

**Neutral intermediaries, gatekeepers, or intercultural mediators? Interpreters’
stance-taking in institutional talk**

As bilinguals in intercultural interactions, interpreters in legal, governmental, or medical settings mediate between participants who speak different languages, come from different cultural backgrounds, and have different degrees of familiarity with the institutional setting. While interpreters are expected to act as neutral intermediaries in such interactions, they do need to negotiate their own stances towards the other participants, towards the wider context of cultural and linguistic contact, and towards the institution in which the interaction takes place. Drawing on data from professional court interpreters in New York City and from informal interpreters in doctor-patient interactions in Hamburg, this paper explores situations of conflict or tension, where interpreters come to play a part in the resolution of disputes. In such situations, they may be called upon to do more than “just translating,” in order to resolve differences in the other participants’ cultural expectations or knowledge of institutional practices.

The analysis of relevant transcript excerpts investigates how interpreters accomplish these tasks interactionally, focusing in particular on reported speech and on the marking of evidentiality, two phenomena which relate strongly to stance-taking and to the interpreter’s participation status. In all cases, the interpreters are native speakers of the minority languages, but there is considerable variation in the stances that they take, with profound implications for the other participants and the interaction between them.

The analysis reveals that interpreters are rarely truly “neutral”, as their attempts to mediate across cultural differences are generally in one direction only. Interpreters who are employed by the institution (i.e. a court or a hospital) may attempt to increase the other language user’s understanding of institutional practices and of cultural norms of the host society, but are often unwilling to explain the minority speaker’s perspective to institutional representatives, a practice that is also explicitly discouraged in institutional norms for court interpreting. By contrast, interpreters who come to the interaction as family members or acquaintances of a minority language speaker often seek to convey this perspective to institutional representatives. However, they often do not have sufficient understanding of the institutional practices to be able to explain these to their fellow minority language speakers. However, intercultural communication is a two-way street, depending on a mutual willingness to establish common ground and accommodate to the other’s communicative behavior. Where interpreters are unable or unwilling to facilitate such accommodation and to mediate between the other participants, this may lead to misunderstandings and communicative breakdown. Most importantly, minority language speakers may not be able to make themselves heard in such intercultural interaction.