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Humanitarian interpreting in the context of African migrant reception in the Canary Islands

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Abstract: The Canary Islands have traditionally been known for their beautiful beaches and tourist resorts. However, in the last decades, African migrant reception in this territory has become a human rights issue, which requires attention from all those involved in providing infrastructure, medical assistance, integration opportunities, etc. At the base of any of these actions is communication. Assisting migrants as soon as they arrive in Spanish territory, is certainly a new context where both language and cultural barriers are present.

In this article we aim to describe the characteristics of the so-called Atlantic route in the context of irregular migration by sea, with a view to justifying its designation as a humanitarian crisis context and the consequent need to address this situation by providing suitable interpreter training for both ad hoc interpreters and those involved in interpreter education. We will also describe the main differences in the role played by interpreters and cultural mediators, with a special focus on ethical principles attached to the interpreting profession. Finally, after presenting some of the challenges in current communication practices with people arriving on the coasts of the Canary Islands, we will discuss whether translation and interpreting services should adapt to this specific situation.

Keywords: humanitarian interpreting, crisis communication, ad-hoc interpreters, migration, public service interpreting

1 Introduction

The Canary Islands, a Spanish archipelago situated off the northwest coast of Africa, have a long-standing tradition of foreign visitors who choose this region of Spain for

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their holidays or business purposes. Their warm weather throughout the whole year has been a major contributor to the tourist industry, which is the main source of income in this territory (cf. EXCELTUR 2023).

Although there are existing inequalities in Canary Island society as a whole, the development of tourism has spurred economic growth and has made the islands a potential destination for longer stays. Migration to the Canary Islands can currently be classified into three groups, according to the origin of people arriving in the territory:

- Persons arriving from European countries, mainly Great Britain and Germany, who temporarily or permanently reside in the islands, either for work or as a retirement plan. Within this group, we must also consider the more recent inflow of migrants from Ukraine, which has occurred in many other European regions, too.
- Persons arriving from Latin American countries, who settle in the Canaries due to cultural and language bonds or because it is the land of their ancestors, who themselves had emigrated to Latin American countries in the past.
- Persons arriving by sea in small boats in precarious conditions from African countries, mainly Morocco, Senegal, Mali, Ghana, and the Ivory Coast, who often arrive at the Canary Islands as their first and geographically nearest stop on their intended journey to continental Europe.

These groups obviously have very different language service needs, but providers have traditionally focused on tailoring their provision to the requirements of the European market. Trade and tourism are fields where English, French, and German are commonly used as working languages. Simultaneous and long or short consecutive interpreting are the modalities of interpreting provided in these contexts.

At the same time, bilateral interpreting within public-service settings comes into play when the necessity arises for any non-Spanish speaker to go to court, seek medical attention, or communicate in any other way with institutional authorities. If interpreting is provided, with the exception of the court setting, it is normally at the expense of the interested party and the language combination varies depending on the first language of the person who hires the service and the availability of interpreters.

In this well-established language service environment, communication between African migrants in the third aforementioned group and service providers has become especially challenging for various reasons. The nature and unpredictable timing of their arrival, and therefore the appointment with an interpreter, cannot be planned in advance; the migrants often speak languages that are not commonly taught, learned, or used in Spain; communication at the point of reception takes place in unsuitable premises; and, on many occasions, those arriving are

traumatised from their journey, suffering from seasickness and dehydration, and can hardly communicate in their mother tongue – let alone in a lingua franca. As Tomei/Pardeilhan (2024:390) put it, “the criticalities in this environment stem from divergent life experiences, repertoires, and backgrounds which contribute to widening communicative gaps”.

In this article, we aim to describe the characteristics of the so-called Atlantic route (cf. International Organization for Migration 2023) in the context of irregular migration by sea, with a view to justifying its designation as a humanitarian crisis context and the consequent need to address this situation by providing suitable interpreter training for both ad hoc interpreters and those involved in translator/interpreter education. We will also describe the main differences in the role played by interpreters and cultural mediators, with a special focus on ethical principles attached to the interpreting profession. Finally, after presenting some challenges posed by the ways of dealing with language barriers and communicating with people arriving on the coasts of the Canary Islands, we will discuss whether translation and interpreting services, and especially professional distance, should adapt to this specific situation.

2 Irregular migration to the Canary Islands: Humanitarian crisis setting?

Thirty years ago, in 1994, the first boat carrying two migrants from the Sahara arrived in Fuerteventura. Since then, arrivals, mainly on the islands of Fuerteventura and Lanzarote, started growing slowly but steadily. At that time, migrants were returned to the Moroccan coasts after spending some time in centres run by the government.

From 2004 on, cayucos instead of pateras have been used more often. A cayuco can be crowded with more than 200 people, in comparison to around 60 who can fit in a patera. During 2006, the so-called Crisis de los cayucos meant that 31,678 people arrived from Morocco, Senegal, The Gambia, and Guinea-Bissau, among other countries in West Africa.

The social and economic crisis affecting the whole world in the following years put migration on hold until 2019, when “several signals warned that an increase in migration flows towards the Canarian archipelago was expected. However, these warnings didn’t translate into anticipatory measures to offer an adequate and organised response as far as decent assistance and accommodation is concerned” (Faleh Pérez 2022:23).

Therefore, in November 2020, in the middle of the Covid-19 global pandemic, 2,600 people were crammed into an emergency camp, with a capacity for 400

people, set up in the small fishing port of Arguineguín on Gran Canaria. Since then, the number of arrivals on the Canary Islands has substantially increased every year. For example, in April 2022, the arrival of a number of cayucos carrying more than 900 people in one week was reported. And, in 2023, 39,910 migrants arrived, which meant an increase of 154.5% compared to 2022 (cf. Ministerio del Interior 2023).

This sea journey can last from 24 to 48 hours if boats set out from the south of Morocco and arrive at Fuerteventura or Lanzarote after having travelled 100 km. It takes much longer, from 12 to 15 days, and boats must sail for up to 2,400 km, if they set out from Senegal or even further south from places such as Guinea-Bissau, and arrive at the coasts of Gran Canaria, Tenerife, or El Hierro. However, for these migrants, their journey may have started months or years before.

As for the occupants of the boats, sometimes they are several members of the same family, including pregnant women, babies, and children. Unaccompanied minors are often among the group. Conditions in the Atlantic Ocean regarding winds, currents, and temperature differ greatly from those of the Mediterranean Sea, which are generally milder. Cayucos and pateras are both made of wood, and they are only equipped with either one or two 40 CV engines. In the event of requiring rescue, the chances are that limited radars, which can range up to 12 nautical miles, won't find the boat in the open ocean (cf. Martínez Ibor 2019:45).

All these aspects add up to the journey involving an unusually high degree of physical and psychological risk. In fact, according to the International Organization for Migration, 85% of those who die in their attempted migration have chosen the Atlantic route to reach Spain. On average, only 20% of arrivals in Europe go through the Canary Islands, but this number may increase significantly depending on other factors such as stricter controls at the Mediterranean border, the traffickers' demands, and other socio-political aspects (cf. *ibid.*).

The following illustration shows the main country of origin of migrants from Africa, the distance in kilometres from the city of departure to the Canary Islands, and the approximate location of shipwrecks:

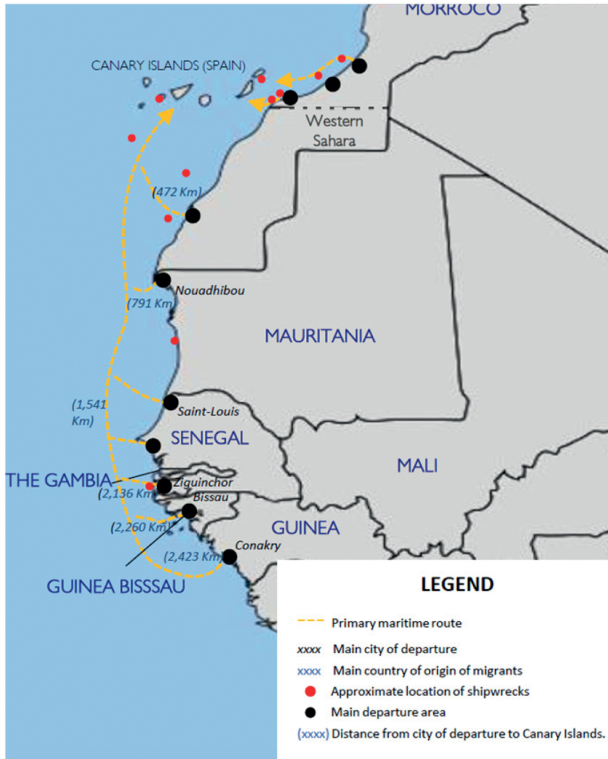


Fig. 1: Main countries of origin of migrants from Africa. Source: The International Organization for Migration (January 2023)

When it comes to defining a humanitarian crisis, there are few doubts concerning circumstances experienced in countries at war, in refugee camps, or in places stricken by natural disasters where the survival of the local population or their assets is at risk. Claiming that term for an Outermost Region of the European Union, known for its beautiful beaches and tourist resorts, is certainly open to discussion. However, the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA) defines a humanitarian crisis as a singular event or a series of events that are threatening to a community in terms of its health, safety, or well-being (cf. Moser-Mercer et al. 2024:218f.). The fact that so many people lose their lives at sea after they have set out heading towards these islands or shortly after they have arrived shows the clear challenges industrialised countries face in assisting vulnerable populations.

While it is true that “these societies [in industrialised countries] usually have high baseline levels of health and education” (Encyclopedia Britannica n. d.), the large number of migrants who arrive in the territory in poor conditions puts so

much pressure on the receiving community that it becomes “overwhelmed by the disaster event” (ibid.) and finds itself unable to provide basic services such as decent accommodation or appropriate healthcare. Organizations with a humanitarian mandate state that “typically vulnerable groups include children, pregnant and nursing women, migrants, and displaced people” (Humanitarian Coalition n.d.), all of whom can be found among those migrants who arrive on the Canary Island coasts in small boats from African countries.

“Vulnerable population” is the right way to describe migrant people who, in many cases, have spent several days at sea and have arrived suffering from physical conditions, such as hypothermia, malnutrition, dehydration, bruising, infectious and contagious diseases, and from psychological disorders, such as disorientation or post-traumatic stress. In addition, they arrive in a country where their languages are not widely spoken, which prevents them from communicating successfully. In fact, migration is a “life change in which one experiences grief for several reasons. Grief for one’s language is one of the most significant examples and it leads many immigrants to suffer from the immigrant syndrome of chronic and multiple stress, or Ulysses Syndrome” (Valero-Garcés 2021:10).

It is in this sense that the Canary Islands is a territory where the extreme conditions suffered by some of its population can be tagged as critical from a humanitarian point of view. With limited infrastructure to face the constant arrival of small boats and manage the situation in an orderly manner, local institutions seek help from the central government and require migration to be considered an issue that transcends ideologies and the borders of this small region (cf., e.g., Expósito 2023; Campo 2024; Diario de Avisos 2024).

Even though large sectors of the population in this part of Spain enjoy a high level of well-being, “the phenomenon of (crisis-induced) migration has become itself a crisis due to the overwhelming amount of economic, practical, logistic, personal, social, and communicative consequences for refugees/asylum seekers themselves, the hosting countries and their apparatuses” (Tomei/Pardeilhan 2024:390). Indeed, African migrant reception in the Canary Islands has become a human rights issue, which requires attention from all those involved in providing infrastructure, medical assistance, integration opportunities, etc. At the base of any of these actions is communication, which, as we have seen, also presents a challenge in this context.

A telltale sign of the humanitarian crisis scale of the problem and the importance of communicating with migrants is the fact that, along with different police forces, the teams that give first assistance to migrants arriving at the coast are the Red Cross Emergency Response Teams (ERIEs in Spanish). These teams are heterogeneous groups consisting of professionals, such as lifeguards and physicians, who play a critical role in those first moments. Translators/interpreters and cultural mediators are also members of these Emergency Response Teams.

3 Perspectives and purpose of communication in humanitarian crisis settings: Ethics and role of cultural mediators, trained, and untrained interpreters

In the context of humanitarian crises such as migrant reception in the Canary Islands, interpreters are present in three-way or triological encounters where migrants are one of the parties involved in the communicative process. The other party, whether it is a health service provider, an NGDO representative, or a police agent, to name but a few examples, is also a protagonist in the conversation, but interpreters must attend such meetings with the sole purpose of assisting the other two participants. They should never speak on their own behalf.

As opposed to interpreters, cultural mediators sometimes meet directly in dialogue with interested parties. In three-way meetings, they may also intervene in support of the migrant person, whereas interpreters do not, even though they may make clarifying comments to avoid misunderstandings.

Giménez (cf. 2019:203) states that intercultural mediation revolves around four objectives: contributing to managing conflict, facilitating communication, encouraging participation, and adjusting institutions. These goals can be achieved through different routes within the framework of three models (cf. Hernández 2014):

- The Traditional Linear Model, also known as the Harvard Model, involves the parties in reaching a consensus on their own. The mediator in this model is a problem solver.
- The Transformative Model tries to transform the positions of the parties through listening and self-reflection. “The mediator can be perceived as preparing the parties for direct negotiation, which will take place ‘outside’” (Alberstein 2007:336).
- The Circular Narrative Model focuses on communication so that the parties co-create a new narrative. The mediator in this model informs participants and reflects about the process, meets with them individually or in groups, compares different positions, etc.

In all three models, mediators have an interventionist role. It is part of their job to foster communication between the parties and even make them move from their initial standpoints so that they can reach an agreement. A study by Radicioni (cf. 2024:239) in an Italian healthcare setting confirms that cultural mediators carry out a wide variety of tasks, many of them in direct interlocution with migrants:

“These include, but are not limited to: welcoming patients and/or health and social service users; providing them with language and cultural mediation prior to and during the medical examination and in compiling medical files at the outpatient clinic; accompanying patients who need hospital treatment to public health facilities and hospitals and assisting them with reception and admission procedures; liaising with the local authorities and the Italian Health System; informing patients about their rights; providing healthcare education; carrying out health and social service orientation activities and enabling people to access care or assistance; helping them access the Italian Health System; supporting the computerised management of data; and contributing to the management of certain administrative or logistical aspects of the projects.”

Interpreters, on the contrary, are guided by ethical principles which carefully circumscribe their role. Deontology for translators and interpreters is not unquestionably defined in a single ethical code. However, they observe certain common principles around their responsibility towards the parties involved, their responsibility towards the profession, and their responsibility towards themselves (cf. Hale 2010). These three axes result in interpreters abiding by the core principles of confidentiality, fidelity, impartiality, professional solidarity, and lifelong training, among others. “The most complex and widely debated aspects of ethics in interpreting concern the inter-related issues of the nature, boundaries and flexibility of the interpreter’s role” (Setton/Prunč 2015:148).

The focus on one principle or another varies depending on the association, field, or country in which the interpreter works. If we take healthcare settings in America as an example, the code issued by the National Council on Interpreting in Health Care (NCIHC) includes patient advocacy within the national standards of practice, stating that “when the patient’s health, well-being, or dignity is at risk, an interpreter may be justified in acting as an advocate” (National Council on Interpreting in Health Care 2005:10).

Court interpreting settings, to the contrary, highlight that the interpreter’s behaviour should not interfere in any way with the proceedings. This is the reason why the Code of Ethics and Professional Responsibility of the US National Association of Judiciary Interpreters and Translators (NAJIT) clearly states that “all hedges, false starts, and repetitions should be conveyed; also, English words mixed into the other language should be retained, as should culturally-bound terms which have no direct equivalent in English, or which may have more than one meaning” (National Association of Judiciary Interpreters and Translators n. d.).

Professional organizations which are not centred on community interpreting, such as the International Association of Conference Interpreters (AIIC), along with other common ethical principles, will focus their deontological codes on aspects of conduct towards the profession, such as requiring good working conditions for

interpreters (cf. International Association of Conference Interpreters 2022). In these environments, interpreters have clearly defined roles, which are known and respected by all participants in the meetings where they work.

While it is true that there is a greater need to set boundaries in community interpreting settings, where interpreters might be more easily likened to cultural mediators, there is no doubt that some of these contexts require a certain degree of flexibility, especially when the interpreting service is provided to facilitate communication with vulnerable populations, which is precisely what humanitarian interpreters try to do. Having described the situation of African migrants upon their arrival in the Canary Islands, and considering it a context of humanitarian crisis, we must allow different ethical approaches for the interpreters who work in this setting and for those who practise the profession, maybe only a short distance away, in business and tourism conventions.

The vulnerability of the users in humanitarian interpreting settings changes both the perspective and purpose of communication. Delgado Luchner/Kherbiche (2018:423) point out that “the beneficiaries of their services often fall in the category of ‘protected persons’ according to IHL; humanitarian interpreters play a role in enabling beneficiaries to access their rights”. Along the same lines, researchers at the programme InZone, established by the University of Geneva to provide empowering education to communities affected by conflict and humanitarian crisis, highlight the fact that these interpreters work in fragile environments where Humanitarian Law is applied, which entails a challenge associated with humanitarian interpreting (cf. InZone n. d.).

Because they work for international associations with a humanitarian mandate, interpreters must comply with ethical codes of these organizations in the same way as all their other employees. For example, the Red Cross and CEAR (the Spanish Commission for Refugees), both active associations in African migrant reception in the Canary Islands, each have their own codes of conduct. By virtue of them, their workers reject certain behaviours, such as discriminatory practices, and promote others, such as equal opportunities.

Some standards of practice of these organizations include guidelines to be followed by anyone acting as an interpreter. Such is the case of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), whose code of conduct “is meant to guide UNHCR interpreters in maintaining professional behaviour at work” (UNHCR 2009:104). It includes basic principles regarding the interpreters’ level of linguistic competence, physical and mental attitude, potential conflicts of interest, and personal feelings, all of which may affect their professional behaviour. A second set of principles has to do with accuracy when conveying the speakers’ message and neutrality. Being neutral means that, when interpreting, they will never act as experts, even if they may be such. Finally, UNHCR’s code of conduct refers to the

need for impartiality on the side of the interpreters who should not accept assignments in which they have a personal interest or involvement.

In a context of migration and refuge, organisations encourage interpreters to go beyond the strict conveyance of a message when there are grounds for misunderstanding. On such occasions, the interpreters must “indicate to all parties in the conversation in a very transparent and comprehensible way, when and how they have intervened to further understanding, and also which parts of their translation incorporate explanations they have added themselves, or which explanations were added upon their request” (Rienzner 2017:159). These codes take for granted that the person acting as an interpreter will have to make decisions in situations not described in the code, as is explicitly stated in UNHCR’s: “it [the Code of Conduct] does not and cannot include reference to every possible situation, obstacle or dilemma interpreters may face” (UNHCR 2009:104).

These ethical guidelines respond to the need for regulating an activity which is often carried out either by people who lack any formal training or by professional interpreters who are not familiar with humanitarian crisis contexts. On this matter, Pöllabauer (cf. 2015) mentions four groups of interpreters in asylum proceedings: interpreters who have received formal training in higher education centres; interpreters who have taken courses at the institution hiring them; interpreters qualified to work in the judiciary, who, depending on the country, may or may not be required to have a degree in interpreting; and, finally, interpreters who have not received any kind of training.

Taking into consideration the specific context of African migrant reception in the Canary Islands, it is easy to see that interpreter profiles may not differ greatly from the above. Translation and interpreting bachelor’s and master’s degrees are offered at local universities for combinations of Spanish with English, German, and French, apart from some optional courses in basic Russian, Arabic, Chinese, Korean, Italian, and Portuguese. It is therefore possible for graduates in interpreting to communicate in a lingua franca if migrants have a sufficient command of it, but African languages such as Mandingo, Wolof, or Bambara are only spoken by very few people, normally migrants themselves. In such contexts, “interpreters are not hired because they have received training as interpreters, but because they speak the relevant languages” (Ruiz Rosendo 2024:137).

Consequently, as speaking the languages involved is a pre-requisite for interpreting, communicating with the help of ad-hoc interpreters is sometimes unavoidable. Even though mastery in these languages cannot be expected, contrary to what one might think, according to the Standard Operating Procedures for working with professional and non-professional interpreters and translators in the refugee crisis in Greece (UNHCR 2016: n. p.), “in many cases, volunteer interpreters are even preferable for reasons of convenience, advanced contextual or cultural understand-

ing, improving community relations, etc.” As Pöllabauer (cf. 2015:204) explains, the interpreters may even be viewed as a reassuring presence by those submitting an asylum application because they represent a link to their language, culture, and “home”, a feeling which is certainly stronger if the person interpreting belongs to the same background as the applicant.

However, in certain cases, employing non-professional interpreters is considered inappropriate. These include situations where confidentiality is a concern, specialised knowledge or certification is required, there is a conflict of interest, the interpreter might be considered part of the authoritative structures, have access to information leading to preferential treatment, or when the proposed interpreter is a child or a teenager (cf. UNHCR 2016).

As for NGDO staff taking the interpreting role, this is usually feasible since they often speak several languages, understand the system, and do not have personal involvement in the issues being dealt with. These are further advantages for mediating, but “while their institutional and technical knowledge may be an asset for mediation in professional settings, NGDO staff often fail to identify the boundaries between these two roles, shifting from the role of interpreter to the role of expert staff, thus causing interference between the primary interlocutors” (DePalma et al. 2024:5f.).

These settings call, therefore, for a two-way approach. On the one hand, when hiring ad hoc interpreters is the only or preferred option, an emergency training course would help them know what is and what is not expected of them. This training must include ethical aspects and at least some basic knowledge of interpreting skills, which they will necessarily strengthen while working, not prior to carrying out interpreting tasks. This would presumably minimise the risk of misperformance by them.

On the other hand, experienced interpreters in other fields need a higher degree of plasticity in the way they deal with ethical dilemmas, especially those present in humanitarian interpreting. Professional distance cannot and should not be the same when working in these contexts as when they are involved in other interpreting contexts such as business, formal meetings, or academic conferences, for example. This coincides with the results of a recent study by Aguirre/Paíno (cf. 2024:267) on the role played by interpreters in the migrant reception of people arriving by sea. The so-called advocate interpreters are closer to cultural mediators in the way they handle the interpreting service. They are more visible, but they are still neutral parties in the conversation:

“According to interpretation users, the role of advocate interpreter seems preferable as it allows for an enhanced understanding between migrants and public officials and promotes empathy among them. [...] A visible interpreter can help the migrant feel comforted and more prone to communicate.”

Ultimately, what interpreters, as well as cultural mediators, try to do is help participants in three-way encounters understand each other. Barriers to communication arise from the experience of living in different languages and cultures, but also for mistrust, misconceptions about the other's role, or an inability to express one's feelings or ideas. If stepping down from a strict professional distance may result from better communication, there would seem to be sufficient reason for interpreters to reconsider their positionality.

Conclusion

Due to the large number of African migrants who continue to arrive on the coasts of the archipelago and the distressing conditions in which they arrive, the Canary Islands can currently be considered a territory of humanitarian emergency. The migratory flows exert unsustainable pressure on already limited infrastructures and pose all sorts of challenges at the point of reception. This new context of a traditional tourist destination has added a new dimension to the need for interpreting services. Interpreters are still in demand for conferences, business meetings, general assemblies of tourist resort owners, etc., but a wholly new and unprecedented area of interpreting has emerged. Assisting migrants on shore, in the camps and centres where they are accommodated, and in interviews with border agents and health professionals, to name some of the settings in which they are involved as soon as they arrive in Spanish territory, is certainly a new context where both language and cultural barriers are present.

The job carried out by cultural mediators aims to help migrants overcome obstacles they may find upon their arrival and guide them towards integration into the receiving community. They stand for their cause and speak on their behalf. Their role is invaluable in encounters that are asymmetrical, but migrants have their own voice and efforts should be made for them to be able to speak their minds. Very often, communication is attempted by means of a *lingua franca*, which is used by local authorities and NGDO staff who do not speak African languages but might have some knowledge of English or French. This is a double-edged sword because, on the one hand, some degree of communication can be achieved, but, on the other hand, dealing with sensitive issues in a language of which no participant has a good command can lead to undesired consequences for the most vulnerable parties, especially bearing in mind that “the exile and hardship experiences described by refugees often shake their expressive abilities, even in their mother tongue” (Aguirre/Paño 2024:275).

Besides, when staff of these organizations act as interpreters in three-way encounters, it is difficult for them to remain neutral parties, precisely because they

are experienced workers in the field and they are used to acting in their capacity as experts, not in the role of language and cultural mediators.

Other migrants who, having arrived in Spain earlier, are able to communicate in Spanish and in one or more African languages, are normally required to carry out interpreting tasks. The main challenge for these ad hoc interpreters is the lack of specific training in interpreting and of language competence in Spanish. This may lead them to act intuitively, unaware of the ethical issues and the basic skills involved in the field of translation and interpreting. The psychological impact associated with participation in highly emotional meetings also needs to be considered when employing untrained interpreters who might also be vulnerable themselves.

With regard to graduates from Translation and Interpreting undergraduate or master's degrees, there are two major obstacles that must be overcome for them to perform well in this particular context. The first is their lack of knowledge of African languages, something which cannot be addressed in the short term, although learning basic concepts in some of these languages might help them strengthen their communication abilities, even if they still need to use a *lingua franca*.

The other challenge for trained interpreters working in this field is attitudinal. The concept of impartiality is closely linked to professionalism in the interpreting world. In fact, this principle is included in one way or another in every code of ethics. Maintaining a professional distance at work is therefore instilled in people who have been shaped to become translators and interpreters. While this is an important asset which might be key for preserving the rights of vulnerable people, it needs to be revised in the context of African migrant reception in the Canary Islands because flexibility is required for successful communication in this setting. Professionalism and measured advocacy have to be reconciled in humanitarian interpreting.

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