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Citation for published version:

Monteoliva, E 2020, Communicating in a diverse Scotland: research on multilingual communication and interpreting in police settings. in *The Scottish Institute For Policing Research annual report 2019/20*. Scottish Institute for Policing Research.
<http://www.sipr.ac.uk/assets/files/Scottish%20Institute%20for%20Policing%20Research%20-%20Annual%20Report%202019_20.pdf>

Link:

[Link to publication record in Heriot-Watt Research Portal](#)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Published In:

The Scottish Institute For Policing Research annual report 2019/20

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Communicating in a diverse Scotland: research on multilingual communication and interpreting in police settings

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Communication lies at the heart of policing operations, and the efforts to guarantee a resilient, safe and equal Scotland require having mechanisms in place to guarantee successful communication across policing scenarios even if a language barrier exists. This article presents a recent case study on multilingual communication in police settings in Scotland conducted by the author, an overview of CTISS, the Centre for Translation & Interpreting Studies in Scotland, and ongoing research by Heriot-Watt University researchers in the field of translation and interpreting in police settings. The study explored communicative practices used by response and community officers in their daily operations in a Police Scotland division with the aims of mapping out the purposes and strategies of communicative practices; discussing the range of means used by police officers to overcome language barriers while on duty; assessing the impact of linguistic and non-linguistic factors on decision-making when selecting the most suitable approach to overcome language barriers; and understanding the aspects that are challenging for officers when working with interpreters, with the aim to inform future practice, research, training and provision in relation to linguistic support.

Monteoliva-García, E. (2020). Interpreting or other forms of language support? Experiences and decision-making among response and community police officers in Scotland. *Translation & Interpreting, The International Journal of Translation and Interpreting Research*, 12(1), 37. Full paper available at: <https://www.trans-int.org/index.php/transint/article/view/1035>

BACKGROUND

When a language barrier is identified, interlocutors resort to different solutions to communicate. These range from using gestures, online translation tools, a bilingual friend or a professional interpreter, among others. Each solution will be more or less adequate and feasible depending on the demands and constraints

of the situation. Communicating effectively is of paramount importance in policing operations for effective assessment, decision-making and for the success of operations, as observed in the Police Scotland Incident Prioritisation and Response Standard Operating Procedure (2017). An increasing need for collaboration between interpreters, interpreting scholars and police forces emerges from a linguistically and culturally diverse Scotland. This is particularly important to foster dialogue and knowledge exchange on the practices and actions that are most suitable (Perez, Wilson, King, and Pagnier, 2006), in particular because police officers respond to a wide range of situations which pose various constraints and may require different actions (Gamal, 2014; Mulyim, Lai, & Norma, 2014).

As the act of providing a spoken or signed translation when a communicative barrier exists in conversation, interpreting is one of the main solutions to enable communication. Despite being still an under-researched when compared to interpreting in court or conference settings, police interpreting research has witnessed a rapid growth over the past decade (Monteoliva-García, 2018). This growth is especially marked in studies exploring interpreter-mediated investigative interviews as highly sensitive, evidentiary communicative genres (Berk-Seligson, 2002; Böser, 2013; Gallai, 2013; Heydon & Lai, 2013; Krouglov, 1999; Mayfield, 2016; Monteoliva-García, 2020; Nakane, 2007, 2009, 2014; Russell, 2002). These studies have made it possible to understand the high degree of sophistication of interpreter-mediated interviews due to the combination of legal and informal language; at least two languages; the participation of one more interlocutor -the interpreter; role and power asymmetries among participants; and potentially diverse expectations regarding policing, interviews and protocols and cultural and communicative conventions.

THE STUDY

An area that has received scant attention so far is policing practitioners' perceptions and experiences of multilingual communication, including working with interpreters. This study sees communication and, in particular, interpreting, as a socially-situated practice (Angelelli, 2004; de Pedro-Ricoy, 2017; Hale & Napier, 2016) that is shaped by contextual conditions, including

the communicative situation, the participants involved in the encounters, their roles in interaction and their expectations, as well as legal and other types of requirements and protocols. The study focused on communicative practices across police settings in an area of Scotland identified for the case study and documented communicative strategies and practices used by response and community police officers in their daily operations in both monolingual and bilingual encounters. The aims of the study were a) to map out the range of resources used in different communicative encounters, understand the factors shaping decision-making in multilingual encounters and how different solutions are ranked relative to each other; and b) to gain insights on police practitioners' views on working with interpreters across policing scenarios.

LINGUISTIC SUPPORT PROTOCOLS IN POLICE DEPARTMENTS

Police forces around the world have different mechanisms in place to provide linguistic assistance when needed, such as the Queensland Police Service (QPS) Language Services Strategy (2011), London Metropolitan Police Working with Interpreters and Translators SOP (2017) or Language Access Plan in New York City Police Department (2018). These comprise different solutions and working with qualified interpreters is normally the preferred or required one. These guidelines also contemplate the use of ad hoc, i.e. non-qualified interpreters, bilingual officers and even family members or members of the public in informal and/or urgent information, something that can be problematic and pose risks if what is understood for 'informal' or 'urgent' is not described clearly or the demands of the act of enabling communication are not evaluated accurately. In Police Scotland, the Interpreting and Translating Services SOP (2018) provides guidance on "the use of interpreters in circumstances that imply involvement in the formal judicial process" and acknowledges the right "for all persons in their contact with the Police Service to understand and be understood". The "fairness to the accused or suspect" is mentioned as the prime consideration when doubts about the need for an interpreter emerge, and resorting to relatives, friends or ad hoc interpreters is contemplated in "informal" settings. In this study, different solutions adopted in a range of policing scenarios were documented and examined.

METHODOLOGY

Following relevant ethical approval, data were collected through 6 focus group interviews facilitated by the author with 28 police officers at Paisley Police Station. Group sizes ranged from 3 to 6 officers and the average focus group

discussion length was 29.5 minutes. In order to gain a more comprehensive picture of communication in policing operations, both community (2 groups, 11 officers) and response officers (4 groups, 15 officers) plus two desk-based officers who joined the response officers' groups, were interviewed. A larger number of groups with response officers was arranged in case they were called in during the interviews. The officers' degree of experience in working with interpreters ranged from very experienced (4%) to no experienced at all (one officer), with 55% of participants stated rarely working with interpreters and 41% occasionally. The interviews took place in two different police stations, all of them between shifts to minimise interference with participants' duties and time. Sergeants in charge of each shift were provided with the interview materials beforehand, including the interview prompts, pre-interview questionnaire and information about the project. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed to facilitate the analysis and a thematic approach was adopted for the analysis.

RESULTS

Before discussing multilingual encounters, a range of communicative purposes in policing operations was documented, with gathering information, getting the message across, and establishing trust as the main ones reported by participants. Officers stressed the pivotal role of communicating effectively in their daily operations and some differences between community and response officers were observed. Whereas building trust and learning about community concerns and what matters to them was highlighted by community officers, response officers stressed their focus on solving problems and the need to identify what the problems are in order to adopt the most adequate action.

In order to achieve those purposes, officers reported analysis and the ability to adjust the way you speak in each situation as key skills. Acting respectfully, being kind and empathetic were strategies stressed by community officers, and identifying who each person is as a speaker and adopting the right way of communicating with them through their tone, non-verbal actions and style was mentioned by response officers. These ranged from shouting to de-escalate a situation to using your voice to calm someone down.

When a language barrier exists, officers mentioned a range of means to overcome communication barriers. These are presented in Table 1 below, together with the purposes and scenarios in which they are normally used, as reported by the officers:

TABLE 1 LANGUAGE SUPPORT SOLUTIONS AND CORRESPONDING SCENARIOS

LANGUAGE SUPPORT SOLUTION	PURPOSE/SCENARIO
Google Translate and other language apps	Information requests from members of the public (at airports, on the street, directions) To establish the initial circumstances To establish initial contact while waiting for an interpreter To assess what is going on In “less formal” situations When the urgency of the situation makes it necessary
Telephone interpreting	To take a statement At charge bar To “sarf” someone (inform of their right to a solicitor, as per the Solicitor Access Recording Form or SARF) Instead of an app, when the matter is not urgent
Face-to-face interpreting	In formal situations and legal requirements (interview someone under caution, take a statement, if someone has been arrested, someone is getting processed) In serious situations When the urgency makes it necessary At the police station In interviews When availability and time make it possible
Bilingual police officers	Mentioned as a solution that is not ideal, but a good choice for people who request information or need immediate assistance until an interpreter arrives.
Family and friends	Mentioned in relation to calls about neighbour disputes Not adequate if the situation becomes serious or potentially risky for anyone involved Only if no data protection issues are at stake
Communicating in broken English	If the person can communicate in broken English, it is a useful resource to establish common ground and try to establish what happened -before calling an interpreter or not
Poster with flags and language names and card written in different languages that says “I am an officer at Police Scotland, and I am here to help you”	Used to establish which language and dialect they talk and so that people know that assistance is coming

As shown above, different solutions are used in different circumstances, with interpreting being mentioned as “the proper way”, in particular face-to-face interpreting, when the legal nature and seriousness of the case require it and time constraints are not an issue. The urgency of a situation may require using apps such as Google Translate, a bilingual member of the public or telephone interpreting to communicate in the initial stages while waiting for an interpreter. While language apps were reported as a frequent solution, officers limited their use to matters of a non-serious nature, such as giving directions, or used them as interim solutions to assess the situation or provide basic information while waiting for a more appropriate one.

Finally, regarding the challenges of communicating through an interpreter, officers mentioned various limitations and complications, although they were also very aware that interpreters are necessary for them to guarantee fairness and be able to do their job. The main challenges identified by officers was perceived loss of access to emotions, and reduced ability to express empathy and build rapport in interpreted interaction. Some officers mentioned the “almost robotic” nature of interpreting and highlighted the significance of what is conveyed beyond the words uttered in their operations. Across groups, officers were concerned about not being able to connect with people through, for instance, eye contact, when an interpreter is present. This is also mentioned in the ImPLI Partners Final Report 2011-2012 (2012, pp. 24-25) and was reported by hearing users in the study by Napier (2011) on sign language interpreting. A decreased ability to apply interviewing tactics effectively was also reported, such as putting questions rapid-fire or using silent pauses, and to assess whether someone is truthful or not.

Regarding the complications observed, the main complication that emerged was the changing flow of interaction. Interpreting makes encounters longer

and officers felt that the interpreter’s turns interrupt the flow, although a response officer also mentioned the positive ‘side effect’ that the time involved in getting an interpreter and knowing that an interpreter will be there have, namely calming the person down and making them feel safe. Finally, and an interesting observation given the increase in the use of remote interpreting during the COVID-19 pandemic, telephone interpreting was mentioned across groups as more cumbersome and less reliable than face-to-face interpreting. This perception was related to the practicalities to book an interpreter, the absence of dedicated devices, an increasingly complicated flow of interaction, lack of access to verbal cues, lack of context for the interpreter and technical constraints.

WHAT DO WE LEARN FROM THIS STUDY?

This study mapped out the range of solutions that are adopted by officers with varying degrees of awareness and experience in dealing with language barriers. The factors and situations mentioned provide useful information and should inform guidelines on best practices and on solutions to be avoided. Despite the challenges identified by respondents (see above), overall police officers had a positive view of face-to-face interpreting as key to be able to perform their duties. The challenges identified, though, shed light on areas that both interpreting scholars and trainers need to be aware of, and on potential aspects that should be included in the training of interpreters and police officers. An increased awareness of the demands of policing scenarios (purposes, techniques, urgency, seriousness, strategies) among interpreters and interpreter trainers on the one hand, and on the workings and needs of interpreted interaction among police officers on the other, would be beneficial to continue improving existing practices to guarantee effective communication.