduces himself and explains his accommodation problem	TRIADIC
II	02:09–04:16	51–96	P answers a phone call; M and U speak about the asylum application	PARALLEL
III	04:16–04:38	97–104	M and U go on speaking; P listens to them	DYADIC WITH P
IV	04:38–06:10	105–142	M and U go on speaking; P makes a phone call to the Immigration Office	PARALLEL
V	06:10–11:20	143–256	U tells his story to M; P has gone out of the room	DYADIC W/OUT P
VI	11:20–13:10	257–309	U goes on telling his story; P makes a phone call to a homeless shelter	PARALLEL
VII	13:10–15:39	310–363	M asks U for clarifications about his story; P has gone out of the room	DYADIC W/OUT P
VIII	15:39–15:45	364–370	P comes back and enquires about U's date of birth	TRIADIC
IX	15:45–18:40	371–406	M explains to U the reason for his questions; P has gone out of the room	DYADIC W/OUT P
X	18:40–19:45	407–426	P comes back and enquires about U's story	TRIADIC
XI	19:45–21:55	427–455	M and U speak about the asylum application; P has gone out of the room	DYADIC W/OUT P
XII	21:55–25:02	456–514	P comes back and illustrates the solution to the accommodation problem	TRIADIC
XIII	25:02–29:20	515–568	M tells U how to get to the homeless shelter and resumes the asylum application topic; P has gone out of the room	DYADIC W/OUT P
XIV	29:20–31:55	569–620	P comes back and gives further instructions about U's appointment at the homeless shelter	TRIADIC
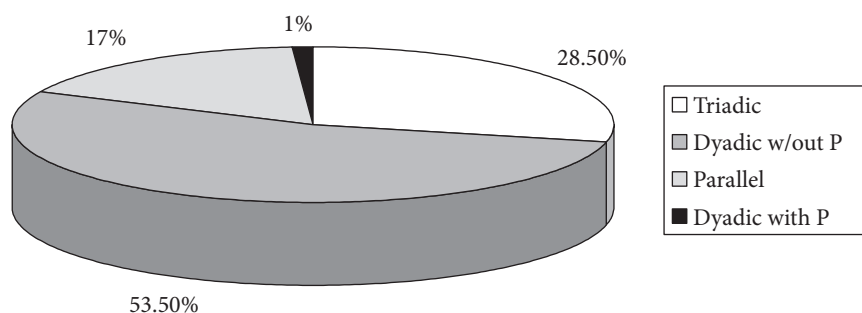
Figure 2. Frequency distribution of conversational formats

With reference to the topics discussed in the different phases, a quick glance at Table 1 shows that the asylum issue was mainly dealt with in dyadic and parallel conversations, with the sole exception of phase X, whilst triadic exchanges focused on the accommodation issue.

In the following paragraphs, Roman numerals appearing at the head of each excerpt identify the phase from which the sequence has been taken, whilst Arabic numerals refer to the lines in the full transcript. For easier reference, the latter also appear beside each line. Elements of interest are shown in bold. Transcription conventions are provided in the Appendix.

3.2.1   *Setting the scene*

The opening sequence of the encounter has been reproduced almost integrally, as it anticipates many of the features of interest for the present analysis.

> **Excerpt [1]   I: 1–27; 33–40; 49**
> 1   P: da dormire (.) senza:: senza documenti è impossibile
>   *a place where to sleep without papers it is impossible*
> 2   M: non ho capito
>   *I didn't get it*
> 3   P: da dormir sans document è impossibile=
>   *((mixing Italian and mispronounced French)) a place where to sleep without*
>   *papers it is impossible*
> 4   M: =quindi pour dormir si vous[15] n'avez pas pour avoir un lieu où dormir si v-vous
>   *so somewhere to sleep if You don't to have a place where to sleep if You*
> 5   n'avez pas de docume:nts c'est impossible
>   *don't have any papers   it is impossible*
> 6   P: **documenti ↑ (.) non ne ha ehm::=**
>   *papers   he doesn't have any*
> 7   M: **=mais vous n'avez rien non↑**
>   *don't You have anything*
> 8   U: voici la déclaration j'ai été là bas à XXX ( )=
>   *here is the declaration I was there in XXX*
> 9   M: **=quand↑=**
>   *when*
> 10 U: =( ) (je suis arrivé en retard je suis parti) ils m'ont demandé d'écrire mon
>   *I arrived late   I went   they asked me to write down my*
> 11   histoire comment je m'appelle j'ai quitté le Cameroun
>   *history my name   I left Cameroon*
> 12 M: oui
> 13 U: je suis du Cameroun ( ) ils m'ont donné l'adresse de: votre adresse je suis venu
>   *I am from Cameroon   they gave me your address   I came*
> 14   ((phone rings)) ici rencontrer monsieur et madame
>   *here to meet the gentleman and the lady*
> 15 M: oui

16 U: ils m'ont envoyé prendre les photos je prends les photos comme ils m'ont dit
        they asked me to go and get myself some photos I did as they said
17   ((phone rings))
18 M: °ouai° lui è stato in via XXX poi l'hanno mandato:: qua ((phone rings)) ha
        yes he went to XXX street   then they sent him here he has
19   scritto la sua storia e: lui ha preso le foto e la marca: =
        written down his history he has got the photos and the stamp
20 U: =et comme madame m'avait indiqué ((phone rings)) après avoir pris les
        and as the lady suggested   after getting the
21   photos et les timbres je pars encore à ((phone rings)) XXX et je suis parti là
        photos and the stamps I went there again to   XXX I went there
22   ce matin
        this morning
23 M: ah
24 U: je suis parti là ce matin ((phone rings)) ils m'ont dit
        I went there this morning   they told me
25 M: **vous avez déjà un rendez-vous à vi — via XXX↑** ((phone rings))
        have You already got an appointment in XXX street
26 U: (je suis je suis)=
         I have I have
27 P: =è andato e gli hanno dato questo=
        he went and they gave him this
        […]
33 U: =je n'ai aucun dormi (.) pas mangé ( ) je dors à la gare °j'ai pas pu dormir°
        I haven't had any sleep   haven't eaten   I'm sleeping at the station I could not sleep
34   je n'ai pas d'argent (et tout et tout)=
        I haven't got any money and all the rest
35 M: =mhm mhm (hai capito↑)=
                      did you get that
36 P: =((calls a colleague who is in another room)) G.↑=
37 M: =no solo per
         just to
38 P: sì
39 M: **perché lui diceva: hai capito cos'ha detto↑**
        because he was saying did you get what he said
40 P: ((in a tone indicating he is jesting)) **no dimmelo tu io ho capito però dimmelo tu**
                                          no you tell me I did get it   but tell me all
        the same
        […]
49 M: sì e non ha: né: soldi per mangiare ((phone rings)) né vestiti né nulla
        yes he has no money to buy himself something to eat no clothes nothing

M is evidently acting as a translator. His first few moves, however, already indicate an active rather than passive involvement in the exchange. P's question concerning the asylum seeker's possession of documents (meaning here identity papers)

is reformulated as a more general request ("don't you have anything?", line 7). The effect is to prompt U to exhibit the form — a declaration of fixed abode — that he was given at the police station (this is referred to by the name of the street where it is located, which has been replaced in the transcript with 3 "X"s). M's involvement soon takes on even more marked contours, as he starts asking questions on his own behalf (see lines 9 and 25). Stepping in as a fully ratified participant in the exchange, he alters the turn-taking sequence, by reassigning the floor to U as next speaker. Less relevant is the omission of U's self-introduction in M's translation, lines 18–19. This is probably a deliberate choice on his part, due not so much to the transparency of the term Cameroon, but to the fact that the employee met the service user, albeit briefly, two days before. M's interactional behaviour positions him on an equal footing with the service provider. This position is fully accepted by P, who, from the very beginning of the encounter, addresses M as his direct interlocutor and refers to U in the third person. Admittedly, out of context the use of the third person in Italian is ambiguous, in that it can also function as a formal token of address. Here, however, the ambiguity of line 6 is resolved just a few lines later, when P concludes U's sentence by talking *about* him: "*gli* hanno dato questo", "they gave him this" (line 27), where the Italian direct object pronoun makes this reading the only one possible (the formal pronoun being "Le"). This reference to the service user in the third person will remain constant through all the triadic phases. The only exception is the final one (phase XIV), where, as we shall see, P tries to communicate directly with U in a hybrid mixture of Italian and French, an anticipation of which is found in line 3 above. P's display of a sympathetic attitude towards asylum applicants, as revealed in later sequences, argues against interpretating his use of the third person as a distancing device. Rather, this is to be read as an indicator of his positioning of the cultural mediator as a peer, with whom to speak about the case. The informality of their relationship is evident in their last exchange (see lines 39–40), in which they address each other using "tu" instead of "Lei", with M alerting P in a direct and rather forceful manner, and P answering back in jest. As for M's interpreting in the third person (see lines 18–19), for the reasons explained in the above sections, it is hardly deserving of notice. On the other hand, U's reference to P in the third person, as "monsieur" (line 14), is a more interesting feature. U has never seen M before, while he has seen P; and yet, he naturally selects as his interlocutor the person who speaks his language and who is projecting as powerful an interactional role as the Italian service provider. Incidentally, in the same line "madame" refers to a female employee with whom U had also spoken briefly on his previous visit to the Bureau.

3.2.2   *Shifting topic*

Excerpts [2] and [3] are taken from phases of parallel conversations (respectively, phases II and IV). The column on the left shows the employee speaking on the phone, whilst the column on the right shows mediator and asylum applicant talking to each other. To visually represent the simultaneous progression of the two conversations, in this graphic layout blank lines are used to indicate moments of silence.

Excerpt [2] II: 62–86

((in Italian))   ((in French))

P:	62	M: *=Monday yes but if:: <u>if</u> You haven't got (.) an*
	63	*address*
	64	U: *no I haven't got anything*
	65	M: <u>*a fixed one*</u>=
	66	U: *=no nothing*
	67	M: *it is:: it's °very difficult for You° (.)*
yes↑	68	
	69	***may I — may I see the:: (.)***
we have the files	70	
	71	U: *You have the photocopies here the lady made*
	72	⌈*photocopies*⌉
	73	M: ⌊*no I haven't*⌋ *I haven't read I haven't had*
	74	*the chance (to read it) (.) You know that*
	75	*when one applies for (.)* ***I am opening here***
I'll talk to	76	***only a parenthesis when one applies for*** *(.)*
someone about it (.) I	77	
will yes (.)	78	
yes yes	79	***political asylum it is necessary to have***
already talked to them (.)	80	***problems with the state*** *(.) and not with (.) for*
already read (.) already	81	*instance: the::: the neighbours >or<* ***problems***
written (.) okay thanks (.) no:	82	***of a political nature*** *(.)* ***religious:*** *or I don't*
he hasn't come here (.) no no	83	*know: a group:*
not today (.) nts nts no no	84	
	85	U: ***Mister at this (very moment) I am***
	86	***a wanted man in Cameroon***

Here, the format of the exchange between M and U is a dyadic one, as P, though present, is engaged in a telephone conversation. M is thus acting autonomously as a service provider, yet still within the larger framework of a triadic encounter. Phase II is the first in a long sequence of dyadic monolingual exchanges, which will be briefly interrupted in Phase VIII, but more significantly so only in phase X, when, as we shall see, P comes back and enquires about U's story. The most interesting feature in excerpt [2] is the topic shift initiated by the mediator, from

the requirement of a fixed abode to the draft version of U's account, which he asks to see (line 69). The introduction of the asylum application topic is hedged in several ways. M speaks about a mere parenthesis (in the French original, "j'ouvre *simplement* une parenthèse", lines 75–76), a parenthesis which, in fact, is going to become the object of conversation for most of the encounter. This opening remark is then followed by the use of impersonal forms: "lorsque *on* demande l'asile politique *il faut* avoir des problèmes avec l'état" (lines 76–80). Such hedges testify to M's awareness of the potentially threatening effect that his clarifications might have for U's face. M's attempt to alert the service user to the legal requisites of the asylum procedure is indeed misinterpreted by the latter as mistrust. In terms of positioning, the discourse invoked by M, whereby U is cast in the depersonalized category of "applicant", clashes with U's personal narrative as a victim of persecution, which he foregrounds in an offended tone (lines 85–86).

In excerpt [3], the conflict is resolved by M, who explains the reason for his previous remarks.

Excerpt [3] IV: 104–124

((in Italian))		((in French))
P:	104	M: =*no* (.) **that was simply to give You**
( ) *hello*	105	**(some information) about the police** ( )
Immigration↑ (.) *uh:*	106	*because the first the first:* ( )
hi it's B. from the	107	( )
Foreigners' Advice Bureau	108	( )
(.) *listen I:: have been told*	109	( )
that new summonses have	110	( )
arrived (.) *from Rome*	111	( )
(.) *I dont' know I-* (.)	112	*now You will go to the police* (.) *You*
because: (*and so*) (.) *on the*	113	*You will tell You will tell Your*
seventh↑ (.) *eh can you*	114	*history which will be translated* (.) *and then*
send me a fax because ( )	115	( ) *after eight months You* ( ) *before the*
because otherwise (.)	116	*Commission in Rome* (.) *the capital*=
	117	U: =*yeah*=
	118	M: =*there will be>You-You will have<* <u>*one*</u>
the seventh then because the	119	*quarter of an hour to tell* ( ) **it's necessary**
earlier I:: get the figures	120	**to be** (.) <u>**convincing**</u> (.) *this is the problem*
that is the names the	121	*because* ( )
earlier **I can see** (*whether I*	122	( )
can help these people) or (.)	123	( )
you'll decimate them (.)	124	( )

M's clarification, "non, seulement pour vous donner une information sur la police" (lines 104–105), is explicitly motivated in lines 119–120, where, speaking about

the Refugee Commission's hearings in Rome, M points out: "il faut être convain-cant". Note, again, the impersonal forms used in both utterances. If the second one is still to be read as a mitigation of the threat to U's face, the first one may be an initial (and subconscious?) sign of M's hesitation to "step to the fore" as the one offering inside information. A realignment of positions occurs as a result of M's explanations. Having understood the mediator's intention to help him obtain the status of refugee, from now on U will show a very cooperative attitude. Also worthy of notice are lines 122–124 in the lefthand column, which manifest the employee's outspoken commitment to helping service users go through the asylum procedure (he is on the phone with the Immigration Office and is asking for the names of the applicants who have been summoned to Rome). The close parallel-ism in meaning and intent between the two simultaneous conversations is a mere coincidence, albeit a felicitous one.

3.2.3 Shifting narrative

Excerpts [4], [5], [6] and [7] show the mediator improve the account that the ser-vice user is required to write down for the police records and for his asylum ap-plication. The conversion of U's ontological narrative into an institutional one is carried out by M through different discursive practices. The first excerpt is taken from a dyadic phase, while P is out of the room.

Excerpt [4] VII: 348–361
((in French))

348 U: *(because) a policeman had beaten up killed a mototaximan*[16] *on duty*
349 M: **ah↑ and why did he kill him↑**
350 U: *I don't know*
351 M: **ah is it so ↑ so then I ask You why (.) were You were You**
352   **involved with this group↑ why did they kill the mototaximan↑**
353 U: *maybe as* ⌈*I said*
354 M: ⌊*( ) the state*⌋ *doesn't want mototaximen to*
355   *be around because there have been some: some dead↑* ⌈*( )*
356 U: ⌊*no ( )*⌋ *these*
357   *policemen have abused us for too long these policemen=*
358 M: *=why↑*
359 U: *( ) a policeman you ask me why a policeman a policeman ( ) (standing there in*
360   *front of us) like this (.) show me the papers*
361 M: *mhm corruption*

This sequence follows upon a rather chaotic narration of the events which brought U to become a trade union leader, to be put in jail and tortured, and eventual-ly to flee Cameroon. Throughout the narration, M has helped U re-establish a chronological ordering of such events, while pointing out sources of potential

inconsistency. Here, his help takes the form of a simulated refugee hearing inter-
rogation.[17] The style is that of a fast-paced adversarial line of questioning, which
succeeds in eliciting the "wrong" answer. U is led to vent his anger against the
corrupt police agents who exact bribes in return for letting mototaxi drivers work
(lines 359–360). As we shall see in excerpt [6], corruption is not an "interesting"
topic for the purposes of the adjudication procedure.

   Excerpt [5], which is again from a dyadic phase, shows the first clear signs of
the mediator's internal conflict.

   Excerpt [5] IX: 382–391
   ((in French))
382 M: =*if You have* (.) <u>*no*</u> *it's it's* **I-I I should not be asking these questions but I am**
383   **expressly asking them to make it euh:: clear to You what it is that the**
384   **Commission requires** *that* **if You have a true story euh based on true facts**
385   *You may have* ((phone rings)) *You have the chance to get*
386   *euh* ((phone rings)) *political asylum otherwise the Commission is going to-euh may*
387   *judge: that Your: account* ((phone rings)) *is sort of made up I don't know so it is*
388   *necessary to always stress* ((phone rings)) *the political issue* (.) *this is*
389   *why it is called political asylum* ((phone rings)) **one must not stress**
390   **economic things or I have nothing to eat** (*because*)
391   ((phone rings)) *this is of no interest to the Commission that's why if You*

M's reference to a prohibition ("je *dois pas* poser ces questions", line 382) is the
very core around which the argumentation of this paper is built. The first reading
which can safely be ruled out is that the mediator is here alluding to the interpret-
ing norm of "non-involvement", which prohibits interpreters' autonomous incur-
sions into the exchange as fully ratified participants. As pointed out in Section 1,
cultural mediators in Italy are not trained to become "invisible" interpreters (or,
for that matter, interpreters *tout court*). Besides, M has independently conducted
a conversation with U for most of the encounter, and has shown absolutely no
qualms about it. Equally untenable is the hypothesis that M is referring to a code
of ethics requiring the Bureau's staff not to divulge "inside information" about the
adjudication procedure. While on the phone with the Immigration Office, the Ital-
ian employee is explicit about his intention to help applicants prepare for the hear-
ing in Rome (as illustrated in excerpt [3] above); moreover, later in the encounter
(see next excerpt), he himself will offer advice. The most likely interpretation of
that "je dois pas", as supported by later sequences, is that M positions himself as
a representative of a socio-institutional context which goes beyond the Bureau's
confines. In this wider frame of reference, M sees himself as a fully integrated
citizen in the new country that has hosted him, and towards which he feels too
obligated to allow the indiscriminate entrance of all immigrants. Note, in particu-
lar, the emphasis he places on the condition for a successful application: "si vous

avez une histoire vraie, basée sur des éléments véridiques" (line 384). This position is in evident contrast with an alternative story line, that of his past experience as emigrant, which was probably characterised by the same kind of disorientation that his interlocutor is now feeling. This latter self evidently inclines the mediator to overcome the scruples felt by his other self. Further evidence of his willingness to help the asylum seeker is found only a few lines later (lines 389–390). Here, M tells U not to underline the economic reasons for his fleeing the country. Interestingly, he shifts from an impersonal form "il faut pas mettre l'accent sur les choses économiques" to embedded speech "j'ai rien à manger", where he dramatizes a fictitious applicant speaking before the Commission.

A narrative in the first person features in excerpt [6] as well. The sequence is taken from the only triadic phase where the asylum issue was dealt with.

Excerpt [6] IX-X: 406–418

406   M : je sais pas si-si je me suis expliqué ou non=
            I don't know if I've made myself clear or not
407   ((P comes back))
408   U: =non je vous comprends je vous comprends
            no I understand You I understand You
409   P: **lui** ha un problema::=
            he has a problem
410   M: =**lui** ha ha due problemi ha un problema politico e un problema di tipo::=
            he has got two problems he has got a political problem and a
411   U: =le problème est le suivant=
            the problem is the following
412   P: =sindacale
            a trade union one
413   M: sindacale ma sindacale si può considerare politico (.) il problema è che magari la
            a trade union one but can a trade union issue be considered a political one the problem is maybe
414   corruzione dei polizio:tti (queste cose qui)=
            policemen's corruption (and the like)
415   P: =**non è importante**
            it's irrelevant
416   M: ouai alors ( ) **moi je suis allé là-bas j'étais le leader le le le le porte-parole du**
            so then   I went there   I was the leader the spokesperson of the
417   **groupe: je-je on a essayé de s–de: nous organiser: et ils m'ont met mis en**
            group   I   we tried to organize ourselves   and they put me in
418   **prison parce que j'étais le: pour eux une personne dangereuse qui va déstabiliser**
            jail because I was the   for them a dangerous person   who would destabilize

P comes back and indirectly enquires about U's story (line 409). His reference to U in the third person invites M to provide a direct answer rather than a translation into French for the benefit of the service user. U's attempt to step into the conversation (line 411) — he has evidently grasped the word "problema" — is disregarded by the other two interlocutors. Incidentally, P is able to conclude M's utterance about the trade union issue (line 412), since he has probably caught some fragments of conversation — the French word "syndicat" being very similar to the Italian one "sindacato" — during his comings and goings into and out of the room. M's synthesis of U's account (line 410) is clearly not a move on his part to turn the dyadic exchange into a triadic one. It rather serves the specific purpose of introducing his request for P's professional advice (lines 413–414). Once this is given (line 415), M resumes his conversation in French with U, which will last for the short remainder of phase X. M's role here is distinctly that of a co-provider of the service. This role is fully accepted by P, who does not ask any further questions. The last three lines of the excerpt (416–418) see the mediator recite a narrative, which is a much more concise and focused version of the confused and lengthy account he has heard from U. The reason for such succinctness is given soon after, as shown in excerpt [7], where emphasis is also placed on exact reference to time.[18] This sequence, which is again a dyadic one, contains further evidence of M's contradictory self-positioning, as he fluctuates between formal and informal tokens of address (see note 15).

Excerpt [7] XI: 444–455
((in French))

444	M:	_this is what **You** can say because **You** have a quarter of an hour_
445	U:	_ah when will it be↑_
446	M:	_°when will it be° a year but the same things that **you** tell here that_
447		_**I'm sorry that You** tell here ( ) always **You:** tell the same sto–the_
448		_same story because there are people who write down a story (.) when they_
449		_get there they forget they ask them from what hour to what hour↑ (.)_
450		_I've seen people who have been flunked (.) because they got the hour_
451		_wrong (.) instead of saying half past twelve he said half past one so_
452		_it's not fair ( ) tell stories that's why I'm telling **You:** (.) and then_
453		_it's necessary to tell how **you** were: **you** were:: **you** were **you** crossed the border_

That this sudden inconsistency is an indicator of the struggle between distancing and empathic closeness, rather than a mere lapse in formality induced by the colloquial manners of most of the Bureau's employees (see in excerpt [10], line 609, P's use of "tu" in addressing U), is supported precisely by M's constant use of "vous" in the previous 20 minutes of conversation and in the remaining 10 (see excerpt [8], lines 456 and 500). The collocation of the above sequence after an

extended dyadic interaction focusing on U's account of persecution is, in this re-spect, quite revealing.

3.2.4   *Shifting discourse*

Even more revealing is M's unsolicited justification for offering advice on the asy-lum hearing, as shown in excerpt [8], lines 458–460. P's return (line 456) and M's shift from French to Italian (line 458) would identify the service provider as ad-dressee of the utterance. Most probably, however, this self-justification was meant for the observer — the student interpreter — whom M knew to have a perfect knowledge of French, enabling her to follow the whole conversation. It can thus be safely argued that the mediator feels the need to motivate his "breach of loyalty" not in the eyes of the Bureau's employee, but in those of an outsider.

Excerpt [8] XII: 456–462; 476–477; 483; 500–504

456 M: euh ((P comes back)) et puis maintenant vous êtes (venu ici) peut-être pour
          so now   You have (come here) maybe to

457   parler (d'autres) problèmes problèmes: d'hébergement: de logement: de: la
          speak about other problems problems of accommodation lodging

458   nourriture les: vêtements (justement) (.) **no perché spesso alcuni: ci sono delle**
          food   clothes   (that is)   no because often some people there are

459   **persone che hanno delle storie ma sono anche storie vere eh↑ non dico**
          people who have stories   and these stories are certainly true I don't deny it

460   **che però si perdono in alcuni dettagli ( ) e allora:**
          who however get some details wrong   and then

461 P: okay **digli così** perché io c'ho già (cinquantamila persone) (.) riscriva meglio la
          okay tell him this because I've got (fifty thousand people) already he should write his

462   storia io (la do) ( )
          story better I (will give it)
          […]

476 P: ⌐ lui   ⌐ faccia così allora (.) stasera alle
                                         he   should do this then tonight at

477   sei va in via XXX quattordici prende il sessantatré=
          six he should go to XXX street number 14 and take bus number 63
          […]

483 P: =e va lì (lì a) corso XXX e gli danno da dormire fino al dodici
          he goes there (there to) XXX high street and they will put him up until the twelfth
          […]

500 M: vous vous présentez là-bas avec la lettre ils vous donnent un endroit
          You You will show up there with the letter they will give You a place

501   pour dormir et même: quelque chose à manger (.) jusqu'au douze avril (.) le
          to sleep   and also something to eat   until the twelfth of April the

502   douze avril ((addressing P)) **e lì gli rilasciano: il certificato che lui abita**
          twelfth of April   and there will they give him the certificate that he lives

503   lì↑
             there

504   P: sì gli danno: ehm: gli ho scritto che gli devono dare una lettera di ospitalità
             yes they'll give him I have written to them that they should give him a letter saying
             they are putting him up

The other interesting aspect of this triadic phase is the shift of topic, back to the accommodation issue, by both M and P, independently of each other (see lines 456 and 461–476). Assistance with the asylum application, at least at the early stages, is delegated to M, whose role as co-provider of the service is not brought into question. Overburdened with work, P indirectly invites U (see again the reference in the third person, "tell him this", line 461) to rewrite his story, under the implicit assumption that M's indications should be taken into account. He then starts giving instructions on the solution he has found to the accommodation problem (line 476). Having been expressly asked to interpret, M resumes his translation role, which, however, shows once again a high degree of involvement. After conveying P's instructions in French, he turns to him and asks whether the people running the shelter will give U the declaration of fixed abode that the latter needs for the police (lines 502–503). He thus reassigns the floor to a primary speaker, not to ask for a minor clarification, but to elicit a piece of information which he knows is of crucial import for the service user.

From shifting topic, sequence [9] shows M decidedly shifting discourse. Here, the mediator identifies with the host community. He first justifies the inadequacies of institutional responses, by pointing out that Italy is witnessing a large inflow of immigrants, as is the city where the encounter is taking place (replaced here by three "X"s) (see lines 529–532). The specific reference to asylum seekers would also suggest an indirect justification of the rigour and severity with which the adjudicating authorities assess the asylum applications. A few lines down, M is then seen to transmit the values of a dominant discourse, whereby Europe is portrayed as the continent of democracy and human rights (lines 533–534). His adoption of European self-celebratory rhetoric is wrapped in slightly patronizing tones. The symbolic position accrued to M from his higher social status marks the distance not only between himself and the newly arrived immigrant, but more significantly between M's former and present selves.

Excerpt [9] XIII: 522–536
((in French))

522   U: (*I haven't got any money*) *Mister*
523   M: *I know*
524   U: (*not even*)
525   M: *for the bus ticket yes I know*
526   U: ( )

527   M: (*it's a problem*) **we will we will** ( ) **we will ask the gentleman yes** (.) *because*
528   *the first few weeks are normally very difficult* (.) *especially for those*
529   *people who get here and don't have anyone who knows them* (.) *euh:* **Italy**
530   **is: there are a lot of people who apply for political asylum** *the situation in XXX*
531   ( ) *there are a lot of people* ( ) *who come here that's why*
532   *the first few days the first few months are* (.) °*difficult*° **it is necessary to have a lot**
533   **of patience to hold on** (.) **that's it** (.) **we are in Europe the country the country**
           the-the continent
534   **of democracy of human rights but one needs to it is necessary euh** (.) **to be always**
535   **ready to face up to these very difficult and critical situations** (.) *it's not a it's not*
536   *a hotel* (*it's not a*) *luxury* (*accommodation*) *but still it is a solution*

From the linguistic point of view, a clarification is called for. The subject pronoun featuring in the French original utterances of lines 527 and 533 was "*on*": "on va demander à monsieur" and "on est en Europe". Besides its impersonal value, "on" is used, especially in the spoken language, as a substitute for the inclusive first person plural pronoun "nous", i.e. "we". The selection of either value depends on the immediate context. Here, the latter meaning was clearly the prevailing one. Unambiguously impersonal is, on the other hand, the verb form "*il faut*" in lines 532–533, "il faut avoir beaucoup de patience, résister", and 534–535, "il faut toujours être prêt à affronter ces situations très difficiles et critiques". It should be recalled that in politeness theory, impersonal forms are described as devices of negative politeness, whereby the interlocutor's face is protected through an increase in the distance between speaker and hearer (see Brown & Levinson 1987).

3.2.5   *Shifting language*

In the final phase of the encounter, a radical change is observed in the dynamics of the interaction. Pointing to the city map, P starts addressing U directly, in a hybrid and chaotic mixture of Italian, French and English words, which is meant to instruct him on how to reach the shelter. M steps in only to provide language support. His interventions, both solicited (see excerpt [10], line 609, "a sinistra come si dice?", "how do you say left?") and unsolicited, are mostly confined to the translation of single words from Italian and English into French (see below the bus number, line 575; the bus terminal, line 577; and the marketplace, line 608). The employee's vivacious manners, bordering at times on the histrionic, and the relaxed and friendly atmosphere of this phase suggest only one possible interpretation for this new communicative scenario. Far from indicating P's loss of confidence in the mediator's translation skills (as may sometimes be the case), or his repositioning of the latter within a strictly ancillary role, this attempt at an unmediated interaction is evidence of a shift in relational patterns, brought about by the marginality of the topic under discussion. Whereas, throughout most of the encounter, P saw U as yet another "case" to be dealt with as expeditiously as

possible thanks to M's help, in the closing exchanges he positions the service user as a "person", with whom to engage in a lighter and funny interaction. The following excerpt, for which no translation has even been attempted, is left to the reader to decipher and — possibly — enjoy.

> **Excerpt [10]XIV: 571–578; 607–613**
> 571 P: (°dove sei↑°) (.) you are here okay↑ vous êtes ici (.) Porta XXX (.) il sessantatré
> 572   fa questa via (.) eh↑ here is the sixty-three=
> 573 M: =ici=
> 574 P: =okay↑ ici
> 575 M: le soixante ┌trois ┐
> 576 P: └okay↑┘ you go al terminal de bus
> 577 M: terminus jusqu'au ┌terminus┐
> 578 P: └terminus┘ six o'clock in the afternoon
>   […]
> 607 P: sì ma questo è Porta XXX okay↑ il mercato grande
> 608 M: où il y a beaucoup ouai le marché il y a:=
> 609 P: =okay se tu fai così e a sinistra come si dice↑
> 610 M: à gauche
> 611 P: à gauche grande mercato okay↑ grande mercato (.) dopo sessantatré okay↑ pour
> 612   prendre le pomeriggio tac grande mercato via XXX okay↑ à droite et à gauche et
> 613   you arrive à quinze heures okay↑

4.   Conclusions: The mediation zone as a "shifting ground"

This paper opened with the notion of cultural mediation as a zone of instability. Abundant evidence of both interactional variety and relational complexity has indeed emerged from the analysis of the encounter. Starting with a summary of the most relevant shifts which were seen to occur in the different phases, some conclusions will be drawn concerning the discursively produced identities of the three interlocutors.

At an interactional level, the cultural mediator exhibited different degrees of involvement. With reference to the five-category typology suggested in Section 2, the mediator's behaviour identified him mostly as a co-provider of the service. Even in triadic interaction, while functioning as a translator, his involvement often shaded into the autonomy of a fully ratified participant. In dyadic exchanges, this autonomy derived not so much from the frequent and extended absence of the Italian employee, but rather from a tacitly agreed division of tasks, whereby the latter dealt with the more immediate accommodation problem, and the mediator with the asylum application. Though the overall triadic format of the encounter does not allow for a classification of this role as one of a fully independent service

provider, the boundary between this category and that of co-provider was found to be as blurred as the one between co-provider and involved translator. This is especially true, if one considers that the only summary translation of a previous monolingual exchange with the service user, required of and provided by the mediator, did not introduce a triadic conversation on the subject, but took the form of a peer-to-peer consultation. The practical manifestation of the mediator's interactional power was his management of both topic and floor. From such a prominent participation status, a noticeable shift occurred at the end of the encounter, where the mediator was cast in the ancillary role of "linguistic support". In the specific context of our analysis, the institutional representative's reassertion of interactional control and the consequent restriction of the mediator's room for manoeuvre were not intended to challenge the previous positioning of the latter as an equal-status professional. The new configuration is simply indicative of the employee's re-positioning of himself and of the service user. From a "case" to be talked about and solved, the asylum seeker was re-positioned as a "person" by the service provider who, in turn, relocated himself as a caring and funny human being, thereby offsetting the image of an elusive bureaucrat he had projected until then.

Coming thus to shifts in positioning, the interaction was found to be an extraordinarily heterogeneous space, where alternative and at times conflicting discourses constituted and re-constituted the interlocutors' identities. From the opening sequences, interactional dynamics established a joint positioning of the mediator as a knowledgeable and competent advisor, on a par with the Bureau's employee. Within this position, the mediator was able to help the asylum seeker transform his personal narrative into an institutionally acceptable one. As pointed out by Maryns (2006: 279), the adjudicating authorities' "demand for an exact frame of reference […] clashes with the narrated chaos of displacement and the indeterminacy of time and place". To turn the asylum seeker's narrative chaos into a linear account, the mediator pointed out potential inconsistencies and eventually synthesised the original narration in a first-person dramatisation of the applicant's speech before the Refugee Commission. Besides the logical and chronological restructuring of events, improving on the narrative required a foregrounding of the political motives over the economic ones. This was most effectively achieved through a simulated interrogation, in which the mediator was seen to appropriate the discursive practice of the legal institutions. A shift in function was thus effected, as the very same discourse which is meant to reproduce the dominant ideology was here strategically used to help a member of the minority culture overcome the strictures of the legal process. Though referring to a more general conceptualization, Inghilleri's (2005: 72) notion of "pedagogic discourse" — which she draws from Bernstein's social constructivism — would seem a fitting description for this form of discursive recontextualization exhibiting the typical traits of an empowering process.

The self-positioning of the mediator as the asylum seeker's ally was, however, not unproblematic. His first attempt to replace the service user's personal story line with the depersonalised one of "refugee claimant" was resisted by the latter, despite the deployment of face-saving strategies — of which impersonal forms were the most recurrent ones. This initial resistance was overcome as the asylum seeker saw the advantages of the alternative positioning offered by the mediator. If this tension was soon resolved, a second and more subtle one was seen to permeate the whole encounter, until the very end. Although the mediator's migration experience was far from being as traumatic as that of the asylum seeker, he was certainly inclined to recognize the sense of cultural uprooting and estrangement that he himself must have felt upon his arrival in the new socio-institutional context. Whereas his understanding of the asylum seeker's predicament led him to provide "inside information", his present status as a fully integrated citizen in the host country pushed him in the opposite direction. Not only did he feel the need to justify his behaviour, but he appropriated the self-celebratory discourse of official European rhetoric to mark the distance between himself and the newly arrived immigrant. At a deeper level, this tension can be read in terms of a negotiation between the mediator's discursively produced selves. As Davies and Harré (1990: 49) note, the positions created for oneself "are not part of a linear non-contradictory autobiography (as autobiographies usually are in their written form) but rather, the cumulative fragments of a lived autobiography". Thus, two institutional discourses were used to project two different fragments of self. In this sense, the cultural mediator's identity — as indeed any other individual's identity — can be construed as a constant search for coherence, where "those contradictions we are immediately aware of must be remedied, transcended, resolved or ignored" (1990: 59).

The reference made in the title of this paper to an identity-seeking process suggests, however, a second "zone of uncertainty", which aptly describes the present ill-defined state of cultural mediation. The absence of a well-established professional identity, which is partly due to the lack of formally-accredited and comprehensive training programmes, accounts for a vagueness of competencies and a wide diversity of practices. As Inghilleri (2005: 82) incisively argues, this same indefiniteness, while raising issues of professional standards, may also be looked upon as an opportunity for cultural mediators "to structure and/or restructure their professional selves". Drawing on Bourdieu (2000: 158–159), the author stresses in particular how practitioners could use this freedom to "define a role for themselves that corresponds to 'who they are' rather than to an already established notion of 'who they must be'" (2005: 82). In the limited confines of one single interaction, the present study has attempted to show precisely this, who an individual mediator was, in the negotiated space of a specific socio-institutional context.

Acknowledgment

Notes

* Shorter and theoretically thinner versions of this paper were presented at the following international conferences: "Languages and European Citizenship", Rome 25–27 September 2006, and "Issues of Identity in and across Cultures and Professional Worlds", Rome 25–27 October 2007.

1. Although the denomination of "cultural mediator" is currently the most common one, a number of variants have appeared in different fields of practice, from "linguistic-cultural mediator", to "intercultural mediator", to the even lesser used "community mediator", "socio-cultural mediator" and "cross-cultural socio-educational operator" (see Degano 2002–2003). It should be noted that, if not in their title, a difference is often drawn by mediators themselves between the two distinct functions they are called upon to perform, with linguistic mediation referring to oral translation in triadic interaction, and cultural mediation referring to a broad spectrum of autonomously conducted tasks, including counselling, learning support and social work. As for the terms "community interpreter" and "public service interpreter", they were adopted by the Italian Association of Translators and Interpreters, in 2000, to describe the person who "translates in the oral mode to provide linguistic assistance to foreign citizens (immigrants or refugees, usually belonging to minority ethnic groups) in their dealings with institutions, authorities and public administrations during their stay in the host country" (AITI 2000: 121; my translation). The latter terms, however, have gained virtually no currency in Italy.

2. Exceptions are mainly found in the field of law enforcement. "Interpreters" work not only in court but also in police stations. In the latter context, they are civil servants employed full time by the Ministry of the Interior, and usually cover widely spoken languages, such as English, French and Spanish. When, however, the use of these vehicular languages is insufficient to enable communication with minority language speakers, linguistic and cultural mediators are called in to follow through a given case (see Zoff 2003–2004).

3. "Politiche per la mediazione culturale. Formazione ed impiego dei mediatori culturali" in "Documenti", 03/04/2000, at http://www.cnel.it, available as recently as July 2008.

4. The surveys were conducted in five northern Italian cities — i.e. Turin, Udine, Trieste, Gorizia and Pordenone — by student interpreters from the Trieste School of Modern Languages for Interpreters and Translators (SSLMIT), working under my supervision. The findings as well as the integral transcripts of the interviews can be found in their unpublished MA theses (see Brondino 2002–2003, Degano 2002–2003, and Zoff 2003–2004).

5. On this, see also Carlo Marzocchi's (2005) insightful article.

6. The focus of the present study is on the mediators' behaviour in spoken interaction, although written translation does make up a large part of their job.

7. The relevant section of the document (see note 3) reads: "The cultural mediator contributes to: preventing occasions of potential conflict from arising, while favouring social integration and equal access to legal rights, and enhancing the resources of the immigrant citizens' own cultures and values; helping foreign citizens integrate into the Italian society, by informing them about their rights and duties, and about the use of locally operated social, healthcare, educational and cultural services, both public and private, so as to guarantee equal access and use of those same services; facilitating the encounter of different people through linguistic-cultural mediation, which entails the ability to decode the codes — underlying the language and the totality of feelings, experience and values — of the two interacting parties (i.e. migrant and service provider); helping foreign citizens read and understand Italian culture with reference to their cultures of origin and mutual prejudices; promoting and enhancing the role of foreigners as a resource and opportunity within the wider socio-economic context." (my translation).

8. Generally, cultural mediators are not directly employed by public administrations. After obtaining their qualification, they join either a cooperative or an association, which then tender for the provision of the mediation service on the basis of fixed-term contracts.

9. To avoid any possibility of tracing back the identity of the cultural mediator involved in this study, the name of the city will be kept anonymous. Consequently, no reference to the source of the public tender document can be made available.

10. In listing, more than two decades ago, the number of disciplines which had until then applied the concept of discourse to their specific fields of study, Van Dijk (1985: 8) commented on the "burgeoning variety of orientations, methods, characteristic objects of research (e.g. genres of discourse or dimensions of context), and styles of theory formation and description". As this variety has, if anything, increased, it would be pointless to attempt even a summary review here. Readers are instead referred to the two volumes edited by Van Dijk (1997a, 1997b).

11. Since cultural mediators work in both the oral and written modes, to avoid any potential ambiguity, it might be worth clarifying that the word "translator" is used here to refer to the cross-lingual transposition of oral utterances.

12. On the perspective of person, see Bot (2005), Dubslaff & Martinsen (2005), and most recently Amato (2007).

13. Drawing on Somers & Gibson (1994), Baker (2006: 28) gives the following definition of ontological narratives: "*Ontological narratives* are personal stories that we tell ourselves about our place in the world and our own personal history. The stories both constitute and make sense of our lives. Although they ultimately remain focused on the self and its immediate world, they are interpersonal and social in nature". Thus described, ontological narratives bear a striking resemblance to Davies & Harré's "personal story lines".

14. Criteria for selection were the triadic nature of the encounter, with the mediator functioning as interpreter, at least for part of the time, and the languages spoken by the users, which were restricted to those known to the observer (i.e. French, Spanish, English and German). In some cases, although these criteria did apply, authorisation to record was nonetheless denied, because of the extremely delicate nature of the topics under discussion. The full transcripts of the 6 recorded encounters can be found in De Caneva's (2003–2004) unpublished MA thesis, which was written under my supervision. It should be noted that, for the purposes of the present

investigation, I have further revised the transcript of the one encounter discussed here, and re-designed its graphic layout to increase the readability of parallel conversations.

15. To differentiate formal tokens of address from informal ones in the English translations, the first will appear with capital letter (e.g. French vous/Italian Lei = You; French/Italian tu = you).

16. The original French word was "bendskineur". This is derived from "bendskin", which in the pidgin English of Cameroon uses a metaphorical process to designate the driver of a mototaxi.

17. In an interesting research project carried out in Canada by Robert Barsky (1996), a number of refugee claimants were asked to take part in simulated interviews and answer questions similar to those that are asked during an actual hearing. On the basis of the findings, Barsky argued that "too many claimants are refused status on the grounds that their testimony is unclear or contradictory, when a few well-placed questions or statements could easily clarify the reasons for any apparent contradictions. If competent and supportive interpreters were allowed to play a more active role in the hearings, claimants (and especially those less familiar with the Western system of interrogation and adjudication) would have a better chance of explaining their predicament to the adjudicating party directly" (1996: 46). Readers are also referred to the author's in-depth discussion of discursive practices in refugee hearings (see Barsky 1994).

18. In Maryns' (2006) comprehensive study of Belgian asylum procedures, exact reference to time and place is identified as one of the institutionally required narrative conventions.

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Appendix: Transcription key

Symbols		Meaning
A B	[[well I said Yes	utterances starting simultaneously
A she's B	⌈ right ⌊ huh mm ⌋	overlapping utterances
A I agree= B =me too		latched utterances
(.)		untimed pause within a turn
((pause))		untimed pause between turns
↑		rising intonation
wo:::rd		lengthened vowel or consonant sound
word — word		abrupt cut-off in the flow of speech
word		emphasis
WORD		increased volume
°word°		decreased volume
>word<		quicker pace
((word))		relevant contextual information; characterisations of the talk; vocalisations that cannot be spelled recognisably
(word)		transcriber's guess
( )		unrecoverable speech

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