

Public Service Interpreting in Greece: Professionalization Challenges and Candidate Profiles for the National Interpreter Registry

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Summary. In response to the increasing demand for professional interpreters, the Greek Ministry of Migration and Asylum, in collaboration with the Ionian University's Department of Foreign Languages, Translation, and Interpreting, launched an initiative to establish a national registry of accredited public service interpreters. This paper examines the challenges of professionalizing the field by drawing on insights from two questionnaire-based surveys conducted as part of the project: one assessing interpreter-mediated interactions from the perspective of asylum officers, and another analyzing the profiles of candidates who participated in the registry's entry-level exams.

The first survey, which collected responses from 16 public officers at the Greek Asylum Service, revealed persistent issues, including reliance on untrained interpreters, frequent breaches of ethical standards, inconsistencies in professional conduct, and a lack of trust between stakeholders. The second survey examined the profiles of 61 interpreter candidates, highlighting their diverse linguistic backgrounds, varying levels of Greek proficiency, and limited formal training in interpreting. Despite previous work experience, many candidates failed the entry exams. By correlating the findings from both surveys, this paper identifies systemic gaps in the professionalization of public service interpreting in Greece and underscores the urgent need for targeted reforms.

Keywords. Public Service Interpreting, registry of interpreters, professionalization, candidate profiles, Greece.

La interpretación en los servicios públicos en Grecia: retos de profesionalización y perfiles de los candidatos para el Registro Nacional de Intérpretes

Resumen. En respuesta a la creciente demanda de intérpretes profesionales, el Ministerio de Migración y Asilo de Grecia, en colaboración con el Departamento de Lenguas Extranjeras, Traducción e Interpretación de la Universidad Jónica, decidió poner en marcha una iniciativa para establecer un registro nacional de intérpretes de los servicios públicos acreditados. Este artículo analiza los desafíos de la profesionalización del sector a partir de los hallazgos de dos encuestas basadas en cuestionarios realizadas en el marco del proyecto: una que evalúa las interacciones mediadas por intérpretes desde la perspectiva de los funcionarios de asilo y otra que analiza los perfiles de los candidatos que participaron en los exámenes de acceso al registro.

La primera encuesta, que recopiló respuestas de 16 funcionarios del Servicio de Asilo de Grecia, reveló problemas persistentes, como la dependencia de intérpretes no formados, frecuentes infracciones de las normas éticas, inconsistencias en la conducta profesional y una falta de confianza entre los actores involucrados. La segunda encuesta examinó los perfiles de 61 candidatos a intérprete, destacando su diversidad lingüística, los distintos niveles de dominio del griego y la escasa formación formal en interpretación. A pesar de su experiencia laboral previa, muchos candidatos no superaron los exámenes de acceso. Al correlacionar los resultados de ambas encuestas, este estudio identifica deficiencias sistémicas

en la profesionalización de la interpretación en los servicios públicos en Grecia y subraya la necesidad urgente de reformas específicas.

Palabras clave: interpretación en los servicios públicos, registro de intérpretes, profesionalización, perfiles de candidatos, Grecia.

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1. Introduction

The role of interpretation services in Greece's asylum system has become increasingly critical amid the ongoing refugee and migration crisis. Although migration flows temporarily declined during the COVID-19 pandemic, asylum applications surged afterward, rising from 37,337 in 2022 to 64,213 in 2023 – an increase of approximately 72% (Ministry of Migration and Asylum 2024: 6). This sharp rise, coupled with a continuous influx of migrants and refugees, has placed significant strain on Greece's asylum infrastructure and highlighted the urgent need for skilled, professional interpreters. However, this need remains largely unmet due to challenges such as the accommodation of diverse linguistic groups, the rarity and volatility of certain languages, and the absence of standardized interpreter qualifications. These factors result in considerable gaps in professional interpretation, with services often delivered by untrained, unqualified bilinguals – such as family members, friends, staff, or, as described by Cecilia Wadensjö and Laura Gavioli (2023: 6), “anyone-translating-please”.

In response, the Greek Ministry of Migration and Asylum launched the project *Enhancing and Building National Capacity for Migration and Asylum Strategic Planning*, running from May 2023 to April 2024. Funded by the European Economic Area (EEA) Financial Mechanism 2014–2021 and developed in collaboration with the Ionian University's Department of Foreign Languages, Translation, and Interpreting, the project aimed to establish a national registry of accredited interpreters. According to the Ministerial Decision that enacted the project, the registry seeks to enhance the efficiency, accessibility, and quality of interpretation services not only in asylum procedures but also across Greece's public sector, which had previously relied heavily on external providers (YA 8000/20/76/5-οστ´/01-12-2021: 4). The Ionian University was tasked with designing a tiered classification system for the registry, incorporating global best practices while adapting them to Greece's specific needs.

Within this framework, the university's research team developed a structure categorizing interpreters into four levels, based on two main criteria: educational qualifications and professional experience. To qualify specifically for the entry level of the registry, candidates were required to complete an accreditation and training process, which began with a rigorous language proficiency test in Greek and a second language. During the pilot phase, this testing was available in seven languages: Arabic, Kurmanji, Sorani, Farsi, Dari, Urdu, and Punjabi. Candidates who passed the language test then participated in a specialized training seminar covering professional standards, ethical considerations, and interpreter responsibilities.

Drawing on empirical data collected during the pilot phase, this paper examines the main challenges in professionalizing public service interpreting in Greece, linking them with the professional profiles of candidates who participated in the entry-level exams. The analysis is based on two questionnaire-based surveys: the first, a small-scale survey targeting public officers at the Greek Asylum Service to identify operational challenges and needs; and the second, a survey distributed to interpreter candidates, gathering information on their linguistic competencies, professional backgrounds, and training experiences. By synthesizing these findings, this study identifies systemic gaps in professionalization and emphasizes the urgent need for targeted reforms to ensure high-quality interpretation services in Greece.

2. Profession, professionalization and professionalism: a theoretical overview

In sociological research, the concepts of *profession*, *professionalization* and *professionalism* are used to explain the social standing and development of various occupations. A *profession* is commonly defined as “any type of work that needs special training or a particular skill, often one that is respected because it involves a high level of education” (Cambridge English Dictionary n.d.). However, the term remains debated among sociologists. Some view it to categorize high-status occupations, where standards of expertise and ethics are clearly defined. Others argue that the term is subjective, shaped by internal perspectives and influenced by descriptive elements as well as embedded value or moral judgments (Grbić 2015: 322).

Sociologists have developed various models to explain how an occupation gains recognition as a profession – a process known as professionalization. Despite differing approaches, these models generally fall into two main frameworks. The first, *trait theory*, suggests that an occupation attains professional status only if it meets specific predefined criteria. Applied to public service interpreting, these include clearly defined roles, formal training, a dedicated body of knowledge, and a philosophy centered on serving the community, along with establishing a professional association, a code of ethics, and a certification system to ensure service quality (see Roberts 1997: 20–24, Ozolins 2000: 25, Pöchhacker 2000: 42–66, Rudvin 2007: 65–66).

Other scholars, on the other hand, criticize *trait theory* for oversimplifying the concept of a profession, reducing it to a static checklist. In response, they have proposed a more flexible model viewing professions as part of an evolving social process shaped by the interactions of various stakeholders, such as professional associations, educational institutions, and government regulators. This approach positions occupations on

a spectrum, ranging from *full professions* at one end to *semi-professions* in the middle and *non-professions* at the other. Movement along this spectrum reflects the dynamic process of *professionalization* as an occupation progresses or *de-professionalization* as it potentially regresses (Grbić 2015: 322). An influential example of this approach is Tseng's model (1992), developed in his unpublished master's thesis on the development of conference interpreting in Taiwan. Tseng conceptualized professionalization as a continuum of four successive phases, from *market disorder* to *full professional autonomy* (Pöchhacker 2004: 87).

In a similar vein, Hanna Skaaden (2016, 2023) employs a sociological model that conceptualizes professionalization as a process integrating both performative and organizational aspects. The performative aspect defines a profession through specific qualities of practice, characterizing a *professional* as someone who provides a service, uses specialized expertise, solves skill-intensive problems, applies skills in complex, non-standardized situations, and exercises judgment and discretion. While public service interpreting meets these performative criteria, it falls short in terms of the organizational aspect. This aspect refers to the measures societies must adopt to license and mandate individuals to carry out specific societal tasks, thereby ensuring the consistent delivery of high-quality services. Skaaden (2016: 61) identifies formal education in interpreting as the crucial measure societies must implement to ensure interpreting services are provided by trusted, qualified professionals who meet the necessary standards.

Professional trust, along with the related concept of trustworthiness, is central to Skaaden's model. As the author explains, individuals engage professionals because they trust in their expertise, which is verified and endorsed through society's license and mandate. Trust is thus tied to "the organizational aspect of professions through society's measures for assigning 'license and mandate' to individuals who conduct a specific task according to certain standards" (Skaaden 2016: 59). Research shows that an interpreter's personal character and level of trustworthiness significantly influence people's perceptions of what constitutes a good interpreter (Edwards et al. 2005). Trust is also often challenged by various role prescriptions and conflicting role expectations. For instance, asylum seekers may perceive interpreters as *traitors* or *collaborators* with host country authorities on one hand, or as *advocates* and *trusted persons* on the other. Similarly, state officials may view them as their spokespersons and aides or mistrust them as aligned with minority language speakers (Pöllabauer 2015: 208, Skaaden 2016: 60).

The concepts of professionalization and trust discussed above are closely intertwined with the notion of professionalism. Professionalism refers to how practitioners articulate their shared social objectives within a distinct work culture, which encompasses their ideologies, value systems, ethical standards, and modes of interaction. As such, professionalism includes intrapersonal, interpersonal, and public dimensions (Grbić 2015: 323). Robin Setton and Andrew Dawrant (2016) define professionalism as a combination of technical competence and a commitment to delivering optimal service within established standards. They identify three core components: mastery of skills, adherence to ethical standards, and an understanding of the profession's social and practical dimension (Setton & Dawrant 2016: 360 ff.). The latter includes the interpreter's ability to embody key qualities of effective professional behavior, such as courtesy, a polished appearance, adaptability, reliability, and the ability to foster trust and transparency through thoughtful interaction, respect for personal boundaries (proxemics), and effective collaboration (Setton & Dawrant 2016: 360-361, 397. See also Albl-Mikasa 2012: 86-87, Feldweg 1996: 342-348, Gentile et al. 1996: 67, and Hebenstreit et al. 2017: 76).

Building on these theoretical foundations, the concept of a *professional public service interpreter* can be understood through an integrated framework comprising performative, organizational, and interpersonal dimensions. Performatively, professional interpreters are expected to demonstrate a high level of linguistic proficiency and interpreting competence, enabling them to mediate across languages and cultures in complex, non-standardized settings. This involves not only technical skills but also the ability to exercise professional judgment in dynamic and high-stakes interactions. Organizationally, professionalism is sustained through societal structures that formally recognize and regulate interpreting work. These include established education pathways, certification systems, and codes of ethics that collectively ensure interpreters are competent, accountable, and trustworthy. Interpersonally, professionalism is reflected in the interpreter's adherence to behavioral and ethical standards that support maintaining clearly defined professional boundaries, promoting transparency, and fostering trust with all parties involved. This paper uses these standards to evaluate the current public service interpreting landscape in Greece and examines how gaps in training, ethics, and regulation hinder the transition toward full professionalization.

3. Research methodology

Guided by the theoretical framework outlined above, this chapter presents the methodological approach adopted in the two field studies conducted as part of the project described in the introduction. The first study explored the perspectives of public officers involved in asylum procedures. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire developed by the research team at the Ionian University's Department of Foreign Languages, Translation, and Interpreting. The questionnaire aimed to capture the views of asylum officers working with refugees and migrants on the effectiveness and quality of interpreting services. It consisted of 31 questions, most of which were closed-ended, along with one open-ended question inviting suggestions for improving interpreter-mediated encounters. This mixed-format approach sought to balance the collection of quantitative data with opportunities for qualitative elaboration, while minimizing the time burden on busy public service staff.

The development of the questionnaire was informed by two key studies in the field of public service interpreting. The first is a survey-based study presented in Sandra Hale's seminal work, *Community*

Interpreting (2007). The study, conducted with legal and medical professionals in Sydney, Australia, sought to capture their perspectives on the use of interpreters within their respective professional settings, focusing on perceptions of interpreter professionalism, performance, working conditions, and overall satisfaction with interpreter-mediated encounters (Hale 2007: 146-156). The second is the EU-funded CO-Minor-IN/QUEST project (Cooperation in Interpreter-Mediated Questioning of Minors), which aimed to enhance the quality and consistency of interpreter-mediated interviews with children in criminal proceedings. This project brought together experts from six EU countries (Belgium, France, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom) and adopted a multidisciplinary approach, involving field research with interpreters, legal professionals, psychologists, and child support workers (Balogh & Salaets 2015).

Drawing on insights from these studies, the questionnaire used in the Greek context was divided into five thematic sections. The first focused on respondent profiles, including institutional affiliation, professional experience, relevant training in intercultural or interpreter-mediated communication, work with vulnerable groups, and basic demographic data. The second section examined the state of language mediation services, such as the frequency and necessity of interpreter involvement, commonly required languages, and the availability of trained interpreters. The third section addressed collaboration with interpreters, covering briefing and debriefing practices, feedback, psychological support, and employment status. The fourth section explored professional practices, including interpreting modes, the use of relay interpreting, and aspects of interpreter conduct such as first-person speech, impartiality, and punctuality. Finally, the fifth section investigated perceptions of the interpreter's role, asking respondents to evaluate qualifications, levels of trust or mistrust, interpreter duties, instances of replacement, and overall service quality.

To facilitate completion and reduce the risk of misinterpretation, the survey featured a linear structure and employed accessible language. To minimize potential biases such as leading questions or order effects, the wording and sequencing were carefully reviewed by the research team to ensure neutrality, clarity, and internal consistency. The questionnaire was piloted internally and reviewed by academic staff prior to distribution.

For dissemination, the Ministry of Migration and Asylum distributed the questionnaire electronically via Google Forms to 25 designated departmental email addresses of relevant public agencies, including the Asylum Service, the Reception and Identification Service, and the Appeals Authority. These contacts were requested to circulate the questionnaire internally among their staff. Two rounds of dissemination were carried out to maximize participation: the first in February and the second in early March 2023. The questionnaire remained open for two months.

Participation in the survey was voluntary. Respondents were informed about the purpose of the study through an introductory text and were required to tick a box confirming that they had understood the information and consented to participate before proceeding with the questionnaire. No personally identifiable information was collected, ensuring full anonymity and confidentiality. Although the sample size was limited to 16 complete responses, the data offer valuable – albeit indicative – insights into institutional perspectives on interpreter-mediated communication. Of the 16 respondents, 10 identified as female and 6 as male. Regarding professional experience in asylum-related services, 10 reported having five to ten years, 5 one to five years, and 1 ten to twenty years. In terms of age, 8 were between 41 and 54 years old, 7 between 30 and 40, and 1 between 55 and 65.

The second field study focused on the candidates who applied for admission to Greece's National Registry of Public Service Interpreters. The aim was to gain insight into the linguistic, educational, and professional profiles of individuals seeking to become accredited public service interpreters, as well as to assess their performance under standardized testing conditions. The dataset analyzed in this study was derived from a structured questionnaire, which was distributed in paper form to all candidates who participated in the entry-level examinations for the registry. The questionnaire was administered immediately after the completion of the written portion of the exam, enabling candidates to reflect on their language proficiency, educational background, and interpreting experience.

More specifically, the questionnaire was structured around five thematic areas. The first section collected demographic information, including gender, year and place of birth, nationality, arrival date in Greece, and current residence status. The second section focused on language proficiency, asking participants to list up to four languages and rate their speaking and writing skills on a scale from basic knowledge to native fluency. The third section addressed education and professional background, covering the highest level of education attained, country of study, and any participation in interpreter training programs. The fourth section explored experience with interpretation, including previous and current occupations, and whether the respondent had worked as an interpreter or cultural mediator. For those with experience, follow-up questions examined duration, language combinations, types of organizations, and working contexts. The final section gathered respondents' opinions on the examination, including perceived difficulty, clarity of the questions, and any areas of confusion. An open-ended prompt allowed for additional comments or feedback.

The questionnaire included both quantitative and qualitative questions and was designed by the research team at Ionian University, in collaboration with the Greek Ministry of Migration and Asylum, to align with the project's objectives and ethical standards. Participation in the survey was voluntary, and all individuals were informed of the academic purpose of the research and the confidentiality of their responses. Informed consent was obtained prior to submission by ticking a designated box on the paper form. To protect anonymity, no names or identifying details were collected. Responses were coded numerically and stored securely in a location accessible only to the research team. The study adhered to ethical research standards and received approval from the relevant ethics committee.

A total of 61 candidates completed the survey. Among the respondents, 19 identified as female, 41 as male, and 1 did not specify a gender. In terms of age distribution, 31 participants were between 41 and 54 years old, 14 between 30 and 40, 8 between 18 and 29, 7 between 55 and 65, and 1 was aged 66 or above. Regarding place of birth, the top six countries were Pakistan, Egypt, Iran, Greece, Afghanistan, and Syria. Among the participants, 33 had been living in Greece for 0-25 years, 14 for 26-35 years, and 5 for over 35 years, while 9 did not state their year of arrival.

In addition to survey responses, the study examined candidates' performance on the official entry exams. These results were made available to the research team through institutional collaboration with the Ministry of Migration and Asylum and Ionian University, both of which were involved in the project. Only aggregated, anonymized data were used in the analysis. The research team did not have access to personal identifiers, ensuring that individual exam scores could not be traced back to specific candidates. This procedure aligned with data protection policies and ethical research practices governing studies conducted within public institutions. Formal approval was obtained through the university's internal ethics protocols, and all procedures conformed to applicable confidentiality guidelines.

4. Assessing Professionalization: Insights from the Asylum Officers

Although not experts in Interpreting Studies, asylum officers represent a critical third party – the most powerful one – in the triadic communication dynamic (cf. Pöllabauer 2005: 74-75). As institutional users of interpreting services, they are uniquely positioned to offer valuable, experience-based insights into how interpreter-mediated encounters unfold in practice. Because of their regular engagement with interpreters in high-stakes, real-time interactions, officers are well-placed to observe key aspects of interpreter performance, particularly those related to professional conduct, behavior, and communication outcomes. For instance, they can assess whether communication appears effective overall – whether their questions are clearly conveyed to applicants and whether the applicants' responses are relayed accurately. While they cannot assess linguistic fidelity in a technical sense, as they do not speak the applicants' languages, they may still detect signs of breakdowns, hesitation, summarization, or omissions, especially when these disrupt procedural flow or cause confusion. Officers can also evaluate observable elements of professional behavior, including punctuality, preparedness, respectfulness, and adherence to role boundaries. Their perceptions of trust and neutrality are equally important; repeated instances of interpreters acting as advocates or gatekeepers may erode institutional confidence and raise ethical concerns (cf. Hale 2007: 147-148).

This institutional perspective is echoed across various national contexts, where similar concerns about interpreter qualifications and trust have been widely documented. Research from multiple countries points to a recurring reliance on untrained or insufficiently trained bilinguals, particularly in low-demand or languages of lesser diffusion. For example, De Wilde et al. (2021) report that volunteer interpreters are routinely used in Belgium, raising concerns about accuracy and impartiality. In France, Navarro (2024) highlights comparable issues involving under-resourced language services and a frequent reliance on ad hoc recruitment strategies. Leanza et al. (2024) further substantiate these concerns in the Canadian context, where healthcare professionals during the COVID-19 pandemic often depended on untrained interpreters to facilitate remote consultations. Similarly, Vargas-Urpi (2016), in a study of Chinese-Catalan/Spanish interpreters in Spain, notes that the interpreters in her sample lacked formal training in interpreting, resulting in several challenges such as difficulty managing specialized terminology, uncertainty about their professional role, and limited strategies for handling cultural and ethical complexities. Reports from the European Union Agency for Asylum (EASO 2020, EUAA 2022) further emphasize persistent deficiencies in interpreter training, language proficiency, accuracy and overall service quality across several EU member states, including Ireland and Sweden. Hale (2007: 146 ff.) also shows how legal and medical professionals in Australia express mistrust when interpreters compromise neutrality, edit utterances, or take on expanded roles.

These examples highlight systemic challenges in public service interpreting worldwide. Against this backdrop, the current section examines whether similar concerns are reflected in the Greek context. While the responses of Greek asylum officers do not constitute expert evaluations of interpreting quality – and must be interpreted cautiously due to the survey's small sample size – they may nonetheless reveal patterns that resonate with international findings. Moreover, when asked whether they had received any training on communicating via an interpreter, 68.8% of surveyed Greek officers reported attending some form of specialized training or orientation, primarily through short, ad hoc courses organized by NGOs. This may suggest a growing, if partial, awareness of interpreting dynamics. Building on this context, the section presents key findings from the national survey, focusing specifically on officers' experiences and perceptions of interpreters' professional behavior. The results are organized around three central themes: the degree of professionalization within the sector, interpreter professionalism, and trust-related challenges.

Professionalization Degree

The first question in this section aimed to assess whether interpreters employed by the Greek Asylum Service are consistently trained professionals or if, at times, untrained or non-professional interpreters are also engaged. Survey results indicated that 75% of respondents believed interpreters were generally professionally trained. However, 25% noted that, on occasion, individuals without interpreting training are assigned to this role. When asked who typically fills the interpreter role in such cases, respondents identified several ad hoc solutions, including volunteers (50%), friends or family members of the beneficiary (31.25%), and, in some cases, random fellow nationals with no formal affiliation (18.75%).

To further investigate factors affecting professionalization, the questionnaire explored specific challenges asylum officers encounter in interpreter-mediated interactions. Respondents evaluated several predefined criteria spanning translational, linguistic, paralinguistic, and ethical dimensions, identifying those they found most relevant. Analysis of the responses revealed language barriers as a significant concern, with 81.3% reporting issues such as limited Greek proficiency or difficulties understanding beneficiaries' native languages. Additionally, 56.3% of respondents highlighted concerns related to interpreters' professional and ethical conduct, particularly neutrality and cooperativeness, while 50% cited communication skills as a critical factor affecting the quality of interpreting services. Gender dynamics were noted by 31.3% of respondents as influencing interactions, whereas cultural understanding (6.3%) and considerations of age or religion were rarely mentioned as primary concerns.

Professionalism and professional role

This section explores Greek Asylum Service officers' perceptions of the professional behavior and responsibilities of the interpreters they work with. Officers were first asked to evaluate interpreters' professional practices, selecting from options such as note-taking, dictionary use, direct speech, introductions, punctuality, impartiality, and asking clarifying questions. Their responses highlight both adherence to and notable lapses in key professional practices among interpreters. While the majority (87.5%) are reported to maintain impartiality and seek clarification when needed, concerns remain that 12.5% may not consistently uphold these critical standards of neutrality and accuracy. Additionally, although 62.5% of interpreters are reported as punctual, nearly 40% are not, potentially undermining service reliability. Furthermore, only 75% consistently introduce themselves to beneficiaries, meaning a quarter may neglect this fundamental step to establish trust and transparency. Just over half (62.5%) take notes during meetings, and only 56.3% use direct, first-person speech – a fundamental practice – suggesting that 43.7% may use methods that could reduce clarity or lead to misunderstandings. Notably, only 37.5% of interpreters consult dictionaries when needed, raising concerns about potential gaps in linguistic accuracy.

The final question in this section examines the duties and responsibilities interpreters are expected to fulfill within their profession. The survey revealed a concerning trend in the roles assigned to interpreters within the Greek Asylum Service, highlighting a misalignment between their core responsibilities and additional tasks they are sometimes asked to perform. For example, 56.3% of officers reported that interpreters assist beneficiaries in completing documents, 37.5% indicated that interpreters help schedule meetings, and 18.8% mentioned that interpreters accompany beneficiaries to appointments. While these activities may benefit beneficiaries, they extend beyond an interpreter's traditional scope and risk blurring professional boundaries, potentially compromising neutrality and objectivity. Conversely, tasks more directly related with the interpreter's core responsibilities were less frequently reported. Only 18.8% of respondents mentioned interpreters engaging in cultural mediation by explaining cultural differences, and just 6.3% noted that interpreters provide sight translations of written documents – two activities that are integral to their professional role.

Reasons for mistrust and replacement

The final section of the study examined the reasons for mistrust and the replacement of interpreters within the Greek Asylum Service. When asked if they fully trust interpreters, only 50% of asylum officers expressed complete confidence, revealing a notable trust gap. To explore the causes of this mistrust, officers evaluated several potential issues. The most frequently cited concern, reported by 75% of respondents, was interpreters engaging in side-conversations with applicants – a behavior perceived as undermining neutrality and transparency. Additionally, 37.5% of officers noted that interpreters do not consistently render statements fully and accurately, raising significant concerns about the reliability of communication. Factors contributing to mistrust also included interpreters' language skills. Specifically, 31.3% of officers reported that interpreters sometimes lacked full comprehension of the applicant's language, while another 31.3% highlighted limited proficiency in Greek, affecting interpreters' understanding of officers' statements. Similarly, 31.3% of officers felt that interpreters occasionally interfered in conversations by expressing personal opinions or judgments, while 12.5% believed interpreters demonstrated partiality by favoring the applicant's side.

When asked if they had ever requested an interpreter's replacement, a substantial majority (81.3%) of officers responded affirmatively, indicating how frequently mistrust escalates to action. The reasons for replacement requests were categorized into translational, behavioral, and ethical issues. Behavioral concerns were prominent, with 37.5% of respondents citing unprofessional conduct, including impoliteness, sarcasm, unwarranted interference, poor punctuality, and hostile or judgmental attitudes – all behaviors that erode trust and hinder effective communication. Additionally, 25% of officers reported inadequate interpreting skills, such as insufficient accuracy, and another 25% cited interpreters' limited understanding of the applicant's language. Ethical concerns were also raised, with 12.5% of respondents reporting issues related to a lack of impartiality.

5. Profiling the candidates for Greece's National Registry of Interpreters

This section examines the profiles of candidates who participated in the entry exams for Greece's national registry of public service interpreters, drawing on data from the second survey. It offers relevant insights into their language proficiency, educational background, professional experience, and exam performance.

Language proficiency

Based on self-assessments from the 61 candidates who participated in the entry exams, this section presents detailed data on their language competence and proficiency levels in both Greek and their selected language (referred to here as “language A”) across two skill categories: oral and written proficiency. More specifically, candidates were asked to evaluate their speaking and writing skills in both Greek and their language A on a scale from 1 to 6, with each level corresponding to a specific proficiency: (1) *Basic knowledge*, (2) *Moderate knowledge*, (3) *Good knowledge*, (4) *Very good knowledge*, (5) *Excellent knowledge*, and (6) *Native language*.

Regarding their proficiency in language A, most candidates demonstrated a high level of proficiency, with 41 respondents (67%) rating their spoken skills and 35 (57%) rating their written skills as native level, indicating strong linguistic competence. In addition to those at the native level, a smaller group showed high proficiency, with 8 candidates (13%) rating their spoken skills and 7 (11%) their written skills at level 5 (*Excellent knowledge*). Among the remaining respondents, very few rated themselves at lower proficiency levels (1 to 4) in their chosen language. For example, only one candidate rated their oral proficiency as level 2 (*Moderate knowledge*), while four candidates rated their written proficiency at level 1 (*Basic knowledge*).

On the other hand, candidates' proficiency in Greek is notably lower than in language A. Only 8 respondents (13.1%) rated their spoken Greek skills at the native level, while the majority demonstrated excellent (level 5) or very good (level 4) proficiency, with 31 respondents (50.8%) and 9 respondents (14.8%), respectively. A smaller portion, 8% of respondents, reported moderate to good proficiency (levels 2 and 3). Written proficiency in Greek follows a similar pattern. Only 12 respondents (20%) rated their written Greek skills at the native level, while nearly a third (19 respondents, 31%) rated them as excellent (level 5). Meanwhile, a notable portion (10 respondents, 16.4%) assessed their skills as good (level 3), and slightly fewer (8 respondents, 13%) selected very good (level 4). At the lower end, only small groups rated their written skills at lower levels (level 2 or below).

Educational background

To gain insight into the candidates' educational backgrounds, respondents were first asked to indicate their highest level of formal education, choosing from options that included primary education, secondary education, post-secondary education, tertiary education, postgraduate education, and other forms of education. The largest segment of respondents (19 out of 61, or approximately 31%) reported secondary education as their highest level completed, indicating an educational foundation that does not extend beyond high school. An almost equal portion (18 respondents, or 30%) reported holding a university degree, representing tertiary education. Additionally, eight candidates (13%) reported post-secondary (non-university) education beyond high school, typically encompassing vocational or technical training programs. Another eight candidates (13%) had completed postgraduate studies, indicating advanced academic training. Finally, a small number of respondents (3, or 5%) reported “Other studies”, likely referring to non-formal or alternative education paths, such as certificates, workshops, or training programs outside traditional education levels. Notably, five candidates (approximately 8%) did not provide information about their educational background.

After examining the candidates' general educational backgrounds, the next question aimed to explore whether they had received specialized training in interpreting. Among the 61 candidates who took the entry exams for Greece's registry of public service interpreters, a notable majority (43 candidates, or 70%) reported completing some form of interpreting education. Conversely, 13 candidates (21%) indicated no such studies, and 5 candidates (8%) did not respond. When asked to describe their training, most candidates referenced short-term seminars averaging around 60 hours, with some programs as brief as 30 hours and others extending up to 200 hours. These training sessions were primarily offered by various Greek and international NGOs, as well as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Notably, no candidates reported completing university-level education in interpreting.

Work experience

Following the examination of educational backgrounds, the next set of questions assessed candidates' professional experience in public service interpreting within Greece. When asked about their work experience, 50 respondents (82%) indicated they had worked or were currently working as public service interpreters, while 4 respondents (7%) reported no experience in the field. An additional 7 candidates (11%) did not respond. Among those with interpreting experience, candidates were further asked whether interpreting served as their primary occupation. Of the 50 experienced candidates, 37 (74%) confirmed that interpreting was their main profession, though some mentioned other concurrent jobs, such as translation, language teaching, warehouse work, construction, and mental health counseling. When asked if interpreting had been their profession prior to arriving in Greece, only one candidate responded affirmatively, combining interpreting with work in a warehouse.

In terms of the duration of their experience, candidates presented a wide range of professional backgrounds in public service interpreting. Among the 51 candidates, the largest group (24 individuals, nearly 40%) reported having between five and ten years of experience. Another 21% (13 individuals) had between one and five years of experience, while a smaller group (11 individuals, approximately 18%) had been interpreters for over a decade. Notably, 21% of the candidates (13 individuals) did not disclose the length of their interpreting experience.

Lastly, in response to questions about where they gained their experience, candidates highlighted a variety of public service sectors in which they have worked or are currently involved. These sectors include justice, healthcare, asylum and migration services, mobile support units, educational institutions, social services,

mental health support, and specialized services for unaccompanied minors. Most candidates reported that their interpreting assignments were conducted on behalf of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). This reliance on NGOs for interpreting services reflects a broader trend of public sector outsourcing, with state agencies frequently contracting NGOs to meet essential interpreting needs.

Exam Performance

The final segment of the analysis examines the candidates' performance in the entry exams for Greece's national registry of public service interpreters. Of the 61 candidates, 43 (70%) successfully met the exam standards, while the remaining 18 (30%) did not. A closer look at the 18 candidates who failed reveals that 11 (approximately 61%) are currently employed as interpreters. Among these 11 interpreters, 9 (82%) reported that interpreting is their main occupation and primary source of income, making it a central component of their professional lives. In terms of experience, 6 of these 11 unsuccessful candidates (55%) reported having less than five years of interpreting experience, 3 (27%) reported five to ten years, and 1 (9%) reported over ten years of experience. One individual (9%) did not disclose their length of experience. Regarding training, 6 of the 11 interpreters (55%) reported having completed a training seminar in interpreting, 4 (36%) indicated they had no training, and 1 did not respond to the question. Lastly, an analysis of language proficiency among these interpreters reveals high self-reported skill levels in their primary language. Of the 11 interpreters, 10 (91%) reported advanced oral proficiency, with 9 indicating native-level proficiency (level 6) and 1 reporting advanced proficiency (level 5). In Greek, 8 out of 11 interpreters (73%) reported at least advanced oral proficiency: 1 indicated native-level proficiency (level 6), while 7 reported advanced proficiency (level 5).

6. Discussion

The findings from the surveys described in the previous sections reveal significant challenges in public service interpreting in Greece. The first survey, focused on asylum officers' perspectives, identified various concerns about interpreters' professionalism, linguistic skills, role clarity, and ethical standards within the Greek Asylum Service. The findings align with those of the second survey, which explored the educational background, language proficiency, interpreting training, work experience, and exam performance of candidates for Greece's national registry of public service interpreters. Together, the surveys present an integrated perspective on the field's weaknesses and emphasize the urgent need for targeted reforms.

More specifically, the first study highlighted significant challenges in the professionalization and practice of public service interpreting within the Greek Asylum Service, exposing critical gaps in training, professionalism, and trust. While most interpreters reportedly have some training in interpreting, many unqualified individuals, such as volunteers or acquaintances of beneficiaries, are still engaged on an ad hoc basis, undermining professional standards. Key issues identified include limited proficiency in Greek and applicants' languages, inadequate interpreting skills, lapses in ethical conduct, and deviations from essential practices like punctuality, neutrality, accuracy, and the use of direct speech. Interpreters are often assigned tasks outside their professional roles, such as assisting with documentation or scheduling, further compromising impartiality and role clarity. The study also revealed a significant trust deficit: only half of the officers expressed full confidence in interpreters, and a notable majority reported requesting interpreter replacements due to concerns about unprofessional behavior, ethical breaches, insufficient language proficiency, and poor interpreting or conversation management skills. These challenges underscore an urgent need for clearer role definitions, enhanced training, and measures to build trust and professionalism within the sector.

However, the findings of the first survey must be interpreted with caution, given the limited sample size ($n = 16$), which restricts the generalizability of the results across the Greek Asylum Service. While the data provide useful indications, the small number of participants precludes robust conclusions regarding the overall quality and consistency of interpreter-mediated interactions. Moreover, although most asylum officers reported receiving training on interpreter-mediated communication, they are not necessarily equipped to evaluate interpreter performance using standardized professional or academic benchmarks. Their assessments are likely influenced by subjective perceptions, shaped by personal experiences, misconceptions about the interpreter's role, or limited familiarity with best practices in public service interpreting. These methodological constraints underscore the need for further empirical research based on larger, more representative samples and employing mixed-method approaches to triangulate and deepen the current insights. Nonetheless, despite these limitations, the survey offers valuable preliminary evidence regarding asylum officers' perceptions of interpreter professionalism and highlights key areas requiring targeted intervention.

The second survey revealed a diverse range of skills, backgrounds, and experiences among candidates for Greece's national registry of public service interpreters. While most candidates reported high proficiency in their working languages – self-assessing as native or near-native speakers in both speaking and writing skills – their Greek proficiency varied widely, with fewer achieving native-level fluency and most falling within intermediate to advanced levels. Educational backgrounds were equally varied, spanning secondary, post-secondary, and tertiary-level qualifications. Notably, none of the candidates had formal university-level training in interpreting. Instead, they mostly relied on short-term, NGO-sponsored seminars, in contrast to the field of conference interpreting, where formal academic pathways, including undergraduate studies in any discipline followed by postgraduate studies in interpreting, are the standard. Regarding work experience, the survey revealed that most candidates were actively working as interpreters across public service sectors in Greece,

with nearly half reporting extensive experience spanning five to ten years. Most identified interpreting as their primary profession, though only one had practiced it professionally in their home country.

The analysis of candidates' performance in the entry exams reveals further complexities in the professional landscape, particularly among those who did not pass. While 70% met the exam standards, 30% failed despite many being experienced interpreters – albeit typically with less than five years of experience – and identifying interpreting as their primary occupation. Most of these unsuccessful candidates had completed the standard short-term training and demonstrated advanced to native-level proficiency in their chosen languages. However, their Greek proficiency was more variable, though still largely rated as excellent or very good. Despite their experience, training, and language skills, these candidates fell short of the exam's standards, raising critical questions about the adequacy of existing training programs and their alignment with professional requirements. The findings suggest that basic training and work experience alone may not sufficiently equip interpreters to meet the standardized benchmarks for public service interpreting in Greece.

The findings of the two surveys complement and enrich one another, offering a more nuanced understanding of the challenges hindering the professionalization of public service interpreters in Greece. A particularly striking outcome is the urgent concern regarding the training and qualifications of interpreters employed by the Greek Asylum Service. The survey of asylum officers highlighted critical shortcomings in interpreters' linguistic proficiency, ethical behavior, and adherence to professional standards, further exacerbated by the frequent use of untrained or underqualified individuals – issues that point to potential gaps in formal training. These concerns are reinforced by the second survey, which revealed that while most candidates for the registry reported receiving some form of training, its scope and depth were limited. Most interpreters mentioned attending short seminars, typically averaging 60 hours and provided by NGOs – an educational approach of uncertain content and credibility. This reliance on limited-duration training, rather than robust university-level education in interpreting, raises concerns that many interpreters may lack essential skills and ethical grounding critical for professionalism and reliability in high-stakes contexts. Together, these findings suggest that the root of the issue lies in inadequate training frameworks and the absence of standardized educational pathways, perpetuating variability in interpreter quality and undermining efforts toward professionalization.

The candidates' self-assessment of language skills further corroborates the linguistic challenges identified by asylum officers. While most candidates reported native or near-native proficiency in their working languages, their proficiency in Greek was significantly lower in both oral and written forms. This disparity is critical, as interpreters are expected to demonstrate high fluency in both languages to ensure clear and accurate communication. Insufficient Greek language skills can lead to misunderstandings, compounding the challenges already identified by asylum officers and potentially compromising the integrity of the asylum process. The need for targeted Greek language training among interpreters is evident. However, asylum officers' concerns were not limited to Greek proficiency; in some cases, they also questioned interpreters' competency in the applicants' languages. While this may seem to contradict the candidates' self-reported advanced or native-level proficiency in their chosen languages, the disparity likely points to broader issues of professionalism and ethical practice in the field. For instance, interpreters with limited knowledge of a specific language or dialect may occasionally accept assignments they are unqualified to handle, contravening ethical guidelines that require them to decline such roles. This highlights systemic problems within the profession that go beyond individual skill levels, emphasizing the need for stronger oversight, ethical enforcement, and standardized qualifications.

Another notable finding is that, despite most candidates having substantial work experience as public service interpreters, significant issues persist, including deficits in impartiality, linguistic accuracy, and adherence to professional boundaries, as reported by asylum officers. This trend mirrors the profile of unsuccessful candidates for the registry. According to the second survey, these candidates often possess high-level language proficiency, have received the typical short-term interpreting training, and are actively working in the field. The fact that 82% of these unsuccessful candidates rely on interpreting as their primary occupation raises also concerns about the alignment between interpreters' skills and broader professional standards. Notably, 55% of them reported having less than five years of experience, suggesting that many interpreters enter the profession with limited practical exposure. This, combined with inadequate training, is likely to contribute to the professional challenges identified by asylum officers. Finally, another critical insight from these findings is the issue of trust and credibility, which underscores the systemic challenges within the profession, driven by gaps in training, skill adequacy, language proficiency, and professionalism, as highlighted in the two surveys.

Overall, the two surveys underscore an urgent need for strategic action and collaboration among key stakeholders, including policymakers, public services, educational institutions, and NGOs, to address systemic challenges in public service interpreting. While the prevailing approach of outsourcing interpreting services to NGOs or other unregulated institutions has temporarily alleviated some immediate issues, it has proven insufficient in delivering sustainable or effective solutions. As Carmen Valero-Garcés (2023) aptly highlights, “the implementation of nationalist ideologies, including aspects such as the privatization and outsourcing of PSI, has hindered the professionalization of PSI and damaged public perception of the profession” (Valero-Garcés 2023: 38). The findings suggest that such fragmented and short-term approaches fail to address the root causes of challenges within the field. They highlight the pressing need to transition toward well-regulated systems supported by a collaborative, multidisciplinary effort.

Central to this transition should be two key priorities: strengthening training and establishing a standardized accreditation process. Enhanced interpreting education – an essential factor in the professionalization process, as discussed earlier – should prioritize improving language proficiency, refining interpreting skills,

and establishing clear ethical and professional boundaries to bridge the trust gap identified in the research. Effective training programs can also address the current practice of assigning interpreters responsibilities beyond their core role. By fostering role clarity and emphasizing ethical boundaries, such programs can reinforce neutrality and objectivity, build trust, and ensure interpreters provide effective support to both officers and beneficiaries. Incorporating interprofessional training into these programs – moving beyond the current ad hoc initiatives often offered by NGOs – can further enhance collaboration and mutual understanding between interpreters and other professionals, ultimately improving the quality of service delivery (cf. Krystallidou 2023, Hlavac et al. 2022). Furthermore, introducing a standardized accreditation system for public service interpreters (like the examination and training processes of Greece's national registry) could provide a solid framework for ensuring professionals meet rigorous standards before entering the field. Together, enhanced training and a robust accreditation system would create a virtuous cycle, reinforcing each other to elevate the professional standing of public service interpreting in Greece.

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