Interpreting services for immigrants: a new reality in Greece

FOTINI APOSTOLOU
Aristotle University, Thessaloniki

Abstract

The paper focuses on Greece and the way in which the language needs of immigrants are addressed by the current legislation and in actual practice.

1. Background

In Greece, as in many other countries around the world, the imaginary construct of the homogeneous ethnos/nation, which shares the same origin, language, religion, is very strong. This construct had prevailed for many years, since the country was not a destination for immigrant communities that would put into question this homogeneity of the nation. Greece had been a country of origin for thousands of immigrants for a number of years, with a peak period of nine years (1962-1970), when approximately 100,000 people left the country each year thus creating a huge Diaspora around the globe (Dimoulas 2006: 254).

However, the change of situation in the past twenty years transformed the country into a migrant receiving country, a reality which, according to a Country Report prepared by the project POLITIS “partly reflects a gradual improvement in the economic situation and the living conditions in Europe’s southern countries, but in part it is also an unintended side effect of the restrictive measures taken by the UK, France, Germany, and Switzerland” (POLITIS Project 2007). This change

1 The POLITIS Project started in June 2004 and lasted for three years.
of pattern, with very large illegal inflows of foreign nationals, started to pose a serious threat to the construct of the uniform and homogeneous nation. As we read in the paper “The end of national homogeneity: traditional and new forms of otherness in Greece” by Dr Christopoulos, a founding member of the Research Centre for Minority Groups and the Hellenic League for Human Rights, “quite often, Greeks are proud because ‘there is no Le Pen’ in the country. But this soothing complacency can be seen from another, quite smelly, perspective: racist discourse runs through the entire political spectrum and this may render its identification and combating more difficult” (Christopoulos 2001: 61).

The first immigrants started arriving in Greece in the early 1990s, with legal immigrants in Greece reaching probably around 800,000 (including ethnic Greeks) and estimates for illegal immigrants calculating their number to approximately 200,000. According to official figures given by the Hellenic Police, only in 2010 132,524 foreign nationals were arrested for illegal entry or residence in Greece: 50,175 Albanians, 28,299 Afghans, 8,830 Pakistanis, 7,561 Palestinians, 7,336 Algerians, 6,525 Somalis, 4,968 Iraqis, 3,264 Bangladeshis, 1,645 Moroccans, 1,628 Eritreans, 1,456 Georgians, 1,133 Iranians, 988 Tunisians, 898 of unknown origin (!), 851 Syrians, 792 Myanmarians, 672 Indians, 575 Egyptians, and smaller numbers from China, Sudan, Nigeria, Turkey, Lebanon, Sri Lanka, Côte d’Ivoire, Senegal, Dominican Republic, Guinea etc.

The country has been struggling all these twenty years with ways of handling these large and unexpected inflows. As Ruby Gropas and Anna Triantafyllidou suggest in their study on Migration in Greece at a Glance, “immigration policy in Greece was quick to develop in terms of putting into practice stricter border controls and other enforcement measures. However, there has been a significant time lag in designing and implementing a more comprehensive policy framework that includes the regularisation of undocumented aliens, and that aims toward the integration of this population across all sectors and areas of the host country” (2005: 1).

In this presentation, I will focus only on one aspect of the Greek state’s attempts at integrating this population: interpreting services provided for immigrants in Greece, both in terms of the legal framework and the actual provision of these services.

2. Legal framework and reality
2.1 Asylum procedures

The legal framework which provides for interpreting services for immigrants covers the areas of asylum seekers and court interpreting.

The latest census in Greece was conducted in 2001 and it recorded 762,191 legal and undocumented immigrants, constituting around 7% of the total population. For a quite recent study on immigrant population, see a study conducted by the Greek Migration Policy Institute (Baldwin-Edwards 2004). For a detailed reference to the estimation methods, process and results for illegal immigrants, see a study conducted within the context of the AENEAS Programme for Financial and Technical Assistance to Third Countries in the Areas of Migration and Asylum (Lianos T. et al. 2008).
Presidential Decree 90/2008 as amended by Presidential Decree 81/2009 (transposing Council Directive 2005/85/EC On minimum standards on procedures in Member States for granting and withdrawing refugee status) in Article 8 provides that “all applicants for asylum [...] shall be informed in a language which they may reasonably be supposed to understand of the procedure to be followed and of their rights and obligations during the procedure and the possible consequences of not complying with their obligations and not cooperating with the authorities”; according to Article 10 as amended by Article 3 of PD 81/2009 “an Advisory Refugee Committee is established in each Police Directorate. This Committee consists of one senior Police Officer as President, one police officer, a civil servant of the Department of Aliens and Migration of the respective Region and a representative of UNHCR as members”; one of the obligations of this Committee before it reaches a decision on the petition is to interview the applicant. The same Article provides that “the interview is always conducted with the support of an interpreter capable of ensuring the necessary communication, so that the interested party confirms what s/he states in his/her application and provides explanations, especially concerning his/her precise personal data or the non possession of a passport or other official travel document, the precise itinerary s/he followed in order to enter Greek territory and the reasons that forced him/her to flee his/her country of origin requesting protection”; Article 8 states that “these services shall be paid for out of public funds”.

Despite the efforts of the Greek government to improve its asylum procedures, there are a number of problems concerning the issue of interpreting. As we read in a report on PD 81/2009 published by the Greek Section of Amnesty International in 2009: “Another crucial issue which casts doubts over the efficiency of the new asylum procedure is the one of interpreters. Given that the Directorate of Aliens in Attica, which so far examines almost 95% of asylum applications, faces a lack of interpreters, the problem will only become even greater for the other Police Directorates which will have to secure the services of the necessary for their needs interpreters both in numbers and in languages spoken” (Amnesty International Greek Section 2009: 19-20). The same problem was underlined by Thomas Hammarberg, Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, in his report on the issue of human rights of asylum seekers after a visit to Greece in December 2008: “the Commissioner has noted with grave concern that the problem of lack of sufficient interpretation has been a chronic problem in the Greek asylum system” (Hammarberg 2009).

In entry points, interpreting services are almost non-existent, apart from the cases of NGO missions. The Greek Section of Amnesty International hosts a special commentary on the lack of interpreting services in relation to the above-mentioned Article 10, referring to discussions its people had with aliens who were returned to Greece from other European countries and were held at the airport:

N., an Afghan asylum-seeker, was returned to Greece from Austria in October 2009. At Athens airport he was detained and then, upon release, given a notice in Greek requiring him to report to Petrou Ralli within three days. N. claimed that he does not speak Greek or English and the airport police did not explain in any language that he
understands what was contained in the notice. The police officer gave him the paper and said, in Greek: “Go away”. As a result, N. did not go to Petrou Ralli to apply for his asylum application card before the required deadline. A lack of interpreters has resulted in many asylum interviews being conducted in English, even though neither the police officer nor the asylum-seeker had a satisfactory command of the language. (Amnesty International Greek Section 2010: 22)

In contacts I had with the police authorities in the Prefecture of Evros, and the islands of Lesvos and Samos, major entry points of illegal immigrants, I was informed that very few interpreting services were provided to the immigrants. In the case of Evros, there is an interpreter of Arabic who is used in very few cases, while in the majority of cases in Evros, Samos and Lesvos the police authorities communicated with immigrants in English without an interpreter, using the services of those who spoke a little English among the detainees, not speaking much better English themselves. In the hospitals of the same regions, I was referred by the hospital administration to the police authorities, since when detainees had to visit a hospital, they were always accompanied by a police officer who spoke a little English and thus established some communication; therefore, hospitals were not really concerned about health interpreting services. It should be noted here that, based on police records, in 2010 in the region of Evros (Turkish-Greek land borders) 47,088 aliens were arrested for illegal entry or residence, and in the region of the Turkish-Greek maritime borders (of which the islands of Lesvos and Samos are a major part) 6,204 aliens were arrested (Hellenic Police 2011). The truth is that the Greek state, at least until recently, was not very willing to inform immigrants of their right to apply for asylum; rather, the government wanted to get rid of them as quickly as possible, a fact that is verified by the number of asylum applicants being granted refugee status, based on police records: in 2010 out of 10,273 applicants 60 were granted refugee status, while 47,155 applications from previous years are pending (UNHCR 2011).

2.2 Criminal Procedure

The same problems hold for the interpreting services provided for aliens who do not speak the Greek language and are involved in criminal procedures in Greek courts. Article 233 of the Greek Code of Criminal Procedure provides that “1. The person who conducts the interrogation or the person who conducts the discussion in court appoints an interpreter when the offender, witness or party does not speak Greek sufficiently. 2. The interpreter is appointed from a list drawn up by the Council of Magistrates [...] the first ten days of September”; in cases of emergency and if it is not possible to appoint an interpreter from the list, the court can appoint as interpreter someone who is not included in the list. The law does not refer to specific qualifications that the interpreter must have in order to be included in the list of court interpreters, which allows anybody even with a simple high school certificate to be included in the list. Moreover, the unbelievably low remuneration given to court interpreters is a major hindrance

3 Here, I must also note that the same list of interpreters is used by the Advisory Refugee Committee for the interview procedure with asylum seekers.
for professional interpreters with high qualifications to consider providing their services; the remuneration is 17 euros for each appearance in court, and 11 euros for the procedure of interrogation. This amount was decided many years ago on the basis of the wages of unskilled manual workers, and although these wages have increased considerably through the years, the remuneration for court interpreters has remained the same. We should also stress here that in the courts of Athens and Thessaloniki there are considerable delays in the payment of these remunerations; more specifically, delays reach 3 to 12 months in Thessaloniki and two years in Athens, where court interpreters were on strike for two weeks in late February and early March 2011 because they had not yet received their remuneration for 2008. As Ms Beboni, an Athens court interpreter stated “we are paid even less than unskilled manual workers. We have studied for years to do this job. We work under the most pathetic conditions, without insurance, pension credits or a specific time programme” (Viskadouraki 2010). The number of cases where interpreting is necessary is quite high. As we read in a report in the daily newspaper I epochi, according to the Hellenic Supreme Court of Civil and Penal Law, in 2009 out of the 300,000 complaints filed in the Evelpidon Court Houses in Athens, 130,000 involved witnesses, victims or offenders who did not speak Greek; it is estimated that on a daily basis 150 to 180 complaints filed with the three-member Misdemeanour Court in Athens involve interpreting. The result of all the above – lack of required qualifications, extremely low remuneration and great delays in payment, plethora of cases – is that very low quality interpreting services are provided with no improvement seeming possible. Another major problem is that the law does not distinguish between interpreter and translator as can be seen in Article 237 of the Code of Criminal Procedure: “In the case of a necessity of document translation which demands a long-term occupation, there is a deadline in which the interpreter has to deliver the translation: this deadline can be extended. If the deadline expires, the appointed interpreter is dismissed and another interpreter is appointed”.

To prove this point, I will refer to two cases that were known to the public. The first is the case of a court interpreter who was included in the list of court interpreters in Thessaloniki for Bulgarian, Serbian and Yugoslavian (!), but for a decade was called to interpret into and from Albanian in many cases involving Albanians as witnesses or accused, because “she happened to be at the Court House at all times and provided her services without delays or discontent” and there was no other interpreter available. This shocking fact came to light in 2001, and the interpreter was tried but acquitted of all charges. As the decision states: “The accused knows very little English which, however, combined with her knowledge of Bulgarian, Serbian and Turkish, allows her to fulfill her duty, that is to interpret from Albanian into Greek”. The second case concerned a 58-year-old Bulgarian homeless shepherd who came to Thessaloniki to find a better future but was arrested a few days after his arrival while waiting outside a church charity for a meal. When his documents were examined, the police realised that an arrest warrant was pending against him, so he was led to prison where he stayed for

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4 In an interview I had with a District Attorney in Thessaloniki, I was informed that there are “interpreters” who stay in the Court House from early in the morning until six o’clock in the afternoon every day in order to be available.
eight months, without knowing why he was held. The mistake was revealed when he was led to court, where a more detailed examination of his documents proved that he was not the person in the arrest warrant. As we read in a daily local newspaper dated 29 September 2009 “when the interpreter of the 58-year-old alien interpreted the words of the judge, the shepherd from Bulgaria burst into tears and in body language ‘blessed’ the members of the court. His dream for a better life in Greece, which had finally turned into a real nightmare, was over...”.

3. Health care and other sectors

In May and June 2011, the Ministry of the Interior, Decentralisation and E-Government, the European Fund for the integration of third country nationals, and the European Union co-funded a programme for the use of intercultural mediators in 21 major hospitals in Athens and Thessaloniki (75% funded by EU sources and 25% by national sources). The programme was implemented by the National School of Public Health and the private Vocational Training Centre DIASTASI; it involved 25 nationalities and 35 languages and dialects. As the electronic periodical of DIASTASI informs us, 109 “intercultural mediators” were deployed “in order to offer – on a daily basis – specialised intermediation services to third country nationals and to the administrative and health staff of hospitals. This shapes the necessary conditions so that hospital staff better understand the needs of immigrants and, therefore, provide health services successfully and without discriminations” (DIASTASI 2011b: 1). The same Vocational Training Centre also gives scant information about the training provided to these mediators on its website under the title “‘Intercultural Mediation’ Programme in Select Hospitals in the Regions of Athens and Thessaloniki”: “For the perfect preparation of the Intercultural Mediators, so that they fully meet the needs and demands enforced by the provision of efficient Intercultural Mediation services in the Health Sector, appropriate vocational training seminars will be organised focusing on the following main thematic units: Health & Disease, Intercultural Mediation, Networking, Mediator’s Tasks & Code of Ethics. The seminars aim at upgrading and enriching knowledge for the better management of the particular features of immigrants and the faster settlement of their problems, within a climate of cooperation” (DIASTASI 2011a). As a number of intercultural mediators informed me, the training lasted one week, because of the limited time available; it is doubtful, therefore, whether the interpreters were adequately prepared for the task at hand. Moreover, during their employment in the hospitals, there was no provision for a record of the languages used, which means that the state does

5 Dr Ioannidi-Kapolou, head of the programme, mentions 21 out of the 25 nationalities of the programme in her contribution in the electronic periodical of the Vocational Centre: Albania, Russia, Ukraine, Georgia, Moldova, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Iran, Armenia, Syria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Philippines, Nigeria, Kenya, Sudan, Sierra Leone, Seychelles, South Africa. She also mentions the following languages/dialects: Albanian, Russian, Ukrainian, Georgian, Serbian, Croatian, Romanian, English, French, French Creole, German, Italian, Spanish, Pidgin English, Patwa English, Creole English (in countries of Africa), Arabian, Afrikaans (S. Africa).
not know the real needs for languages; this information could have supported a more efficient and better targeted provision of services when a similar programme is implemented again. Also, there has not been any assessment of the service, either by the users of the services (patients and hospitals) or by the interpreters themselves. Only through a process of assessment can these services become truly helpful and efficient.

The Ministry and the European Fund have announced a second similar programme to be implemented in 2012; the programme will employ sixty mediators in fifteen hospitals for a period of six months. Another programme announced is “Intercultural Mediation’ for the support of access to housing and social services”; the programme involves the employment of fifteen mediators in ten local and regional structures for a period of six months.

4. Community Interpreter training

The Department of Social Integration of the General Secretariat for Immigration and Social Integration at the Ministry of the Interior has set up “Training Programmes for Intercultural Mediators”. These programmes ran in 2007 and 2008 and were implemented by two private Vocational Training Centres: Olympiaki Ekpaideftiki and Demetra KEE. In the first period, there were two programmes, 100 hours each, focusing on the following thematic units: a. Characteristic phenomena of intercultural societies – principles of interculturalism; b. The image of the “alien” in Greece and information on the target groups; c. Institutional and legal issues – Provided services by public and private bodies, communication with bodies and use of services; d. Psychosocial needs of aliens and support methods; e. Communication and negotiation techniques. In the second period, the first Centre provided 80 hours of training which focused on the following thematic units: a. The concept of the cultural and the intercultural. The contemporary social-national field and multicultural dynamics; b. Intercultural approach and social consultation. Management models; c. Theory and practice of consultative intervention in intercultural consultation; d. Greek legislative and institutional framework; e. Communication principles; f. Development of personal skills. The programme trained 50 Greeks and immigrants (preferably aged 22-35). The second Centre implemented 12 Programmes for the Training of Intercultural Mediators in Athens, Thessaloniki, Larisa and Patras intended for Greeks or immigrants aged between 22-50. The thematic units of the programme in Athens and Thessaloniki included the following: a. Introduction to cultural specificities in health issues; b. Interpreting modes and techniques; c. Consultation and career guidance. In Larisa we had only the second and third thematic units, while in Patras the first and second thematic units. The programme was funded by the European Fund for the Integration of Third Country Nationals and the Ministry of the Interior. 50 people were trained in 2007 and 250 people in 2008. As the head of the Directorate of Social Integration of the Secretariat for Immigration Policy and Social Integration in the Ministry of the Interior told me, emphasis was not so much on interpreting as in the part of acknowledging and exploring otherness, as well as on overcoming...
intercultural obstacles even when there is a limited knowledge of the language. The Ministry was not satisfied with these programmes, because there was no provision for the deployment of these people in various public services. As the Ministry wanted to connect training with the provision of actual services, the next training programme focused on interpreting services in the health sector and some of the people who attended these programmes were later employed for a two-month period as intercultural mediators in hospitals in the programme mentioned above.

There are no programmes on community interpreting in Greek universities. The only relevant School in Greece, the School of Foreign Languages, Translation and Interpreting of the Ionian University, does not offer a Community Interpreting Course, either at undergraduate or postgraduate level. The only MA in Interpreting offered in Greece is an interdepartmental MA programme on Conference Interpreting at the Faculty of Philosophy of the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki; the languages it supports are English, French, German, Italian and Spanish and it involves the Schools of English, French, German, Italian, and the School of Greek Philology. This programme does not include a module on community interpreting.

5. Conclusion

Faced with an increasing inflow of immigrants, the Greek government has been groping with putting into place the necessary infrastructure for their integration, pressed by international organisations and conventions. However, this infrastructure has not been very effective in improving the treatment of immigrants by the state. As Chrysa Chatzi has noted in a paper entitled “The foreigner as subject of rights in Greek legal order”: “The contemptuous attitude of public bodies toward the foreigner as user of public services reflects a more general attitude of lack of respect for his/her dignity. Foreigners are not treated as subjects of rights but as objects of contradictory regulations, whose positive content does not always correspond to improvements in reality” (Chatzi 2004: 251).

As we can gather from the cases of interpreter use in a number of state services, there have been some positive steps in recent years, because of available EU funding. However, these steps seem fragmented and suspended in mid air, in terms of quality, training and assessment. All these issues are interconnected; unless we improve the assessment process for all programmes and training, quality cannot improve. Unless the state provides for assessment tools, there cannot be a real improvement of these services or a substantial and targeted utilisation of public service interpreting.


Hellenic Police (2011) Comparative table of illegal immigrants arrested by the Hellenic police and coast guard for illegal entry or residence: Year 2010,

