

A longitudinal study on continuities and shifts in community interpreting services in Türkiye: The case of the Refugees Association (Mülteciler Derneği)

Özgür Bülent Erdoğan 

Fatih Sultan Mehmet Vakıf University, Turkey

oberdogan@fsm.edu.tr



ABSTRACT

This study examines continuities and changes in community interpreting practices in Türkiye, one of the world's largest refugee-hosting countries, through a longitudinal ethnographic approach. Drawing on fieldwork from 2017 to 2018, and a revisit in 2024 to Mülteciler Derneği [Refugees Association] in Istanbul's Sultanbeyli district, it examines how community interpreters of Syrian origin negotiate changing institutional settings, shifting migration policies and rising negative public sentiment. Using one-on-one interviews, focus group interviews, and discourse analysis, the research investigates interpreters' emotional labour, coping strategies, and professional identity formation in a politically charged environment. Informed by reflexive ethnography and intersectionality, it highlights how interpreters' experiences are shaped by multiple social determinants, including gender, disability and migration status. The findings reveal both structural continuities, such as centralized interpreter coordination, and new challenges, including workforce reduction and emotional strain. By situating interpreting within its broader sociopolitical context, the study offers a temporally grounded understanding of interpreter agency and resilience in humanitarian work.

Keywords: longitudinal ethnography, reflexive ethnography, interpreter agency, community interpreting, Syrians in Türkiye

Longitudinalna študija o kontinuiteti in spremembah v storitvah skupnostnega tolmačenja v Turčiji: Primer združenja za begunce Mülteciler Derneği

IZVLEČEK

Študija z longitudinalnim etnografskim pristopom proučuje kontinuiteto in spremembe v skupnostnem tolmačenju v Turčiji, eni od držav, ki gosti največ beguncev. Na podlagi terenske raziskave, izvedene v združenju za begunce Mülteciler Derneği, ki se nahaja v istanbulski četrti Sunltanbeyli, med letoma 2017 in 2018, ter na osnovi ponovnega obiska iz leta 2024 se študija posveča vprašanju, kako skupnostni tolmači sirijskega porekla doživljajo spreminjajoča se institucionalna okolja, spreminjajoče se migracijske politike in naraščajoče negativno razpoloženje javnosti. Z intervjuji, fokusnimi

skupinami in diskurzno analizo preučujem čustveno obremenitev tolmačev, strategije spoprijemanja s težavami ter oblikovanje profesionalne identitete v politično obremenjenem okolju. Na podlagi refleksivne etnografije in interseksionalnosti v prispevku osvetlujem, kako izkušnje tolmačev oblikujejo številne družbene determinante, med katerimi so spol, invalidnost in status migranta. Rezultati kažejo na to, da se je ohranila strukturna kontinuiteta kot v primeru centralizirane koordinacije, obenem pa so se pojavili novi izzivi, vključno z zmanjšanjem delovne sile in čustveno obremenjenostjo. Z umestitvijo tolmačenja v širši družbenopolitični kontekst študija ponuja časovno utemeljeno razumevanje delovalnosti in odpornosti tolmačev pri humanitarnem delu.

Ključne besede: longitudinalna etnografija, refleksivna etnografija, tolmačeva delovalnost, skupnostno tolmačenje, Siriji v Turčiji

1. Introduction

Although it dates back to the beginnings of human history, community interpreting (CI) as an organized practice first emerged in multilingual Western societies to bridge the communication gap between migrants who did not speak the host country's language and service providers (Pöchhacker 1999). In Türkiye, the massive arrival of Syrian refugees since 2011 has necessitated the expansion of interpreting services in various institutional settings, including healthcare, legal aid, and social services. Among these, Sultanbeyli, a disadvantaged suburban district of Istanbul, has emerged as a key site for studying CI due to its significant refugee population and the presence of multiple organizations providing assistance.

This study examines the temporal changes and continuities in CI practices in Istanbul, focusing on the evolving roles of interpreters, their coping strategies, and the impact of broader socio-political shifts on their profession. It is based on ethnographic visits conducted between 2017–2019 and a follow-up visit in 2024, to Mültecilerle Dayanışma ve Yardımlaşma Derneği [Association for Solidarity and Assistance with Refugees], or Mülteciler Derneği [Refugees Association] for short, a sister organization of Sultanbeyli Municipality. The first stage of the research, following the 2017–2018 period that constituted the initial phase of the study,¹ coincided with increased mobility to the region. During this time, tensions between locals and refugees became more pronounced. The external migration experiences of Syrians to Türkiye were explored primarily through the narratives of community interpreters, most of whom were themselves of Syrian origin. The second phase of the research aimed to trace changes and continuities that occurred since the first phase, providing a longitudinal perspective on the evolving dynamics of migration and interpreting practices.

1 The first phase of the research was conducted as part of my PhD dissertation study.

In 2024, migration remained one of the most politically contested issues in Türkiye, driven by economic difficulties and the resurgence of nationalist discourse. The government continued to present its refugee policy as humanitarian, emphasizing “voluntary returns” and Türkiye’s moral responsibility; yet, at the same time, it tightened border controls and registration procedures (ECRE 2025). Opposition parties, particularly nationalist ones such as the Zafer Partisi [Victory Party], used anti-immigrant rhetoric to mobilize public support, portraying refugees, especially Syrians, as an economic and social burden (Ceylan, Uslu and İncedere 2025). Growing public resentment, fuelled by misinformation and online hate speech, resulted in several anti-refugee incidents. Together, these developments deepened political polarization and made migration one of the most controversial and securitized issues in Turkish politics.

This tension has roots in the period following the 2019 local elections, when public discourse on migration became increasingly politicized, leading to increased scrutiny and inspections targeting migrant populations. Although measures to control irregular migration were sporadically implemented in earlier years, enforcement became significantly stricter after the introduction of the so-called “dilution policy” in early 2022. The main objective of this policy was to prevent spatial concentration and reduce the density of immigrants in certain neighbourhoods, to close areas with large immigrant populations to new registrations and, where necessary, to relocate immigrants to different districts and provinces (Danış 2024, 17).

In this article, I explore the roles of interpreters in micro-scale contexts and the influence of social change on their work in the long run, including their coping strategies. De Boe, Balogh, and Salaets (2021) identify three contextual levels in CI: geographical, socio-institutional, and interactional, all of which shape how interpreting is practised, researched, and trained. This study concentrates on the socio-institutional level, analysing how macro-structures – “large-scale forces embedded in social fields that shape individual and collective practices”, as formulated by Bourdieu (1998, 32) – exert pressure on interpreter’s agency.

The purpose of this study is to offer a longitudinal and intersectional perspective on community interpreting practices in Türkiye, focusing on the case of Mülteciler Derneği. Building on ethnographic revisits conducted between 2017 and 2024, it aims to understand how interpreters’ roles, identities, and strategies have evolved under changing institutional and sociopolitical conditions. Against this backdrop, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. Which aspects of CI practices in Sultanbeyli, a disadvantaged suburban district of Istanbul with a significant refugee population, have remained consistent, and where have disruptions or changes occurred between 2018 and 2024?
2. How do social, institutional, and intersectional factors influence interpreter agency within a Turkish NGO for refugees?

By “consistent”, I refer to whether there has been an increase in the number of migrants seeking assistance from the organization and whether the provision of CI services at Mülteciler Derneği has remained sustainable over time. “Change”, on the other hand, refers to the arrival of new ethnic groups, which may have created a demand for additional language pairs other than Turkish-Arabic.

2. Background and context

According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), Türkiye has become one of the largest host countries for refugees, particularly in the aftermath of the Syrian conflict (IOM 2026). Istanbul accommodates over one million foreign residents, and the district of Sultanbeyli, where this study is situated, hosts a significant migrant population (Ministry of Interior of the Republic of Türkiye 2024). As of 2023, approximately 21,740 Syrians resided in Sultanbeyli, marking a decrease of about 3,000 compared to previous years (Mülteciler Derneği 2024). This decline may reflect both onward migration to Europe and voluntary or assisted returns to Syria.

Several organizations in Sultanbeyli offer interpreting services to facilitate refugees’ access to healthcare, legal aid, and social services. The most prominent one among these is Mülteciler Derneği [Refugees Association], established in 2014, which focuses primarily on healthcare and interpreting services. Operating under its umbrella, the Sultanbeyli Community Centre, funded by international organizations such as GIZ (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit – German Society for International Cooperation) and the UNHCR, has provided integrated social services since 2016. Over time, the organization expanded its operations by opening two additional branches in Ümraniye district in the Asian part of Istanbul in 2019 and 2022, offering mental health and protection services for vulnerable groups. These institutions have continually adapted their services in response to shifting migration policies and the evolving needs of the refugee community, which shaped the nature of community interpreting in the region. Additionally, a call centre staffed with Arabic-Turkish bilingual personnel was established, and Turkish language and vocational training courses were launched in 2017. A child and youth centre followed in 2018, and in 2020, a career centre was inaugurated to support refugees in accessing

employment (Mülteciler Derneği 2022). These developments can be interpreted as attempts to reorganize CI practices by redistributing communicative responsibilities across different institutional settings. The establishment of call centres and Turkish language courses appears to have been aimed at reducing the workload of interpreters. Likewise, the opening of child and youth centres and vocational training courses created new spaces where bilingual speakers of Arabic and Turkish were recruited, revealing how institutional expansion simultaneously generated new forms of interpreter involvement.

The following section will provide an overview of CI in migration settings, since it is closely linked to human mobility (Inghilleri 2017b), and examines two central themes: the evolving roles of interpreters and the influence of broader societal changes on their profession.

3. Community interpreting and migration: A theoretical overview

CI is deeply connected to migration, as it directly addresses the communication needs of migrants who arrive in a host country without sufficient language proficiency in the local language, particularly in contexts such as health, legal and educational services (Hale 2007; Pöllabauer 2013; Santamaría Ciordia 2016). Language acquisition is a long-term process that requires consistent exposure and immersion, posing significant challenges for newcomers in accessing essential services such as healthcare, education, and legal support during the early period of their settlement in the host country (Bancroft 2015, 222). Historically, children of migrant families often assumed the role of informal interpreters to bridge these communication gaps. However, this practice has raised serious concerns, particularly as it has been observed that reliance on untrained individuals has led to miscommunication, misunderstandings, and even medical misdiagnoses (cf. Martínez-Gómez 2015, 420). Recent research carried out in Australia points to the crucial role of professional interpreting in making healthcare more equitable. Zucchi, Hlavac, and Hu (2025) show that patients who do not prefer to use English often rely on interpreters to communicate effectively during clinical encounters. Similarly, Hansen and Charles (2023) find that interpreting services play an important role in improving healthcare access and outcomes for Aboriginal Australians, Indigenous communities, and other minority language speakers.

Research conducted in France among Turkish migrant families further reveals the discomfort experienced by parents when required to discuss sensitive or private matters, especially health-related issues, in the presence of their children (Hiçdurmaz 2025). The same study also highlights a growing communication barrier among

elderly migrants, who often face increased isolation due to limited language skills. These findings highlight the critical role of professional community interpreters in facilitating accurate, culturally sensitive and ethically sound communication across linguistic and cultural boundaries (Duman 2025).

3.1 Interpreter identity and in-betweenness

Another reason to examine the relationship between CI and migration is that interpreters themselves frequently come from migrant backgrounds. As in the case of Mülteciler Derneği, many have resided in the host country for extended periods and have developed a high degree of proficiency in both the language and cultural norms of their country of origin and the country of settlement. Nevertheless, they are frequently symbolically positioned “in between”, (Pöchhacker 2016) mediating hybrid and, at times, conflicting identities. This in-betweenness has an impact not only on their professional roles but also their personal experiences, as they mediate between two cultural worlds while fully belonging to neither. Their own migration trajectories and cultural affiliations may influence how they interpret, affect how they are perceived by clients and institutions, and shape how they negotiate the emotional and ethical demands of the profession. Acknowledging this relational dimension is essential to understand the complexities surrounding CI in migration contexts (Erdoğan 2024).

3.2 Advocacy and social justice roles

This relational complexity also reflects the broader historical and structural ties between CI and migration. Since the adoption of the term *community interpreting* in the 1990s, it has been increasingly tied to global migration flows, particularly as the demand for interpreting services grew in response to increased human mobility from the Global South, economically less developed countries with limited public services, to the Global North, economically developed, industrialized nations of North America, Western Europe and Australia. The distinction between the Global North and Global South shapes community interpreting practices in terms of access, training, and recognition, reflecting global inequalities in mobility and institutional support (Inghilleri 2017a). As Bancroft (2015) emphasizes, community interpreting enables speakers of minority languages to have access to public services such as healthcare, education, and justice, thereby promoting fairness and participation for all members of society. Nonetheless, it should be pointed that the research has shown that community interpreters not only facilitated access to services but also had to negotiate

complex sociopolitical dynamics, power relations, and issues of inclusion and exclusion within host societies (Inghilleri 2017b; Tipton and Furmanek 2016). Over time, researchers in the field have expanded the definition of CI to acknowledge interpreters' roles beyond language mediation. Wadensjö (1999) puts emphasis on the co-constructive nature of CI, where interpreters mediate not just words and sentences but also social meanings. Similarly, Angelelli (2004) and Tipton and Furmanek (2016) argue that interpreters actively shape discourse and influence interactions.

The growing presence of refugees and migrants in the 21st century has necessitated a more flexible role for interpreters, often involving advocacy and emotional support (Geiling et al. 2021; Hassan and Blackwood 2020; Sultanić 2021). However, their essential role remains enabling communicative autonomy, allowing service users and providers to communicate directly and make their own informed decisions without interference (García-Beyaert 2015). In Türkiye, the recent increase in migration flows has placed pressure on service institutions. As recent research in healthcare settings indicates, interpreters often take on advocacy roles within the framework of their professional responsibilities (Şener and Kıncal 2019; Şener Erkırtay and Kıncal 2021). Studies conducted in European countries like Spain and Germany also show that interpreters sometimes take on advisory roles, guiding migrants through bureaucratic processes (Relinque 2024; Valero-Garcés 2018; Cases Berbel 2020).

Regarding psychological issues, CI studies highlight burnout risks due to interpreters' exposure to stressful situations, especially in asylum processes (Crezee 2013). Leanza, Pointurier and Duchesne (2025) identified four coping strategies used by public service interpreters in emotionally charged situations: two collaborative strategies which help maintain communication and manage emotions, while two obstructive strategies, characterized by emotional or physical distancing, which can disrupt interaction and increase stress, particularly in cases involving racist microaggressions. Training in trauma-informed interpreting has been suggested in order to provide the essential support that interpreters require, as research shows that training in this field reduces vicarious trauma and increases professional well-being. For instance, Knodel (2018) found that 83% of American Sign Language interpreters in mental health settings reported experiencing vicarious trauma, yet over half had not received training to help manage its emotional impacts. Lai and Costello (2021) similarly report that Australian public service interpreters request professional development that clarifies confidentiality, offers briefing/debriefing procedures, and addresses well-being. Such training would seem to be crucial in organizations like Mülteciler Derneği, where interpreters work in high-stress situations, such as legal, social and psychological counselling services.

Public attitudes toward migrants and refugees significantly shape the working conditions of community interpreters. Negative public sentiment can manifest in numerous ways, including hostility from service providers, discrimination within broader society, and an increased emotional burden on interpreters themselves (Blommaert 2010; Şener Erkırtay, Ulaş, and Kınal 2024; Erdoğan 2024). Positioned between the needs of migrants and the prejudices of the host society, interpreters often become the frontline negotiators of social tension. Continued exposure to such negative attitudes and discriminatory practices can result in increased stress, burnout, and vicarious trauma (Crezee 2013).

CI is deeply embedded in the broader socio-political environment in which it operates (Inghilleri 2005). Previous research has shown that migration policies, legal frameworks, public attitudes, and structural changes in service provision have a direct impact on the demand for interpreting services, the evolving roles and responsibilities of interpreters, and the overall conditions under which they work (Pöchhacker 2016). This section explores these influences, focusing on their manifestations within migration contexts, and how they are reflected in the case of Mülteciler Derneği.

At the macro level, community interpreting practices are closely linked to national migration and integration regimes, as policy frameworks shape both the institutional demand for interpreting and the conditions under which interpreters work (Tipton and Furmanek 2016). Laws regulating immigration, asylum, and refugee status directly influence the number of individuals requiring language assistance and the types of services they must access. Restrictive immigration policies such as longer asylum procedures and stricter eligibility criteria can make it more difficult for migrants and asylum seekers to obtain legal status in the host country, and this can increase the demand for interpreting in legal contexts, as individuals must go through complex asylum procedures or face deportation (Blommaert 2010). On the other hand, countries that adopt multicultural policies, such as Canada, Australia, and the United States, tend to generate greater demand for interpreting in social service settings, where newcomers seek support for integration (OECD 2023).

In Türkiye, governmental initiatives such as the PICTES project (Promoting the Integration of Syrian Children into the Turkish Education System), implemented by the Turkish Ministry of Education in cooperation with the European Union, included components such as teacher training, social cohesion, and psychosocial support, as well as monitoring and evaluation. The project, which was carried out in Istanbul and other provinces with a high concentration of Syrians (PIKTES 2025), also necessitated the employment of Arabic-Turkish speaking interpreters (Ulukuş and Tümtaş 2023). Moreover, the evolving legal frameworks concerning refugee rights have had a direct

impact on the scope and organization of interpreting services in the Turkish context. For example, bar associations in Türkiye have emphasized the indispensable role of interpreters in migration detention centres, warning that their absence poses serious obstacles for detainees seeking legal assistance (Kaymak 2025).

In the Italian context, community interpreting is largely carried out by so-called *cultural mediators*, a term which highlights their dual role in linguistic and cultural labour (Giordano 2014). Their work becomes particularly intense during *denuncia*, testimonies given by migrants against traffickers. In such moments, cultural mediators serve as critical linguistic and emotional buffers between traumatized individuals and institutions such as the police and social services. Pokorn and Mikolič Južnič (2020, 88) highlight that the intercultural mediator role in Europe, particularly in Italy, emerged due to the shortage of qualified interpreters for migrant languages and the growing need for professionals who could bridge not just linguistic but also cultural and social gaps. While both roles overlap, the key distinction lies in their ethical stance: interpreters aim for neutrality, whereas mediators are expected to actively support and guide vulnerable clients. In the Turkish context, studies by Arzik-Erzurumlu (2025), Tekgül-Akın (2020) and Ayan (2021) demonstrate that interpreters frequently operate on the frontlines of social tension, where emotional and ethical pressures intersect with language mediation. Whether in faith-based or conference settings, these studies emphasize that interpreters are socially and emotionally engaged actors who manage emotions, power relations, and expectations within unequal encounters. Through this ongoing emotional labour, interpreters actively negotiate empathy, professionalism, and authority. This way they help build communication and social cohesion, no matter what institutional and cultural divides exist between participants. This perspective portrays interpreting as both a communicative and affective practice.

4. Theoretical framework

This section presents the theoretical foundations on which the study is based: Burawoy's reflexive ethnography (Burawoy 2003) and Crenshaw's intersectionality framework (Crenshaw 1989). It employs an analysis of interpreter discourse which specifically focuses on the following dimensions:

1. Shifts in role perception and professional boundaries over time, highlighting how interpreters negotiate their position between institutional expectations and community needs.
2. The influence of social and institutional changes on interpreting practices, with particular attention to how these changes shape interpreters' experiences, strategies, and professional identities.

The concept of “intersectionality”, first introduced by the American legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), provides a valuable analytical lens for examining how migration status, trauma, and professional identity intersect in the lived experiences of community interpreters. As a theoretical framework in the social sciences, intersectionality examines how various social categories, such as race, gender, class, and sexuality, interact to shape distinct experiences of privilege and oppression (UN Women Australia 2024). Rather than viewing systems of discrimination in isolation, it emphasizes their interdependent and compounding nature (Rodriguez et al. 2024). As highlighted in previous research (Erdoğan 2024), factors such as marginalization through discriminatory discourses, emotional resilience, and conflicting professional expectations have significantly influenced the evolving role of interpreters in Istanbul’s Sultanbeyli district. Building on these earlier findings, this study seeks to explore how the relationship between multiple social determinants creates complex structural challenges for interpreters, while also shedding light on the coping strategies they adopt to manage these intersecting conditions.

5. Methodology

To explore the continuities and shifts described above, this study adopts a longitudinal ethnographic design based on two rounds of fieldwork and a thematic analysis of interpreter discourse drawing on Owen’s (1984) thematic criteria, which are widely used in thematic analysis, and especially in qualitative interview research, to identify patterns and shared meanings across participant responses.

The initial fieldwork carried out in 2017 and 2019 investigated the identities, language skills, migration experiences, and adaptation to Turkish society of Syrian community interpreters working in the NGOs in Sultanbeyli. Drawing on Bourdieu’s theoretical framework and other sociological perspectives, the study analysed their professional practices, roles and interactions with both service providers and clients. Although the 2024 study also employed ethnographic methods, a major distinction between the previous research and the current study lies in their methodological approaches. The earlier research was based primarily on in-depth interviews and participant observation. In contrast, the study of 2024 adopts a “revisit” approach, incorporating focus group interviews, an element not present in the previous research. I conducted three field visits to the NGO Mülteciler Derneği in 2024 as part of the research process. These included interviews with administrative staff and focus group interviews with interpreters. In the following months, I conducted a single in-depth phone interview with one interpreter, whom I selected after realizing during the focus group discussions that they were visually impaired and had been asked to interpret during

psychological counselling sessions, although the administration later deemed it inappropriate for them to continue interpreting in such settings. I was particularly interested in understanding how they managed the challenges of interpreting in such settings without being able to observe the body language of clients or their interactions with service providers.

Prior to initiating the interviews, an application was submitted to the institution to obtain research permission. Following approval, participants were fully informed about the research objectives. In the next stage, ethical clearance was obtained from the author's affiliated university's ethics committee on April 10, 2025 (number 46/16).

Ethnography is a qualitative research method and a branch of anthropology that involves the in-depth and systematic study of cultures, societies, or specific social groups (Simpson and Coleman 2017). It includes participant observation, fieldwork and detailed written account (Haviland 2016; Hammersley and Atkinson 2019). While all ethnographic research is longitudinal in nature, typically extending over a long period, conducting such studies usually requires a minimum duration of six months and sufficient financial resources, both of which can pose significant challenges for the researcher. Ethnography was introduced to Translation and Interpreting Studies (TIS) as a context-sensitive research methodology, particularly through case study approaches (Saldanha and O'Brien 2015), which has allowed researchers to situate translation practices in their real-life social, institutional, and cultural contexts. According to Saldanha and O'Brien (2015, 206–10), the ethnographic turn in translation studies arose from a growing awareness that “translations do not take place in a vacuum” and must therefore be interpreted in relation to their environment, both material and ideological. The emergence of the “translator studies” framework (Chesterman 2009) has further encouraged the incorporation of ethnographic perspectives into interpreting studies (Berk-Seligson 1990; Angelelli 2004; Koskinen 2008) offering interesting insights into the lived experiences and social contexts of interpreters.

This study employs the method of “ethnographic revisits”, which enables researchers to track changes within a particular social field over time. Drawing on Michael Burawoy's (2003) concept of “reflexive ethnography”, this approach emphasizes the significance of returning to the field to observe evolving practices, policies, and forms of interaction. Reflexive ethnography also foregrounds the researcher's situatedness and acknowledges their role in shaping both the process of data collection and interpretation of findings (Burawoy 2003). Moreover, it emphasizes the co-construction of knowledge through sustained engagement with participants. Revisiting the same community at different points in time offers valuable insights into the temporal dynamics of interpreting practices. Unlike traditional or “static” ethnographic studies,

reflexive ethnography involves returning to the previously studied field sites to observe temporal shifts in professional practices. This methodological approach has been adopted by contemporary anthropologists who revisited locations originally explored by influential figures such as Margaret Mead (1928), Oscar Lewis (1943–1948), and Robert Redfield (1926). However, reflexive ethnography is not simply a replication or restudy of earlier research; rather, it aims to critically engage with both the field and the researcher's evolving positionality over time. This approach has rarely been adopted in TIS, although several parallel approaches exist. For instance, Angelelli (2008) observed changes in the competence development of medical interpreters across several years, showing how interpreting practices evolve with institutional and social dynamics. Similarly, a 25-year qualitative case study of the Geneva University Hospital's interpreting service mapped its evolution from volunteer work to a formalized system of equitable access (Bischoff 2020). While few studies have returned to precisely the same field after a long interval, these examples show how longitudinal approaches reveal the historical dynamics of interpreting, similar to anthropology's revisiting tradition and highlighting the importance of temporal depth for TIS research. For this reason, I find it particularly relevant for the examination of the longitudinal development of CI practices in Sultanbeyli, a longstanding hub for internal and international migrants in Türkiye.

Having outlined the overall methodological approaches above, the following section presents a detailed account of the present research, conducted in two distinct phases of fieldwork. The first phase, carried out between 2017 and 2019, involved in-depth interviews with 30 participants, including 15 interpreters based in Sultanbeyli, 13 of whom were affiliated with Mülteciler Derneği, as well as social workers, administrators, psychologists, and HR personnel. Although data were collected from three organizations in Sultanbeyli, this study focuses only on the data obtained from Mülteciler Derneği. Revisiting this group was particularly significant for the present study, as it allowed for an examination of whether the same interpreters remained in the organization, whether their Turkish proficiency had improved, and whether Turkmen interpreters continued to be preferred by the organization.

The second phase, conducted in 2024, consisted of a focus group with 10 interpreters (coded as CI1, CI2, CI3, CI4, CI5, CI6, CI7, CI8, CI9, CI10), supplemented by interviews with an administrator and a supervisor (coded as S), as well as a follow-up individual in-depth interview with CI1.

Table 1. Demographic details of the interpreters participating in the focus group interviews.²

Participant	Age	Gender	City	Ethnic Origin	Education
CI1	32	F	Bayır-Bucak	Turkmen	Bachelor's Degree in Social Services (Türkiye)
CI2	51	F	Damascus	Turkmen	High School (Türkiye)
CI3	27	F	Aleppo	Arab	Law Associate Degree
CI4	21	F	Aleppo	Arab	High School (Türkiye), Economics (Open University)
CI5	26	M	Afghanistan	Persian	Bachelor's Degree in Human Resources (Türkiye)
CI6	21	F	Aleppo	Arab	High School (Türkiye), Social Services (Open University)
CI7	22	F	Latakia	Turkmen	High School (Türkiye), Social Services Associate Degree (Open University)
CI8	28	F	Haseke	Arab	Bachelor's Degree in Theology (Türkiye)
CI9	21	M	Raqqa	Arab	Middle School, Quranic Course
CI10	41	M	Damascus	Arab	Not Specified

In the first stage, a research request form was filled out on the organization's website and sent via email to the research department of the organization on March 18, 2024. A preliminary meeting was held with the administrative director on April 5, 2024, on the purpose of the study. On April 24, 2024, I was asked to fill out the form again. In May 2024, I was contacted by the person responsible for interpreters and given an appointment to conduct a focus group with the interpreters. Given the interpreters' workload, a focus group meeting was scheduled for Friday afternoon and conducted in the room allocated to them, three months after the initial contact with the organization.

At the beginning of the focus group meeting, which lasted for one hour, I informed the participants about the aims of the study and emphasized that I had previously visited their organization in Sultanbeyli a few years earlier. I explained that my current objective was to observe possible changes in interpreting practices and service provision over time. During the discussion, the interpreters were asked a series of open-ended questions, and their responses were recorded with their prior informed

2 The city indicates the participant's birthplace and where they grew up.

consent. To initiate the conversation, I first asked each participant where they were from and how long they had been living in Türkiye and specifically in Sultanbeyli. I then inquired about the sections of the organization in which they worked, such as health, social services, psychological counselling, or legal counselling, and their educational backgrounds. After these introductory, ice-breaking questions, I moved on to more detailed topics concerning their professional experiences, including the difficulties they encountered during interpreting sessions and the strategies they used to overcome them. In some cases, I paraphrased the questions to ensure full comprehension. It is important to note that not all interpreters actively participated in the discussion: five of them provided detailed responses, while five remained mostly silent. The final question addressed how the recent shift in Türkiye's immigration policy and the rise in anti-immigrant sentiment had affected their work. Initially, to create a comfortable environment and build trust, the interviews were not recorded, and notes were taken manually instead. Once rapport was established, audio recording began, with the interpreters' consent and their supervisor's knowledge. The data were transcribed using the "clean verbatim" method, focusing on the content of speech rather than linguistic form, though notable reactions such as laughter were included.

6. Findings and discussion

This section presents the findings of the thematic analysis conducted in line with Owen's (1984) criteria of recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness. Through close reading of the three interviews, five interconnected themes emerged: emotional labour and coping strategies, role perception and professional identity, exposure to trauma and emotional fatigue, social climate and systemic strain, and professional constraints and lack of recognition. Together, these themes reveal how community interpreters negotiate emotional, ethical, and structural pressures in their everyday practice.

This analysis was conducted through inductive coding, starting from close reading and identification of expressions that fulfilled Owen's three criteria. At first, emotional, cognitive, and role-related expressions were annotated in bold. Phrases appearing repeatedly were clustered, and in the final stage these clusters were abstracted into broader categories. The application of Owen's framework to the dialogue above revealed three main themes:

6.1 Emotional labour and coping strategies

A striking pattern across the interviews is the interpreters' deep emotional engagement with the experiences of their clients. The theme recurs through statements such as "it affected me deeply" (CI7) and "I cried" (CI7), indicating both recurrence and forcefulness through the emotional weight of the language. The same interpreter recalled: "I've attended over 500 sessions, but none *affected* me as much as yesterday's. Afterward, a social worker friend noticed it and talked to me. It helped to share" (CI7).³

These expressions show how the interpreters, while striving to maintain emotional resilience during sessions, rely on peer support to manage their own affective responses. Emotional control and collegial solidarity thus emerge as key coping mechanisms within emotionally charged work environments.

6.2 Role perception and professional identity

Among the participants there is a recurring effort to define the nature and boundaries of their professional role. The words "instrument", "conduit" and "narrator" were repeated multiple times, emphasizing interpreters' self-perception as intermediaries responsible for conveying meaning in a neutral manner. However, several participants problematized this neutrality: "Even after interpreting, you realize the social worker has not understood the client. We don't want to intervene, but sometimes we have to" (CI1).

This recurrent tension between neutrality and intervention reflects interpreters' moral awareness and ethical responsibility toward clarity in communication. Their shifting self-positioning, from passive conduits to active mediators, illustrates the interpreter's agency embedded in their work.

6.3 Exposure to trauma and emotional fatigue

Interpreters' repeated exposure to traumatic narratives contributes to emotional desensitization and fatigue. As one participant put it: "I have become emotionless. I feel nothing inside anymore" (CI1).

This strong expression of numbness captures a psychological defence mechanism formed through repeated encounters with violence and suffering. Similarly, recurring statements such as "a burden falls upon us" (CI1, CI5) and "we are emotionally affected" (CI7) reveal how interpreters internalize the distress of their clients. Their experiences of war further intensify this emotional burden, blurring the line between personal trauma and professional empathy.

3 All translations are mine unless otherwise stated.

6.4 Social climate and systemic strain

The interpreters' experiences are also shaped by the shifting social and political climate surrounding migration in Türkiye. Participants recurrently referred to increased hostility toward refugees, as reflected in statements such as: "In recent years, there have been growing problems concerning refugees. We are *emotionally affected* while interpreting these situations" (CI1).

The repetition of "burden" (CI5, CI1) and forceful descriptions of deportations and family separations, such as "families are being torn apart" (S), demonstrate interpreters' feelings of helplessness. These narratives reveal how interpreters not only mediate linguistic exchanges, but also bear witness to injustice and institutional trauma.

6.5 Professional constraints and lack of recognition

Another theme concerns interpreters' limited agency within institutional hierarchies and their precarious employment conditions. The recurrence of phrases such as "no written decision was given to me" (CI1) and "not every institution hires you" (CI1) reflects their restricted professional autonomy. Interpreters also emphasized being assigned non-interpreting tasks, "driver, field worker, attendant" (CI1), which reveals systemic undervaluation and the blurred boundaries of their role.

This theme recurs among speakers, and both the interviewer and participants converged on the idea that interpreters' emotional well-being requires recognition and structured assistance, including in-service training: "they showed us what to do in such situations; it was helpful" (CI7). However, not all actors within the organization shared the same view. The administrator considered the training unproductive and decided to discontinue the module in collaboration with another NGO (interview with administrator, April 4, 2024), whereas the interpreters' supervisor and CI1 believed that it had been useful, particularly in reinforcing the professional ethics. These different perspectives reflect variations in the perception of interpreting training within the organization.

In light of these developments, the study explores whether such policy shifts intensified the emotional burden on community interpreters. To examine this, the following questions were asked at the end of the interview:

I (Interviewer): What has influenced you during your stay in Türkiye, in recent years? Has anything affected your work, the way you interpret, with regard to the developments in Türkiye? It could be while interpreting, any emotional events or it could be more general?

CI1: I think that attitudes and behaviours have completely changed, and this is reflected in how people are in a really difficult situation, and we are *emotionally affected* while interpreting. Now, we are mostly integrated people. Maybe we are not exposed to such things. But in recent years, there have been a lot of problems with refugees. I think you are familiar with it.

CI2: *It affected* all of us in general.

CI1: Arab clients started to be *affected* more. Therefore, they are *emotional*. We also have a *burden* on us. So, we feel sad about them.

The responses to these questions indicate that legal issues, such as deportations and family separations, have placed interpreters in emotionally challenging situations. Furthermore, interpreting in settings like hospitals, police stations, legal aid and social service institutions has become increasingly complex due to shifting policies:

S: People's problems are already increasing. They come here; our problems increase. We have a big *burden* on us as interpreters. Their number is also increasing. They come and open up to us saying that they have experienced this or that.

CI3: Children especially are exposed to peer bullying in schools. We receive many such interviews.

CI2: A client comes to the lawyer. They arrested her husband just because he didn't have an ID in his pocket. They went to Kumkapı [Police Centre for Foreign Residents]. From there they sent him to the [Migrant Detention Centre, MDC]. I heard that there are people from there who found themselves in Syria...families are being torn apart.

S: For example, another one, there was a problem between him and his landlord, they ended up at the police station. Since he is a foreigner, he is sent directly to the MDC. From there, they are sent to Syria. *Families are torn apart*. The rest come here. It puts a burden on us. And the lawyer doesn't know what to do. He sends them back to the. He goes from MDC to the courthouse, here and there. Somehow, he tries to find a solution.

As the present study reveals, rising anti-refugee sentiment in Türkiye has placed an additional emotional burden on interpreters working at Mülteciler Derneği, a context that can be viewed as a microcosm reflecting broader societal dynamics. The

experiences of interpreters in Sultanbeyli offer valuable insights into how socio-political factors, such as public discourse, migration policies and institutional frameworks, intersect with CI practices.

Taken together, the themes noted above demonstrate how community interpreters operate at the intersection of emotional labour, ethical negotiation and structural inequality. Through recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness, the data reveal interpreters' dual struggle: managing emotional exposure while maintaining professional credibility within institutions that undervalue their expertise. Their narratives challenge the notion of the interpreter as a neutral conduit, instead portraying them as emotionally engaged, ethically responsive, and socially embedded actors in the humanitarian field.

Following the focus group interviews, a personal interview was conducted with CI1, providing a unique opportunity to explore the experiences of an interpreter navigating multiple intersecting identities, as a visually impaired person, a woman, and a migrant. The analysis of CI1's discourse reveals several key themes related to intersectionality: "Power relations and authority", "migration and marginalization", "trauma and emotional resilience", "disability and multiple disadvantages". Her narrative sheds light on how power dynamics, social biases, and past trauma shape her professional experiences. It exemplifies the intersection of translation, migration, trauma, and disability, reflecting broader social structures and systemic inequalities. As illustrated in the excerpt below, she highlights that her migrant identity constitutes a disadvantage in securing employment: "Not every institution hires you. Being a migrant is a disadvantage" (CI1).

This statement highlights how structural exclusion limits career opportunities for migrant interpreters, further reinforcing their precarious position within the labour market. Secondly, as someone originating from a region affected by war, the interpreter reflects on the emotional burden of her work: "I got used to pain. I focus not on my own emotions, but on people's problems" (CI1).

The interpreter's familiarity with traumatic experiences in Syria forces her to maintain emotional distance vis-à-vis her work. This provides insight into how emotional management and boundaries may be negotiated within specific interpreting contexts. Her experience illustrates the potential emotional burden experienced by interpreters from conflict-affected regions, as well as some of the strategies she employs to maintain professional boundaries. These coping mechanisms can be viewed as a form of resilience that appears to develop through repeated exposure to emotionally charged situations. Finally, the interpreter reflects on how her visual impairment, combined with her migrant identity, affects her employment opportunities: "A visually impaired person is seen as a drawback to them. Being a migrant indirectly affects employment" (CI1).

This remark reveals the cumulative effect of multiple intersecting disadvantages. Rather than confronting a single barrier, the interpreter experiences a layered form of exclusion, shaped by both her disability and migrant status. Her narrative points to the intersectional nature of societal biases, suggesting that different forms of marginalization may intersect and reinforce one another within the field of community interpreting. A study conducted in Türkiye highlights that disabled translators frequently face discrimination and prejudice from employers. As one participant explains, “they are perceived as untrustworthy. They are not even given a chance, perceived differently from their professional identity, and employers are not interested in their professional skills (Taşkın and Demirel 2019, 248).

At the same time, the intersectionality of a person’s identity can also bring certain advantages. In CI1’s case, in addition to her bilingual qualifications, her academic background in social services in Türkiye has facilitated her integration and enhanced her collaboration with social workers at work.

Since I am familiar with the field-specific knowledge and terminology of social work, I don’t have much difficulty interpreting these terms, although sometimes I have to retranslate the utterances to help the social worker understand the client’s words. (Personal interview with CI1, May 1, 2025)

Besides, her disability does not appear to be a major obstacle, and she said that she has “gotten used to it”, much like someone gets used to “suffering”.

7. Structural changes and continuities in community interpreting practices at Mülteciler Derneği

Despite ongoing shifts in service provision, the CI practices at Mülteciler Derneği have retained certain structural continuities. The organization continues to operate through a centralized interpreter pool system, which enables a coordinated and organized approach to service delivery. The system facilitates interpreter allocation based on availability and demand, preventing *ad hoc* arrangements and ensuring institutional supervision. Furthermore, the centralized management of interpreting services remains in place, supporting consistency in both the quality and accessibility of services provided to refugees and migrants (interview with the administrator, April 4, 2025).

However, significant shifts have occurred in the composition and structure of the interpreter workforce. Since 2018, the number of interpreters has decreased by 50%, reflecting broader trends in employment and resource allocation. According to the supervisor

overseeing the interpreter pool, foreign funding is increasingly being directed toward Ukrainian and Ethiopian refugees. In parallel with this reduction, there has been a notable rise in the recruitment of Syrian interpreters of Turkmen origin, who were already in a relatively advantageous position, driven by both the linguistic preferences among service users and institutional priorities. This shift underscores the dynamic nature of interpreter selection in response to the changing demographics of migrant communities. In recent years, the organization has also begun to serve new ethnic groups, including Palestinian, Iraqi, Uzbek, and Moroccan migrants seeking assistance.

It was also observed that Syrian Arab interpreters included in the 2024 study spoke Turkish fluently, exhibited no noticeable accent, and had completed their education in Turkey, which may indicate a higher level of integration compared to participants in the earlier study. In fact, six out of 10 participants in 2024 had either completed or were pursuing university education in Türkiye or were otherwise studying, whereas five years earlier only a few held university degrees. This upward trend in the number of so-called “dual-role interpreters” (Roat and Crezee 2015, 237) signals a move toward greater professionalization in the field. Another noteworthy development is the recent introduction of bilingual psychiatrists for mental health services, which has reduced the need for interpreters in highly sensitive consultations (interview with the interpreters’ supervisor, May 17, 2024). This shift appears not only to strengthen psychiatric care but also to reflect a growing institutional preference for direct communication between professionals and service users.

8. Concluding remarks

This study revisited the research questions posed in the introduction to trace the continuities and shifts in CI practices in Türkiye. It has illuminated the evolving landscape of CI services in suburban Istanbul, highlighting both continuities and significant changes in interpreters’ roles and the institutional frameworks that shape their work. Interpreters no longer occupy a solely interlingual position, but instead are increasingly engaged in broader forms of community support, negotiating emotionally and politically charged contexts shaped by shifting migration patterns and institutional transformations. The expansion of their responsibilities has intensified their emotional burden, which necessitates urgent interventions in training and support mechanisms.

Regarding institutional policy and practice, the findings emphasize the urgent need for structured training programmes that prepare interpreters to manage stress and interpersonal conflict, as well as formalized support mechanisms to address the psychological challenges of their work, as reflected in the administrator’s remarks:

Some interpreters are not really professional. They sometimes have personal problems with other staff members, even with clients. So, when we select interpreters, we focus more on their personality and interpreting skills rather than their university degrees. For example, one interpreter was dismissed because he couldn't interpret for the client, even though he was a sworn translator. (Interview with the administrator, April 4, 2024)

Moreover, recognizing interpreters as essential actors in enhancing social cohesion, rather than simply neutral facilitators, necessitates a fundamental shift in how institutions approach CI services. Future research should examine the degree of agency that interpreters have in influencing institutional policies, highlighting their role as active participants in governance and decision-making processes.

Translation not only facilitates communication but also constructs social boundaries, reinforcing mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion. This dynamic is clearly evident in the discourse of community interpreters in Sultanbeyli, whose work both shapes and is shaped by the intersecting forces of migration, policy, and cultural belonging. By highlighting these complexities, this study seeks to contribute to a deeper, context-sensitive understanding of CI practices, paving the way for interdisciplinary collaboration between TIS and Sociology.

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About the author

Dr Özgür Bülent Erdoğan holds a PhD in Interlingual and Intercultural Translation Studies from Yıldız Technical University. With seven years of experience as a community interpreter in Montreal, Canada, he developed substantial professional experience in multilingual and migratory settings. He is currently an assistant professor in the Department of English Translation and Interpreting at Fatih Sultan Mehmet Vakıf University in Istanbul. His work includes articles on community interpreters assisting Syrian refugees in Türkiye and on translations of Karamanlidhika migrant literature. His research interests focus on the sociology of translation, community interpreting, sociolinguistics, and the translation of cultural memory in urban contexts.