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Interpreting for vulnerable populations: Tracing the role of interpreters in contexts of vulnerability

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Abstract

This contribution serves as the introductory framework for the articles featured in the special issue of *Just. Journal of Language Rights and Minorities, Revista de Drets Lingüístics i Minories* exploring interpreting for vulnerable populations. Noting the increasing interest in the role of interpreters who work with populations experiencing varying degrees of vulnerability in different settings, this introduction starts by examining some nuanced definitions and causes of vulnerability and the ways in which we are vulnerable to others. The guest editors then focus on language as an important element which can engender vulnerability and consider how interpreters play a pivotal role in mitigating this vulnerability when facilitating access to communication. They discuss how the articles in this special issue address the notion of vulnerability and the complex role of interpreters who work for specific categories of vulnerable populations in different institutional and geographical contexts. The articles describe the elements that interpreters must navigate when managing these challenging situations characterised by high stakes for the vulnerable person and often (highly) asymmetrical power dynamics and dependency.

Keywords: interpreting, vulnerability, vulnerable populations, dependency, language rights

1. Introduction

In recent decades there has been an increasing interest in the concept of vulnerability and the effects of being part of a vulnerable population, which occurs as a consequence of having access to limited resources when confronting and adapting to daily situations. Vulnerability is a multifaceted concept which defies simple definition: on the one hand, it stresses the relational and embodied nature we all share as human beings (ontological vulnerability) and, on the other hand, it insinuates our necessarily situated and unpredictable existence in specific situations of injustice or oppression (situational vulnerabilities) (Boublil 2018; Liedo 2021). Vulnerability, therefore, in any discussion about the concept, must be understood first and foremost to be relational, in that, on the one hand, it presupposes the individual's exposure to the world and to others, and, on the other, it recognises that individuals' relations and bonds are in themselves vulnerable and precarious (Boublil 2018). In other words, any individual can experience a situation of vulnerability at any given moment depending on their relations of power and dependency which are rooted in situated networks in a specific setting, on their real or perceived position with regards to others. In this light, vulnerability is often understood through other terms and paradigms, such as power, violence, agency, and passivity (Masschelein, Mussgnug & Rushworth 2021).

Defining vulnerability often involves an opposition between a vulnerable and a dominant population. For example, vulnerability can be defined as "being at increased risk of harm or having reduced capacity or power to protect one's interests" (Mackenzie 2013, 34). Kuran et al. (2020, 1) offer a comprehensive definition of a vulnerable group as "a population within a country that has specific characteristics that make it at a higher risk of needing humanitarian assistance than others or being excluded from financial and social services." Vulnerable people are considered as such because of disparities in physical, economic, social, and health status when compared to the dominant population (Rukmana 2014), which make them more prone to situations of neediness, dependence, victimhood, or helplessness, and more in need of "special safeguards, supports, or services to protect them

or enable them to protect themselves” (Scully 2013, 205). Along these lines, as Mackenzie (2013) posits, some authors study the notion of *vulnerability* in contrast to the concept of *autonomy* by associating the latter with “ideals of substantive independence and self-determination” (34). Similarly, another conception of vulnerability is linked to a population’s access to social protections afforded by the State—the weaker these protections, and the more difficulty a population has in accessing them, the more vulnerable the population becomes (Castel 1995). Castel argues that vulnerability is not synonymous with exclusion from a dominant population, but rather a state which occurs through the gradual disaffiliation of individuals and populations from a state of dominance through the erosion of protections. Considering these definitions, some of the vulnerable populations identified in relevant literature are children (Bagattini 2019); people with disabilities (Scully 2013); deaf people; people with mental illnesses (Atkinson 2007); patients with dementia; elderly people; and migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers (Strokosch & Osborne 2016; Grubb & Frederiksen 2022).

Mackenzie, Rogers, and Dodds (2013) posit that, as social and affective beings, we are emotionally and psychologically vulnerable to others in myriad ways: to loss and grief; to neglect, abuse, and lack of care; and to rejection, ostracism, and humiliation. As sociopolitical beings, when our capacities for participation (in various parts of our lives) are restricted, we are vulnerable to exploitation, manipulation, oppression, political violence, and rights abuses (Strokosch & Osborne 2016; Fleming & Osborne 2019). In the context of social-ecological systems, vulnerability is usually defined as susceptibility to harm (Adger 2006) when confronted with the impact of the environment on our actions and well-being. Moreover, crises such as a pandemic or a natural disaster reinforce and amplify some of the pre-existing inequalities in groups already presenting heightened vulnerability to economic and social hardship. This heightened vulnerability arises due to the social aspects on which vulnerability depends, such as age, gender, religion, sexuality, income, ethnicity, and disability (Calgaro et al. 2021). The interaction and amplification of these various states of vulnerability are referred to as *intersectional vulnerabilities*. Along these lines, Kuran et al.

(2020, 1) argue that “intersectionality allows us to read vulnerability not as the characteristic of some socio-demographic groups. It is rather the result of different and interdependent societal stratification processes that result in multiple dimensions of marginalisation.”

As an example, gender is one factor that can compound an individual’s experience of vulnerability in challenging contexts such as an armed conflict: as a matter of fact, gender-based violence in conflict zones is characterised by particular features unique to this context and is often exacerbated compared to gender-based violence outside of conflict. During wartime, armed conflicts, and periods of forced displacement, women and girls are particularly vulnerable and experience multiple acts of discrimination that obstruct their access to protection and assistance, leaving them increasingly vulnerable to adversity. The same can be said of children and people with disabilities, who face barriers in responding to hazards and disasters (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) 2022).

All these different contexts, definitions, and nuanced perspectives indicate that the study of vulnerability and of vulnerable populations involves the examination of complex notions, the implications of which are intertwined with a specific time, space, and context. In the same vein, there is no binary split between vulnerable and non-vulnerable populations, rather, there are gradual degradations and multiple intersecting zones of vulnerability into which a population or individual might fall. Consequently, we argue that the notion of vulnerability is not one that inherently applies to an individual or population: in other words, vulnerability is a dynamic, shifting notion dependent on the interaction of a suite of factors in a particular time and place.

2. Vulnerability and language

Language can also engender vulnerability. For example, individuals with limited capacity in the dominant language of a given space (country, region, city, organisation) can be described as vulnerable. Whilst it is true that even citizens who speak the dominant language can be considered as vulnerable

people, not speaking the dominant language of a given space places the individual in a state of heightened vulnerability when defending their cause (in courts or police stations), conveying their health issues (healthcare), or accessing education. Language can also create vulnerabilities for otherwise dominant populations: in the context of a crisis (be it an armed conflict, a natural disaster or a pandemic), local citizens often face linguistic and cultural barriers when accessing the aid offered by international humanitarian organisations.

In order to mitigate language-engendered vulnerability, interpreters are recruited by national public services to work with vulnerable populations in different contexts: detainees in police interviews (Määttä 2015; Gallai 2019; Hale et al. 2020); migrant children (Sultanić 2022); people with mental health issues (Bot 2018); asylum seekers (Inghilleri 2003; Bergunde & Pöllabauer 2019; Määttä, Puumala & Ylikomi 2021); or refugees (González Campanella 2023), among others. International organisations also recruit interpreters to provide aid to populations who find themselves in vulnerable situations in their own country as a consequence of crisis, such as the International Commission of the Red Cross (Kherbiche 2009; Delgado Luchner & Kherbiche 2018; 2019); the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (Todorova 2016; 2017; 2019); and Médecins sans frontières (Doctors without Borders). Interpreters are also recruited in other humanitarian contexts (Radicioni 2020; Moser-Mercer et al. 2021; Ruiz Rosendo 2023); or by the United Nations (UN), in particular for its human rights missions (Ruiz Rosendo, Barghout & Martin 2021; Barghout & Ruiz Rosendo 2022; Haidar & Ruiz Rosendo 2023). Furthermore, international organisations, such as the United Nations and others, host fora allowing vulnerable populations to speak directly to the organisation or through NGOs, such as at the UN Human Rights Council or Treaty Bodies, for which interpreters are also recruited.

3. Intersections between interpreting and vulnerability

Against this backdrop, the special issue “Interpreting for Vulnerable Populations” showcases the need for addressing and foregrounding language and cultural

issues, with a particular focus on interpreters, in the discussion of the challenges faced by people in situations of vulnerability in different contexts and settings. It presents the role of interpreters in different countries—Austria, Brazil, Italy, Palestine, the United Kingdom, and the United States—and with different vulnerable populations, such as migrants and refugees; asylum seekers; deaf refugees; deaf women; English language learners; and local populations who are victims of armed conflict.

In the first article of this special volume, “Vulnerability, moral concepts, and ethics in interpreting,” Xiaohui Yuan approaches the topic of interpreting for vulnerable populations from a critical stance. Drawing on contributions in vulnerability studies and employing the interpretative phenomenological analysis methodology, the author carries out three semi-structured interviews with public service interpreters to elaborate on the public service interpreter’s situational vulnerability and about how interpreters’ decisions are influenced by the interdependency between facets of vulnerability and moral concepts. The author touches upon different aspects related to interpreting for vulnerable populations, such as the moral obligation of care and the interpreter’s moral identity and moral distress. The author posits that the interaction between the anticipated pathogenic vulnerabilities of the vulnerable clients and the interpreters’ moral selves leads to interpreters making care interventions by supporting and restoring agency in the vulnerable clients. Moreover, moral distress affects the interpreters’ emotional and physical well-being and their job satisfaction. Yuan’s contribution highlights a need for a nuanced conceptualisation of the notion of vulnerability when developing ethical guidance on interpreting for vulnerable populations.

In the second article in this special issue, Sonja Pöllabauer addresses the role of interpreters in Austria, focusing on the communication needs of deaf asylum applicants from the viewpoint of asylum interviewers or caseworkers. The article is based on the understanding that deaf asylum seekers are particularly vulnerable in the asylum determination process due to the existence of diverse intersectional vulnerabilities. Drawing on qualitative interviews with Austrian caseworkers, “‘Not everyday business.’ A caseworker

perspective on interpreter provision for deaf refugees and cooperation with interpreters” explores how caseworkers frame and perceive working with interpreters in cases involving deaf applicants, the challenges they face, and the impact that their strategies may have on both deaf applicants and interpreters. The chapter engages in a profound and critical reflection of the existence of an epistemic vulnerability that impacts on both caseworkers’ and interpreters’ perception of the interviewing situations as well as on the strategies that they apply to adapt to the specific needs of deaf asylum seekers. The chapter brings to the fore aspects that are relevant in other interpreting settings involving vulnerable populations, such as the lack of institutionalised support structures; the need for awareness raising regarding special procedural guarantees for deaf applicants and the related need for interprofessional training; the trust that caseworkers place on interpreters to provide them with suitable information on possible communicative arrangements and on whether understanding is possible or not in concrete situations; and the importance that empathy plays in these settings.

The third article, “‘I faced so many barriers’: Interpreting with deaf women survivors of domestic violence as a vulnerable population,” moves to another country but still analyses the needs of deaf people, in this case, of deaf women survivors of domestic violence. Jemina Napier, Lucy Clark, Lorraine Leeson, and Lianne Quigley, drawing on online interviews with eight deaf women in the United Kingdom, examine the women’s perceptions of the barriers they faced in gaining adequate access and support. The authors found that there is a lack of cultural awareness on the part of service providers and a need for training for both police officers and interpreters when working with women in domestic violence contexts. The deaf women report their frustration vis-à-vis the provision of interpreting services, either because no interpreter is available, the interpreter lacks the necessary skills or because service providers ask someone who is not a professional interpreter to interpret the interaction. The authors conclude with a powerful remark related to the existence of intersectional vulnerabilities: deaf women feel they experience a triple disadvantage because they are deaf, women, and survivors of domestic violence; those who belong to minority ethnic backgrounds experience even a quadruple disadvantage.

The next article goes back to the topic of interpreting with asylum seekers. In “Asylum hearings in Italy: Who mediates between cultures?”, Amalia Amato and Fabrizio Gallai, drawing on an interaction- and discourse-centred approach, examine a series of interpreter-mediated asylum hearings in Italy to discuss the roles of communication and culture. The authors seek to elucidate how testimonies enable and restrain asylum seekers in their efforts to establish themselves as deserving of protection. The article puts forward the interpreters’ intra-personal variability in assuming roles, which highlights the need for more in-depth knowledge of communication mechanisms and dynamics both on the part of the interpreter and the officer. Cultural differences can create barriers to the asylum seeker’s effective participation in the legal process, and therefore raise important questions of fair legal outcomes for members of this vulnerable group. It further indicates the untapped potential of interpreters as intercultural communicators from which legal professionals could benefit in their efforts to ensure fair legal outcomes for people in a vulnerable position.

The focus of the volume then moves to another continent. In crossing the Atlantic, we continue to explore stakeholders’ perception of interpreters who work with another vulnerable population, this time allowing people whose first language is not that of the court to take part in proceedings. Renata Machado and Jonathan Downie’s article “Expectations regarding interpreters in Brazil in the light of pandemic-enforced technological change: A pilot study” draws on questionnaires administered to judges, prosecutors, and defence lawyers, as well as interpreters themselves, to explore stakeholder expectations of interpreters in the legal setting and how they may have changed with the shift to remote interpreting during the pandemic. The article highlights the complex interplay between the perceived role of interpreters within the Brazilian justice system and the rise of remote interpreting. Even if there is an agreement as to the vital role played by interpreters in assuring that non-Portuguese speakers take part in legal proceedings, differences in opinion arise as to the effect of remote interpreting in this process. Whilst, for legal professionals, interpreters are needed for the efficient operation of the legal system as long as they do not upset the existing legal process, interpreters see themselves as an

active participant in the encounter with some agency and are eager to gain in status, qualifications, and treatment. Moreover, the role of interpreters as assurers of linguistic presence and the expectation that interpreters should communicate with other legal professionals at key points seem problematic when remote interpreting is used.

Remaining in the Americas, but moving on to a different context, in "Reconceptualizing educational interpreting: A case study in US K-12 classrooms," Xinyue Zuo, Cristiano Mazzei, and Denise Ives draw on data collected through interviews and the analysis of relevant documentation to delve into the nature of the educational interpreting services in K-12 classrooms within a Northeastern US public school district. In particular, they consider the services offered to English language learners and explore the varied responsibilities undertaken by interpreters in this context. The authors posit that, although the interpreters' official duties require them to interpret instructions and make the curriculum accessible, in practice, some interpreters voluntarily take on the responsibilities and roles of instructional aides, advocates, and social-emotional guides, driven by their empathy towards learners. The findings of their study show that the role of interpreters in this setting requires a comprehensive reevaluation and reconceptualisation of their responsibilities, a thorough evaluation of interpreter training programmes and redefinition of their essential skill sets, as well as a culturally responsive approach to interpreting that promotes more equitable and inclusive institutional structures.

The last article of this special issue brings us to a conflict zone. Drawing on qualitative interviews with professional field interpreters working for international organisations, Manuel Barea's "The incidence of empathy when interpreting in the field for vulnerable populations in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict" analyses the interpreter's positionality and the psychological implications of working with vulnerable populations in fragile contexts and how such implications manifest in the interpreter's psychological and emotional sphere. The findings show that empathy is an inherent human reaction in the face of vulnerability and one of the emotions felt by the field interpreter as a result of sharing a psychosocial background with the beneficiary of the

interpreting service. Even if empathy is an emotion that is not supposed to be explicitly shown according to the ethical principles that govern the practice of interpreting, it is a useful way to create rapport and trust with the members of the vulnerable population for them to share sensitive and traumatic information.

We expect this special issue will stimulate new studies which can continue reflecting on instances of interpreters working for vulnerable populations in different institutional and geographical contexts and within specific settings. These seven articles show the challenges inherent in interpreting for different categories of vulnerable populations and the difficult balance that interpreters need to strike in order to facilitate communication between different stakeholders. This is particularly the case in the face of high-stakes contexts where there are asymmetrical relations of power that have an impact on the development of the encounter and on the interpreter's decision-making. We hope that the volume will serve to increase readers' awareness of the nuanced and dynamic nature of vulnerability and the need for interpreters in addressing asymmetries. Additionally, this special issue shows that more research is needed to shed light on aspects that further complicate the issues stemming from language-engendered asymmetrical power relations between vulnerable and dominant populations within a given time and space.

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