

**The interpreter as an active participant:  
Agency, ethics and competence under  
pressure**

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Interpreting has long been framed as a neutral service enabling communication across linguistic and cultural boundaries (Müglová & Hodáková 2024). Professional codes of ethics have traditionally reinforced the image of the interpreter as an impartial and largely invisible conduit of meaning. Yet several decades of research have consistently challenged this assumption, demonstrating that interpreters are active participants in communication whose presence, decisions, emotions, and embodied experience inevitably shape interactional outcomes (e.g., Tribe & Raval 2003, Harvey 2003, Angelelli 2004, Hetherington 2012). This tension between expected neutrality and lived agency forms the conceptual backbone of the present issue.

Volume 6, no. 2 (2025) of *Bridge* brings together contributions that approach the interpreter not as a transparent medium, but as a socially situated actor operating under complex ethical, institutional, emotional, and technological pressures. Across diverse settings – ranging from diplomatic and public service interpreting to interpreter training, gendered mediation practices, and public perceptions of the profession – the articles explore how interpreter agency is exercised, constrained, and negotiated in practice. A recurring theme is the paradox of high communicative responsibility combined with limited institutional, symbolic, or social recognition.

Several contributions in this issue expose interpreter invisibility not as an individual choice,

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but as a structural form of institutional invisibility produced by specific organisational arrangements. While diplomatic interpreting operates in highly formalised yet opaque settings where responsibility for meaning is systematically obscured, crisis-driven public service interpreting reveals a different but equally problematic form of invisibility grounded in improvisation, role blurring, and lack of professional recognition.

The study by Šavelová and Babicová examines diplomatic interpreting in Slovakia through the lens of sociologically oriented Translation Studies, focusing on the systematic invisibility of interpreters and translators and their often-unacknowledged agency in political communication. Although interpreters play a crucial role in mediating highly sensitive, strategic, and ideologically loaded discourse, they are largely absent from political and media representations and are rarely identified as actors shaping meaning. Drawing on the concept of “unknown agents”, the authors argue that interpreters function not merely as neutral transmitters but as co-creators of diplomatic discourse and relationships, whose lexical choices, pragmatic shifts, and cultural mediation can subtly influence political outcomes, often without public awareness or accountability. Empirically, the study reveals that at the highest state level in Slovakia, diplomatic interpreting is predominantly outsourced to external agencies, while authorship of translated texts and mechanisms of quality control remain opaque or entirely absent. Interpreting performance is not systematically monitored, audiovisual records are unavailable, and translations are frequently produced by institutional staff rather than professional translators, reinforcing the structural invisibility of language mediators. This lack of transparency obscures responsibility for translational decisions and makes it impossible to assess potential ideological or strategic shifts introduced through interpreting. The authors conclude that such practices align with broader international patterns of interpreter invisibility but raise serious concerns in a context where diplomatic communication carries significant political weight and where interpreters, despite being indispensable, remain institutionally and publicly unrecognised.

The study by Hodáková and Zsarnóczyiová focuses on public service interpreting (PSI) in Slovakia in the aftermath of the 2022 arrival of Ukrainian refugees, situating interpreter-mediated communication within a crisis-driven institutional and socio-political context marked by the absence of established PSI structures. Drawing on institutional surveys, interviews, and a detailed case study, the authors conceptualize interpreters as indispensable yet structurally invisible actors in public service communication. While interpreters played a central role in mediating access to healthcare, legal protection, social services, and psychosocial support for highly vulnerable populations, their work was largely carried out by ad hoc and non-professional interpreters operating without systematic training, role clarification, or quality assurance. Interpreters’ agency remained

unacknowledged at the systemic level, despite their decisive influence on the effectiveness, safety, and ethical integrity of mediated encounters. Interpreters frequently assumed hybrid roles that combined language mediation with community and social work, thereby shaping not only the transfer of information but also relationships of trust, institutional legitimacy, and clients' willingness to engage with public authorities. This paradox of high practical visibility and low institutional recognition obscures interpreters' accountability, conceals the risks of role overload and burnout, and limits opportunities for professional oversight. By linking empirical observations from frontline PSI practice to emerging training initiatives, the authors argue for the professionalisation and institutionalisation of PSI in Slovakia, emphasising the need to render interpreters visible as qualified social actors whose role extends beyond linguistic transfer to the co-construction of meaning and access in public service communication.

While institutional analyses foreground forms of structural invisibility, another contribution shifts attention to the micro-level of performance where agency is exercised through strategic decision-making shaped by experience, cognitive load, and situational constraints. The study by Niloofar Fathizaviyehkord investigates interpreting strategies employed by Iranian interpreters with different levels of professional experience, conceptualising strategic behaviour as a key dimension of interpreters' agency in cognitively demanding communicative situations. Drawing on retrospective interviews and a large-scale questionnaire, the authors demonstrate that experience level significantly affects both the frequency and the type of strategies interpreters deploy in simultaneous and consecutive interpreting. More experienced interpreters systematically employ a wider and more complex repertoire of strategies, particularly those involving anticipation, restructuring, and higher-level linguistic manipulation, while less experienced interpreters rely more heavily on compensatory or problem-oriented strategies such as self-correction, silence, or explanatory additions. These findings position interpreters not as neutral conduits but as active decision-makers whose strategic competence directly shapes the target discourse. The study thus reinforces the view of interpreters as "hidden experts" whose agency is exercised primarily at the micro-level of discourse production rather than through institutional recognition. By linking strategic competence to experience, the authors argue for interpreter training models that foreground strategy awareness and development, thereby contributing to the gradual professionalisation and visibility of interpreting as an expert practice grounded in informed, context-sensitive choice-making.

The project-based contributions included in this issue extend the discussion beyond analytical description by actively engaging with visibility as a social, educational, and political project – whether by empowering migrant women as mediators in PSIT or by empirically mapping how society perceives translators and interpreters in the age of AI.

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The contribution by Valero-Garcés presents insights from the FEIMEM project, a practice-oriented initiative that foregrounds the often-overlooked role of migrant women as linguistic and cultural mediators in Public Service Interpreting and Translation (PSIT), particularly for languages of lesser diffusion (LLDs). Building on long-standing research on interpreter invisibility, the project situates migrant women at the intersection of gender, migration, and language mediation, conceptualising them as key yet structurally under-recognised agents of inclusion. FEIMEM demonstrates that these women frequently act as informal interpreters, cultural brokers, and community referents who enable access to public services, mitigate institutional misunderstandings, and support the emotional well-being of vulnerable populations, while remaining largely absent from formal professional, legal, and policy frameworks. Drawing on qualitative insights generated through round tables, workshops, and training sessions led by migrant women themselves, the project highlights a paradox of high social impact and low institutional visibility. FEIMEM shows that linguistic and cultural mediation by migrant women is not merely a stopgap response to language barriers but a form of situated expertise that combines linguistic competence, bicultural knowledge, ethical judgement, and emotional labour. By transforming these lived experiences into pedagogical resources, the project offers concrete insights for interpreter training in PSIT and LLD contexts, emphasising ethics, mental health, role awareness, and professionalisation. As such, FEIMEM reframes migrant women not as auxiliary helpers but as knowledge producers and agents of social change, arguing for their recognition as visible, trained professionals within inclusive public service communication systems.

The contribution by Djovčoš and Perez presents insights from the research project *The Image of Translators and Interpreters in Society* which investigates how translators and interpreters are perceived by the public in Slovakia in the context of accelerating technological change, particularly the rise of artificial intelligence. Situating the analysis within translation sociology and the concept of professional habitus, the project shifts the focus from practitioners' self-image to an "outside-in" perspective that examines societal perceptions, expectations, and stereotypes surrounding the profession. The study highlights that although translation and interpreting are increasingly shaped by AI-driven tools and automation, public understanding of the profession remains limited and often disconnected from the actual complexity, expertise, and social value of language mediation. Drawing on representative survey data collected by a professional polling agency alongside questionnaires distributed within the professional community, the project reveals a nuanced picture of partial visibility and fragile prestige. Translators and interpreters are perceived as moderately prestigious professionals associated with communication, cultural mediation, and expertise, yet they remain positioned below

traditionally high-status occupations and are subject to persistent gendered stereotypes. At the same time, AI emerges as a key factor influencing public expectations, reinforcing anxieties about replaceability while obscuring the human agency involved in ethical judgement, quality assurance, and intercultural mediation. These project-based insights underscore the need for evidence-driven strategies to enhance the visibility, social recognition, and attractiveness of the profession, particularly for future students, and position interpreters and translators as indispensable human actors within an AI-augmented communication ecosystem rather than as residual or transitional figures.

Taken together, the contributions to this issue demonstrate that interpreter agency is neither accidental nor marginal, but an inherent feature of mediated communication that becomes particularly visible under conditions of institutional opacity, emotional pressure, crisis, or technological change. Interpreter agency emerges not only as an individual competence, but as a relational phenomenon shaped through interaction with institutions, primary participants, and broader social expectations. Rather than treating visibility, ethics, and competence as separate dimensions, the articles show how these aspects are deeply interconnected in practice, shaping both the interpreter's professional experience and the communicative outcomes for primary participants. By foregrounding the interpreter as a socially situated actor whose decisions carry ethical, emotional, and political weight, this issue invites further reflection on how interpreting is practised, regulated, taught, and publicly understood. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing efforts to move beyond simplified notions of neutrality and to acknowledge interpreting as a form of expert, responsible, and relational professional practice.

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