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Cooperation as a Coping Mechanism When Interpreting between Deaf Refugees and Hearing Professionals

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Abstract

This article describes interpreting between deaf refugees and hearing professionals in community settings, with a focus on cooperation. Extensive communication barriers characterize these situations, as deaf interlocutors and interpreters do not share languages. The situations require interpreters with the ability to communicate visually and use unconventional forms of communication, not depending solely on formalized signed languages when interpreting. Based on interviews with signed language interpreters in qualitative focus groups, this article shows how interpreters in these situations convey meaning between the interlocutors, and how establishing cooperation with the hearing interlocutor is a coping strategy in that regard. The article also describes how cooperation between interpreters can unfold in situations with significant communication barriers.

Keywords: cooperation, signed language interpreting, deaf refugees, deaf interpreters, communication barriers

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If asked, I would say that deaf immigrants, like other immigrants in my country, are highly heterogeneous. The only thing deaf immigrants have in common is coming to Norway and relying on visual communication in interaction with others. They come from different countries, with different social structures, different life experiences, and different levels of language proficiency. Some are well educated; others are not. Some come from poverty, oppression and war zones, others from more stable environments. The concept ‘fremmedspråklige døde’ appears frequently in my findings and can be translated as ‘deaf people with a foreign language.’ This phrase includes all categories of deaf immigrants. The research presented in this article mostly addresses people in forced migration, many with minimal knowledge of spoken, written or signed languages. The most precise English label to use when presenting my findings is therefore ‘deaf refugees’, as the word ‘refugee’ refers specifically to people in forced migration to escape war, persecution or natural disasters (Oxford Dictionaries, 2018).

This article examines how interpreters cooperate with each other and with hearing professionals to convey meaning when interpreting between deaf refugees and hearing persons in situations with extra communication barriers.

1. Literature review

1.1. Interpreting between deaf refugees and hearing people in Norway

Interpreting between deaf refugees and hearing people is somewhat on the periphery of the field of interpreting and not a subject often mentioned in signed language interpreter training programmes in Norway. The main focus of training tends to be on interpreting between spoken Norwegian and Norwegian Sign Language (‘Norsk tegnspråk’ hereafter: NTS) (cf. Western Norway University of Applied Sciences, 2018; Oslo Metropolitan University, 2018; The Norwegian University of Science and Technology, n.d). Most hearing interpreters do not have NTS or other signed languages as their mother tongue or first language (L1); rather, they learn NTS as part of their interpreter training as adults. Deaf people, however, can also be interpreters, and the term ‘interpreter’ in this article largely applies to both.

Interpreting between deaf refugees and hearing Norwegians requires interpreters to balance both linguistic alignment and professionalism in situations with extensive communication barriers. In the interpreted situations presented in this article, the hearing consumers are all public officials. They meet deaf refugees as a part of their

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jobs in the welfare state: as police officers, health care workers, teachers, social workers, service providers, etc. The refugees on the other hand are private persons requiring a service. The two communicate through interpreters.

At first, the interpreters and newly arrived deaf refugees do not share languages, as signed languages across the world are different from each other. Still, the languages have one common denominator: they are visual. Signed languages' modality, spatiality and iconicity can open up communication across geographical borders, using different forms of modified communication methods. These methods make it possible for the interpreters to communicate with deaf refugees. They also require interpreters to have the ability to communicate visually and to use unconventional forms of communication, without depending solely on NTS (Olsen, 2015). Due to the lack of focus on this topic in interpreter training in Norway, the interpreters' competence is primarily acquired through 'learning by doing', and the field is characterized by this 'silent' knowledge among experienced interpreters.

1.2. Stages in cooperation

Various textbooks and studies on interpreting emphasize the importance of interpreters' cooperation before, during and after interpreting assignments. This is also essential in the situations described in this article. Metzger (1999) shows that the frameworks for human interaction are complex and consist of multiple layers. Preparation prior to an interpreting assignment is therefore useful. Russell (2008) also focuses on interpreters' preparation and cooperation in her study which deals with team interpreting practices in legal contexts. In interpreting teams, it is beneficial to do part of the preparation together, clarifying which interpreter does what before, during and after the assignment (Forestal, 2011). When the interpreters have extensive experience in working together, the need for clarification and preparation will be reduced but still exist (Hoza, 2010). Dean and Pollard (2013) identify four salient aspects of an interpreter's job, listed in a Demand Control Schema (DCS). The DCS involves environmental, interpersonal, paralinguistic and intrapersonal demands. Addressing different elements in the communicative setting, ranging from interpreted situations' physical context, to communication and human interaction, the schema is suitable as a starting point for cooperation and preparation. The paralinguistic demand stands out as particularly pertinent as it includes communication form and accent, both highly relevant for the situations mentioned in this article.

Interpreters working in teams actively provide each other various types of support when interpreting (Hoza, 2010). The support interpreter nods and feeds the primary interpreter signs or words. The support interpreter may also correct errors and suggest alternative solutions on how to interpret utterances. Hearing interpreter teams will change primary and support roles about every fifteen minutes. This is also the case with deaf interpreters, apart from some situations in which both interpreters are active primary interpreters at the same time (cf. Brück & Schaumberger, 2014). When the complexity and the length of an assignment require it, extended interpreter teams (with more than two interpreters) can also be convened.

The DCS (Dean and Pollard, 2013) is also beneficial to use as base for debriefing between interpreters after interpreting assignments. In debriefing it is relevant to discuss elements addressed in preparation and evaluate the assignment. Cooperation is an essential topic to be debated after interpreting.

1.3. Cooperation between signed language interpreters

Hoza (2010) describes cooperation as an interdependent process and a part of interpreters' teamwork. For signed language interpreters, cooperation is also enshrined in The Association of Sign Language Interpreters' ethical guidelines. These describe cooperation as a prerequisite for all interpreted situations (The Association of Sign Language Interpreters, 2019).

Increasingly more research studies involve deaf interpreters and address the cooperation between deaf and hearing interpreters (Forestal, 2005, 2011, 2014; Stone and Russell, 2014; Russell, 2017). Interpreting for deaf immigrants is one situation in which deaf and hearing interpreters cooperate (Bartley & Stone, 2008; Bauman, 2008; Boudreault, 2005; Stone, 2009). 'Deaf Extra Linguistic Knowledge' (DELK), a concept introduced by the National Consortium of Interpreter Education Centres, is of the essence here (Adam, Aro, Druetta, Dunne & af Klintberg, 2014). This concept describes advantages deaf interpreters have in sharing life experiences with deaf refugees, as members of the same minority within the hearing society. Using this competence, the deaf interpreters

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have a good understanding of some aspects of the refugees' situation and can potentially use this to support their interpreting (Sheneman, 2016).

1.4. Community Interpreting

The situations described in this article occur within community interpreting, a field well documented in research studies and literature. The research defines community interpreting as interpreting in public service institutions as opposed to conference interpreting which serves a different clientele (Carr, Roberts, Dufour and Steyn, 1995; Hale, 2007; Pöllabauer, 2013; Llewellyn-Jones and Lee, 2013, 2014). Preparation and background knowledge are significant when interpreting for deaf immigrants in these settings (Holm, 2015), as can be seen in Sinkaberg's work (2017) on deaf immigrants' inclusion into the Norwegian society. In her study, she shares experiences deaf immigrants have had with public services, including with the provision of interpreting services. She points out that interpreters experience communication hurdles in interactions involving deaf immigrants.

This section has provided a brief overview of research on cooperation and preparation, community interpreting, deaf interpreters, and cooperation between deaf and hearing interpreters. Other studies describe interpreting between hearing people and deaf immigrants. To the best of my knowledge, however, there are no studies addressing the fundamental question in this article: how do interpreters cooperate with each other and with hearing professionals in interpreted situations with extra communication barriers? To answer this question, I will explore interpreters' preparation before interpreting, the role of the support interpreter, hurdles in interpreting between hearing persons and deaf refugees, and the cooperation between deaf and hearing interpreters. First, however, I will describe the process of data collection.

2. Empirical background

This article is based on data from a master's thesis entitled *Mediated Interaction* (Olsen, 2015). The thesis focused on how interpreters create meaning when interpreting between deaf and hearing people, with an emphasis on deaf immigrants.

2.1. Research design

This is a qualitative study (cf. Halkier, 2010) based on responses from two focus group discussions involving a total of seven hearing interpreters who were chosen by strategic selection (cf. Grønmo, 2004). The focus group methodology allowed detailed exploration of the interpreters' experiences and reflections on interpreting. Before the focus groups met, I emailed invitations with information about the project and an interview guide that contained questions and key words that would be discussed in the focus groups (cf. Halkier, 2010). The main subject for the first focus group was interpreting between deaf and hearing people in general, debating obstacles and possibilities when interpreting. When analysing the transcript from the first focus group, interpreted situations involving deaf refugees emerged as a subject frequently mentioned as an extraordinary challenge. I therefore invited the participants back to another focus group interview to discuss this topic more in-depth. I also interviewed experienced interpreters with knowledge about the subjects raised in the focus groups.

2.2. Analysis

Both focus group discussions were recorded and then transcribed. The resulting 250 pages of text were analysed (cf. Halkier, 2010) using the Hermeneutical circle (cf. Gilje & Grimen, 1993) as a tool to see the details in the findings as important parts of a larger whole. Ideas that emerged repeatedly in the discussions were organized into categories based on content. In the end, all the utterances were categorized into four overall themes: Communication Tool, Cooperation, Role Execution and Culture. The content of these categories formed the

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background for the empirical chapters of the larger study. The category of ‘Cooperation’, which is the focus of this article, addresses the interpreters’ need for cooperation and their thoughts on whom to cooperate with and how.

3. Findings and discussion: Cooperation as a coping mechanism

According to my findings, the interpreters use different coping mechanisms to give deaf and hearing consumers access to each other’s utterances. Cooperation is an important aspect here and the interpreters cooperate with all the persons who are present in the situation. Cooperation with the hearing interlocutors is initiated to make the officials take on their assigned responsibility in the situation, instead of leaving it with the interpreter.

3.1. Continuity and the need for briefing

Continuity is a key theme in the data. The focus group participants state that interactions between deaf refugees and hearing service providers generally are not suited for assignment to random interpreters, where any given interpreter can interpret for any given deaf person. These situations require continuity: the same interpreters interpreting for the same deaf person in the same setting over time. When continuity is interrupted and a new interpreter is assigned to a setting where others have interpreted before, the interpreters maintain continuity by briefing each other. They do this as a part of their preparation, and this solid background knowledge will help the new interpreter provide better service in an already established situation. Ella describes it this way:

I want Emma to do a good job there. So, if I know, I will tell her what they spoke about last time I was there. Then she will be better prepared, and she will not have to ‘show up blank’ so to say.

This briefing strategy also works in reverse, where interpreters take responsibility to be briefed when returning to a setting in which they have interpreted previously.

The interpreters also discussed the issue of sharing information. On one hand, information exchange is highly beneficial as preparation before interpreting in settings with significant communicative obstacles. At the same time, as professionals, interpreters are subject to a confidentiality agreement anchored in The Public Administration Act (The Association of Sign Language Interpreters, 2019). Consequently, interpreters will not share information with a colleague if the colleague is to interpret for the deaf refugee in a setting other than the one in which they interpreted themselves. The interpreters also connect this to the principle of privacy, which specifies that personal information is collected only for restricted use by services providers with a valid need to know (Langtvedt, 2015).

Julia also reflects on the quandary of how much information about a particular refugee’s experiences should be shared with the next interpreter:

It was super hard, when cooperating with other interpreters... Because when the consumers developed skills in sign language, and we got to know their history, we did not know what to share and (...) what not to share... Because, I needed the next interpreter to be completely blank when entering the situation. This was the only way to check if I had understood the story right. Without influencing my co-worker with my understanding of what the deaf refugee had said... It was a huge challenge. And also to consider; what to share now, what to hold back – and in the end; what should the consumers be allowed to keep for themselves?

Information exchange regarding context and persons present is a part of interpreters’ preparation. Here, the interpreters balance the benefits of sharing that needed information with the risk of biasing the next interpreter’s understanding, all while respecting the refugee’s privacy and right to confidentiality. Clearly this boundary is not clear-cut and requires careful thought and judgement.

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One way to reduce the need for frequent information exchange is to maintain continuity with a small number of interpreters in these settings. Interpreters who cooperate regularly in permanent teams will acquire similar knowledge about the context, case proceedings and the persons present without the need for other interpreters to brief them. Reducing information exchange will reduce the risk of potential violation of privacy and confidentiality agreements (Olsen, 2015).

3.2. *Who is responsible for what*

My findings show that the support interpreter plays an important part in situations characterized by significant communication barriers by suggesting possible renderings of what the interpreters label ‘difficult sequences’ from speech to signs. Leah describes it this way:

(...) Collaboration is important and it is nice to be two, because when my creativity has stopped, maybe my support interpreter has some suggestions on how to continue the interpretation.

Successful cooperation with the hearing consumer depends first on assuring an awareness of the existing communication difficulties. Knowledge about deaf people, signed languages and interpreting in general society is scanty. Consequently, many hearing consumers are not familiar with the complexities of communicating through interpreters. For example, hearing consumers often think that signed languages are international. With that assumption, it is difficult to grasp that the deaf refugee and interpreters, who both sign, do not automatically understand each other (Olsen, 2015).

While the interpreters have responsibility for the communicative aspect of the interpreted conversation, the hearing consumers – as public officials – are responsible for providing the deaf refugees with adequate information about laws and regulations, their rights and how to access services. Since the interpreters are the ones who best understand both interlocutors in these situations, hearing consumers sometimes transfer their own responsibilities – purposely or inadvertently – to the interpreter, asking or even expecting the interpreter to explain words and concepts to the deaf refugee. To avoid this extra responsibility with its attendant risks and role confusion, Julia will brief the hearing professional on the complexity of the communication situation:

In my opinion, one of the most important things we have done when interpreting for non-western deaf immigrants is to always work two interpreters together. Because the support interpreter does not function as an ordinary support interpreter. Since there is a lot of negotiations going on between the deaf and the main interpreter, the support interpreter needs to translate these negotiations to the hearing person. We do this to avoid the hearing person thinking: ‘Oh, Lord, what are they doing? What am I missing out on here?’ if not involved in the negotiations.

This ‘counter-interpreting’ or ‘meta-interpreting’ aims to maintain the provider’s control of the situation through knowing what is being said by whom and how it is uttered. By involving the hearing professional in the negotiations between themselves and the deaf refugee, the interpreters makes it possible for the hearing official to grasp the extent of the linguistic obstacles the interpreters and deaf refugees are facing.

In situations like the ones addressed in this article, interpreters use various strategies to convey meaning between the interlocutors. Flexibility is one, which in these settings involves the use of expansion and omission when interpreting. Expansions use more words or signs than originally spoken, while omissions reduce the number of words or signs uttered in order to highlight the essence of what is being said (Olsen, 2015). This practice would seem to be in violation of interpreters’ commitment to accuracy, and indeed, an interpreted rendition of the utterance should not change the meaning of that original utterance (cf. Jareg & Pettersen, 2006; Wadensjö, 1998). Interpreters face a dilemma. Straying too far from the source language will compromise equivalence, leaving the listener with an inadequate understanding of the original speech. At the same time, rigidly adhering to the principle of accuracy (Skaaden, 2013), maintaining all the details in the utterance, can lead to the speech being incomprehensible to new citizens navigating an unknown situation, unfamiliar with both the Norwegian language and the social system. In the other extreme, extensive use of expansions can help refugees better understand the context and implications of the service provider’s speech, but it can also lead to interpreters essentially explaining concepts rather than interpreting them. In its appropriate use, expansions are about expanding utterances without

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changing the utterances' meaning (c.f Wadensjö, 1998). Julia explains that it is stressful to be expected to both explain concepts and interpret them:

We soon found out that we could not be responsible for explaining 'all of Norway' to the deaf refugee. We needed the hearing person working there, or someone else, to put meaning in the concepts used in the situation. Then we could try to translate the utterances. Otherwise, it was overload on our behalf... Lots of processes going on at the same time... So, it was super beneficial for us when we got more and more hearing service providers to understand that; 'I'm the one who must go through all these concepts, just like I do when other refugees come into my office. Then these guys (the interpreters) just repeat what I say, using their hands instead of spoken Arabic.'

Cooperation with the hearing consumer was like day and night for us. We did not have to concern about 'how to explain this concept?' (...) And then also, it is the hearing consumer who decides how to describe different concepts. And we would not be responsible for that part (...).

3.3. Hurdles when interpreting

It is well known that interpreters do the best job when qualified and fluent in the languages between which they are interpreting (Llewellyn-Jones & Lee, 2014). In my findings, the interpreters identify feelings of inadequacy when it comes to overcoming the significant linguistic hurdles in these situations. Sometimes the communication barriers are too extensive for the interpreters to fully understand and accurately render the utterances of the hearing interlocutors. The interpreters also reported that public officials often have unrealistic expectations regarding efficiency and progress in cases involving deaf refugees (cf. Olsen, 2015; Sinkaberg, 2017). Sara talks about how these expectations are difficult for the interpreters to fulfil, due to the communication barriers in the situation:

We must be extremely conscious about what we are doing. Problematize as much as possible to the hearing consumer, I think, so they understand our struggles, and how little information we are able to render and convey for the deaf refugees in the beginning.

One example that arose in the focus groups is the challenge of obtaining informed consent, a common occurrence in both health-related and legal settings. According to the Research Ethics Committees (2015), 'a free informed consent' shall be given without limitations or external pressure. The person involved should be oriented about his or her participation in whatever process is at hand in a way that is understandable for the person. While stemming from a respect for the individual's rights, this practice creates a challenge for interpreters, who may find it difficult to know if the refugee has fully understood the situation, that consent is being given, or to what he is consenting. When expectations and reality collide like this, Leah raises the question about 'drawing the line':

Who is to say; now the person is informed? Now the person is ready to give consent? (...) The hearing person is not able to do this, unless we have been very particular with information in advance about what is going on in these situations. Moreover, who is to decide, the thing that very often happens, that proceedings must be done without informed consent? The hearing official do not want to make decisions on behalf of the deaf consumer, without free informed consent... Because they are used to people being able to give it. But if that does not happen, the official needs to draw the line, and make decisions, I think. Otherwise, we are the ones doing it.

The choice here is to interrupt case proceedings or medical care until communication barriers are reduced to an extent that true informed consent can be given, or to continue without informed consent. Delaying the proceedings can be inconvenient in a system, requiring efficiency. At the same time, continuing without informed consent also has consequences. If deaf refugees are not fully informed in these situations, they are deprived of both autonomy and participation in decision-making. For Emma, it is important that the hearing official makes the decision to continue or stop until informed consent is fully understood and given:

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(...) The hearing person would in addition be responsible for deciding where to draw the line. 'This is enough information today'. Then we would not have to estimate; 'Is it ok now? Has he understood enough now?' In those settings cooperation is important!

Giving the hearing official insight into the communication hurdles can potentially result in a more realistic understanding of these situations, which is helpful for interpreters. The situations are also dynamic, in that the deaf refugees will continuously acquire NTS and knowledge about the Norwegian social structure. Even though the communication barriers are long-lasting and will always be present when it comes to spoken Norwegian, the obstacles involving NTS and written language are likely to reduce over time.

3.4. Cooperation between deaf and hearing interpreters

In signed language interpreting, authorities responsible for providing consumers language access anticipate that the interpreter's ability to sign should bridge the gap that naturally exists in any interaction needing an interpreter. However, as we have seen, this does not always happen. One solution for Sofia is to cooperate with deaf interpreters, for whom the signed language is their L1:

Deaf people from Norway with a capital D are used to traveling both in the physical world and in the digital world, so they can easily communicate across geographical borders. They communicate in a way we can only dream of.

In my findings, the hearing interpreters value cooperation with what they referred to as 'deaf relay interpreters.' (cf. Adam et al., 2014). Today deaf people are training to be professional interpreters, which offers a unique opportunity for professional cooperation with hearing interpreters as equals.

In deaf/hearing interpreter teams, the hearing interpreter will render the speaker's utterances in signed language for the deaf interpreter who interprets this into a visual communication system customized for the deaf consumer. Conversely, the deaf interpreter conveys the signed message to the hearing interpreter, who subsequently interprets the information into speech for the hearing interlocutor (Forestal, 2011). There are two aspects that differentiate this collaboration between deaf and hearing interpreters from a collaboration between two hearing interpreters. The first difference regards the norms for switching roles between primary and support interpreter. When deaf and hearing interpreters work in pairs and the assignment requires simultaneous interpreting, both interpreters function as active primary interpreters simultaneously. Neither adopts the designated support interpreter role, as both are supporting and providing the interlocutors' utterances to the other, all at once (cf. Brück & Schaumberger, 2014). The second difference involves communication *between* the interpreters. Since at least one of the interpreters is deaf, the team will communicate using signs. When both communication between the interpreters, and the interpreting itself is in a signed language, it is important to separate 'feed' from corrections. The feed would typically be the source text, the linguistic exchange of utterances, while corrections are the support-interpreter correcting errors with the primary-interpreter. To separate the feed from corrections, one technique is to sign feed mid-centre in the signing space, while corrections are signed lower and to one side, much like how parenthetical comments are handled in natural signed discourse.

In my findings, the hearing interpreters accentuated differences in their language skills and those of deaf relay interpreters, connecting this to deaf people's experience in communication across geographical borders. This is also a topic in international research studies (Bauman and Murray, 2010; Hiddinga & Crasborn, 2011; Zeshan, 2015). The Deaf community is characterized as a transnational community (Breivik, 2007; Haualand, 2006), in which deaf people connect with each other across geographical borders despite different backgrounds. As a visually-oriented minority within the hearing majority, deaf people will find mutuality and similar life experiences with other deaf people regardless of nationality (Haualand, 2006). This means that many deaf interpreters can connect more effectively than hearing interpreters when serving deaf refugees across varying signing systems (Forestal, 2015). This is also mentioned by Sofia:

Sign language is their first language. They know the tiny little nuances, which I will never learn 100 %. Sign language is not my first language.

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While hearing interpreters can of course also develop good skills in signed communication across geographical borders, deaf interpreters have the advantage of growing up using a signed language as their L1, which is a great asset in these settings.

4. Conclusions

As the title indicates, the focus of the article has been on cooperation as a coping mechanism in interpreted situations involving deaf refugees. Part of this picture is cooperation between interpreters. This cooperation includes both deaf and hearing interpreters who cooperate before, during and after assignments. Cooperation revolves around reducing communication barriers between deaf and hearing interlocutors. Since the hearing interlocutors in these situations are service providers, they are responsible for making sure that deaf refugees receive correct information no matter the context. To take on this responsibility, the service provider must be able to handle the situation with interpreters and deaf refugees. While cooperation will not transcend the communication barriers in these situations, it will help in figuring out who is responsible for what.

Even though interpreters make the greatest effort to facilitate clear communication in these situations, the quality of the resulting services is still up for debate. This area of interpreting is on the periphery of signed language interpreting as a field, characterized by extemporaneous experimentation rather than through proper training. As a result, the field lacks skilled interpreters who have been formally prepared for these kinds of assignments. To improve the current situation, the responsible authorities must establish specific training programmes for signed language interpreters, which leads to improved language access for the deaf refugees. In addition, it is necessary to better incorporate the Deaf community's communicative competence across borders through the training of more deaf interpreters.

The research I have presented in this article provides insight to topics of concern to interpreters, topics that emerged in the focus group interviews. In the continuation of this project, it would be interesting to observe interpreters and explore what they actually do when they interpret in these situations and how they communicate with deaf refugees. In my findings, the interpreters talk little about how cooperation with the deaf refugees unfolds, and it would be interesting to investigate this further. In future research projects it would also be natural to explore the other side of the issue I have raised in this article, that is, the deaf refugees' experiences when establishing a life in a new country. Research in this field would shed light on the real-life experiences of a minority scarcely mentioned in academic research studies, a topic of interest to society in general and to professionals such as interpreters and service providers in particular.

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