# Community Interpreter and Cultural Mediator in Greece

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## **Conference Interpreting**

In Greece Conference Interpreting studies are offered regularly since 1991/1992 at the Ionian University (diploma) and since 2003/2004 at the Aristotle University (master). Additionally, in the last 4-5 years private schools offering interpreting courses pop up in Athens and Thessaloniki. The research in the field of interpretation studies is emerging in the last years, the most important works are:

Apostolou, F. (2015). *Translation and interpreting for public services in Greece*. (e-book in Greek) <http://hdl.handle.net/11419/962>

Ιoannidis, Α. (2018). *Can you ask them for me? Interpreting in asylum hearings in Greece*. Αthens: Diavlos (in Greek)

Resta, Z (2017*). Community interpreting in Greece*. Αthens: Diavlos (in Greek)

Furthermore, the first PhDs were competed only in 2015 (Conference Interpreting in Greece) and 2016 (Court Interpreting in Greece) at the Aristotle University and one major international congress about training of conference interpreters (2016, AUTh) and a symposium about community interpreting (2018, AUTh) have been organized till now.

The majority of the professional conference interpreters has meanwhile studied conference interpreting in Greece or abroad. Some conference interpreters based in Greece are members of the Greece-Cyprus Region of AIIC (which has however no official status in the Greek territory, ΑΙΙC's headquarters being located in Paris) and others are members of the Hellenic Association of Conference Interpreters (SYDISE).  SYDISE, founded in 2014 with the aim of regulating the profession of conference interpreters, currently counts 42 members and continues growing at a steady pace. Its criteria of admission are quite stringent for full members [requiring interpreters to be registered with the tax and social security authorities and not to perform the profession on an occasional basis, as well as requiring interpreters to prove a sufficient number of work days as previous work experience exclusively as conference interpreters (and not as community or court interpreters) before joining the Association], which makes it difficult for young interpreters to join. According to the amended Articles of Association of SYDISE (pending final approval by the Court of First Instance in 2019) a new category of members is added to the existing "full member" category and a great number of young interpreters not fulfilling the criteria of full members will be able to join as "non-voting members". SYDISE and AIIC Region Greece Cyprus have been working together for the past few years and their collaboration is expected to be of significant benefit for the profession of conference interpreters. In a nutshell, according to the forecasts of its Executive Board, SYDISE as a national association of conference interpreters is expected to grow considerably within the next few years.

Conference interpreting has not been a regulated profession so far and there is no official outline for it (only for sign interpreters). However, thanks to constant efforts, mainly by SYDISE, the government (including ministries, regions and local authorities) has started including SYDISE or equivalent membership as a necessary qualification for conference interpreters in the invitations to tender and efforts continue for SYDISE membership to become a prerequisite for the selection of conference interpreters in Greece. Generally, they work as freelancers at a daily fee of Euro 300-400 for a full day and app. Euro 250-300 for up to 2 hours, although these rates are not officially documented.

Regarding community interpreting, conference interpreters would interpret for refugees only if the assignment comes from a “normal” client, e.g. journalists visiting refugee-camps etc. Respectively, they interpret for the courts only if the assignment comes from a client for reasons stated below.

## Court Interpreting

### Appointment of court interpreters/proof of qualification

According to the Greek Criminal Procedure Code (article 233), the judges have to resort to a List of Court Interpreters, in order to appoint an interpreter, and only in exceptional cases is the appointment of someone from outside the List allowed. However, the Greek law does not impose any requirements or qualifications for court interpreters, nor does it provide any mechanism to qualify them. As a result, *anyone* can declare themselves an interpreter and ask their name, as well as their working language(s), to be included in the List, without needing to provide any proof of their qualifications. This lack of accreditation and certification procedure has often raised quality and human rights issues, such as, for instance, the case of a woman who was appointed as an interpreter by the criminal courts of Thessaloniki in trials involving Albanian witnesses or defendants, despite her not knowing the Albanian language!

### **Education**

In Greece, there is not one single educational programme specialising in court interpreting.

### **Professional Ethics**

In Greece there is no professional associations for court interpreters, let alone a code of ethics.

### **The status of the profession**

Court interpreters in Greece are represented through a professional associate or a trade union. Their working conditions, as well as their rights and obligations, are not regulated by any collective agreement. Their remuneration is established by an old Law and amounts 11,74 euro for each interrogation procedure and 17,64 euro for each court case, even if it has to be extended over several court sessions. Court interpreters are obliged to attend the court room at 9 am, without knowing when and whether their services will be required. This depends on the number of their case on the court docket and the speed at which the judges reach a settlement. In case the trial is postponed, the interpreter receives no remuneration, although he/she was ready to deliver his or her services on the spot. There is no provision in the Law regarding additional charges for overtime work, while in many cases significant delays in excess of twelve months in the payment of these remunerations are the rule rather than the exception.

## **Community Interpreting – Cultural Mediation**

Greece among the other southern European countries bears the heaviest load of migration inflows nowadays and gradually it has turned from a traditionally outgoing-migration country (early 1920s, 1950s-1960s and during the current economic crisis) to an incoming-one, having its society transformed into a multicultural community. The need for trained and qualified community interpreters and cultural mediators is bigger than ever before. Nevertheless, there is not a clear distinction between the two professions. Usually community interpreters are called to provide cultural mediation services and vice versa - terms rather unknown till recently in the Greek society. In fact, inGreece the definition and practice of intercultural mediator is closer to what is described as community interpreting, meaning the interpreting offered in the public services environment in order to ensure that immigrants are able to enjoy the right to have access to health and legal services of the hosting country (hospitals, police departments, public offices as well as intercultural education and training)*.*

In Greece the concept of cultural mediation has not been officially introduced in the Greek Law. However, the Law 3386/2005 refers to the integration of Third Country nationals into the Greek society, but does not specify measures for such processes of integration and as a result does not refer to cultural mediation either. The only indirect implication to cultural mediation is the official definition of integration from the part of the Greek state as a two-way process, where the migrants adapt to the new country while the country adapts to the newcomers, which leaves some space for a future introduction of the concept of cultural mediation.

### **Profile of a community interpreter - cultural mediator**

The unprecedented humanitarian crisis that initially sparked mainly in the countries of Middle East has led to a massive migratory influx of people having a multicultural and multilingual background. In order to respond to their needs, the stakoholders having the general mandate of the refugee crisis management, have hastily recruited native speakers as interpreters (or cultural mediators) aiming to bridge the communication gap with the refugee population. The criteria set by the job offers in any NGO are simply the knowledge of the source language, the good command of Greek or English and some relevant experience in the field (if any). Community interpreters are basically native speakers that speak fluently the source languages and at the same time they may master certain dialects of their country of origin (a representative example is that of Iraqi citizens that apart from Arabic, they also command Kurdish dialects such as Kurmanji, Sorani, Palewani etc.). Nevertheless, there are major challenges even in the use of the mother tongue, especially when it comes to languages such as Arabic, since e.g. a Lebanese interpreter cannot easily communicate with an Algerian beneficiary and vice versa (the Arabic language having many variations within the Arabic speaking countries). Furthermore, during certain procedures before the asylum service, at the court or while sessions with doctors, things are more complicated since most of the interpreters are not familiar with the legal or medical terminology mainly due to the fact that they either lack relevant education or experience (or both).

It goes without saying that interpreters - currently working within that framework - have a competitive advantage that consists in the deep knowledge of the cultural background. This is a specific feature that is of paramount importance since they can provide useful input either to a lawyer or to a psychologist as to traditions, beliefs, history etc. of a specific ethnic group, a minority or a political group of a country. Nonetheless, in some occasions that knowledge might not be used in a proper way since an interpreter might be prejudiced towards a beneficiary because of his/her origin. A proper educational program has to set the boundaries and frame the services provided by the interpreters in order to avoid such implications.

As far as the education level of the interpreters is concerned there are many variations. Since a university degree is not a prerequisite, an interpreter might just have finished high school in his/her country of origin or have started his/her studies at the university that were abruptly stopped by the war and only few of them have graduated from Faculties of Literature (English, French etc.). Others have just been for a long time in Greece working as housekeepers, receptionists, plumbers or they are asylum applicants themselves having a good command of English without nevertheless having relevant professional experience. The lack of previous experience renders the provision of interpreting services more complicated given that interpreting is by default a multitasking condition that requires special skills and competences. In addition to that, a community interpreter has to be equipped with additional skills such as flexibility. In practice, a community interpreter has to work from 9 to 5 at a refugee camp exposed to harsh weather conditions, at a hospital for an urgent medical incident or even during a fight between members of certain ethnicities.

### **Employment**

At the beginning of the refugee crisis, **UNHCR** has been called to provide expertise in the management of the needs that resulted from it. Also, various **NGOs**, both international and national, are in place to provide mainly legal, medical and psychosocial assistance recruiting for those needs a great number of interpreters. The funding for these activities comes basically from the European Union, as well as from international organizations such as the **International Organization for Migration.** Gradually, the Greek state (namely the **Ministry of Migration**) will undertake this task and the control of both the refugee camps as well as of any accommodation facility will pass to state agencies.

In 2013 the Registry of Trained Intercultural Mediators was created (www.intermediation.gr, EIF 1.1.b/11 project). The registry offers all institutions in need of interpreters and/or mediators’ services the opportunity to search for a trained mediator for the language and the area in question and to contact him/her directly. Agreements on the terms of cooperation are made by the parties involved. No data is available on the extent of the registry use. Of the 586 interpreters and/or mediators that had been trained in Greece until 2013, only very few reported that they were working regularly for NGO’s involved in migrant issues. Some of them reported that they were offering mediation services through migrant organizations or through direct contact with local authorities. Others reported that they would occasionally offer their services voluntarily. Of the 417 mediators that could be contacted, 36 (8.6%) declared that they are not interested anymore in working as intercultural mediators. Despite the positive attitude of the majority (87.7%) towards the creation of a mediator registry, only 139 mediators registered (33.3% of the total contacted.

Recently, the Hellenic Center for Disease Control & Prevention (***KEELPNO***) opened an invitation to tender for interpreting among other services, which is the first time that interpreters will be recruited for a state agency within the framework of the refugee crisis management. This is a great opportunity for the community interpreters as well as an open window for integration of the interpreters that are either asylum applicants or recognized refugees.

### **Training**

Things are even more blurry when it comes to training and education of community interpreters.

A primary research held in 2013 in a sample of 75 participants activating in cultural mediation in Greece and trained in the framework of SONETOR project has shown that most intercultural mediators are in the work informally; the great majority of them are not trained and/or certified as cultural mediators; there is a poor connectivity between certified cultural mediators and labor market; certified intercultural mediators are few compared to the needs and are offering their services voluntarily or in some cases they are contracted for a limited period of time; migrants are not always aware of their rights to ask for an cultural mediator or they are unwilling to have one as there is often a matter of distrust.

Up to now there is a total absence of certified programs in Higher Education and in private education. Only exception, a course, entitled *Interpretation and Cultural Mediation*, offered in the Police Academy. Usually, whenever a new humanitarian program starts to be implemented, focusing for example either on child protection or on the protection of victims of torture, interpreters as members of an interdisciplinary team are being introduced to a code of conduct with which they have to comply. Furthermore, they are trained in the way in which they have to cooperate with other colleagues. These trainings usually last few hours and offer simply a superficial approach as to the terminology that will eventually be used and the procedures that will be applied. Between 2006 and 2009, several training programs (250 hours each) for cultural mediators have been organized by the Department of Social Inclusion of the General Secretariat of Immigration and Social Integration Policy. The programs were carried out by two private vocational training centers (more than 100 persons were trained). Furthermore, in the frame of the Horizons Program *Professional and Social Inclusion Actions*, the Private Vocational Training Center AKMH organized a 300-hour program for the training of 20 cultural mediators.

On the other hand, there is a Greek NGO Metadrasi that provides a kind of training to future interpreters, without nevertheless having been recognized by the state as formal educational institute and simply taking advantage of the absence of a formal response at place. It is active since 2010 and offers “seminars for training interpreters”, which last 10 days and are followed by written and oral exams. Those who pass the exams can be registered at the organisation’s “Register for interpreters”, an internal pool for community interpreters, who are obliged to work only for Metadrasi. Metadrasi acts as a subcontractor for several NGOs etc. The “adequacy” of the interpreter lasts for a year, then a new assessment is required.[[1]](#footnote-1)

### **Certification**

There are still no registered professional rights for cultural mediators nor is there any official professional profile that is to say an intercultural mediator is not recognized yet as an independent and legally self-standing profession but mostly as a supplementary qualification and skill of a professional in the field of Humanities and Social Sciences. Timid steps have been made as to certification since some workshops have been organized by the **Panhellenic Association of Translators**. Nevertheless, it remains unclear whether such a certificate of attendance in a workshop shall be considered as an official proof of knowledge and mastery of interpreting techniques and skills. It seems that we are into uncharted waters as far as certification is concerned and is an imperative need to effectively respond to it. It will certainly improve the provision of interpreting services and at the end of the day facilitate our communication with beneficiaries of these services.

## References

Data were contributed or retrieved from the following sources:

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* Ioannidis, A./Resta Z. (2016). A sociological approach of the professionalization process of court interpreting in Greece. In Μ. Bajčić & K. D. Basaneže (Eds.), *Towards the Professionalization of Legal Translators and Court Interpreters in the EU* (pp. 66-82). Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing
* Implementation of the Directive 2010/64/ΕC and Court Translation and Interpreting Greece, April 2016 <https://ec.europa.eu/greece/sites/greece/files/docs/body/20160610_conclusions_workshop_courts.pdf>
* TIME Train Intercultural Mediators for a Multicultural Europe – Erasmus+ Synthesis report, June 2016

1. “Metadrasi has carried out 53 Interpreters’ Training Seminars, and has created a pool of 350 interpreters, in 38 languages and dialects and has been providing quality interpretation services in the following frameworks: Asylum Procedures, First Reception & Identification Procedures, Hospitals, NGOs and Agencies involved with the Target Group, as well as embassies of other European countries by locally based teams in Athens and 23 other points in Greece or missions of interpreters.”

   https://metadrasi.org/en/campaigns/training-of-interpreters/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)