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Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Wadensjö, C., Rehnberg, H S., Nikolaidou, Z. (2023)

Managing a discourse of reporting: the complex composing of an asylum narrative

*Multilingua - Journal of Cross-cultural and Interlanguage Communication*, 42(2):

191-213

<https://doi.org/10.1515/multi-2022-0017>

Access to the published version may require subscription.

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# Managing a discourse of reporting: the complex composing of an asylum narrative

<https://doi.org/10.1515/multi-2022-0017>

Received February 16, 2022; accepted April 29, 2022; published online May 24, 2022

**Abstract:** The aim of this study is to demonstrate how the presence of an emerging written record may affect the content of an asylum narrative, based on which a decision concerning the asylum claimant's right to receive protection eventually is taken. The lion's share of studies on interpreter-mediated asylum interviews to date focus on risks involved with assigning non-professionals to perform the interpreting. This study draws specifically on a 3.5 min-long sequence taken from an asylum interview involving a professional interpreter, working between Russian and Swedish, and the corresponding paragraph of the Swedish-language written minutes, produced in parallel by the caseworker at a Migration Agency office. The study demonstrates something that hasn't been highlighted much in the literature on asylum interviews, namely the mutual impact of the interpreter-mediated communicative format—the specific turn taking order and the restricted linguistic transparency—and the parallel record keeping; the intricate passage from two spoken languages to an asylum narrative in the form of a text written in one of these languages.

**Keywords:** asylum interviews; asylum narratives; coordinating talk and text; interpreter-mediated interaction

## 1 Introduction and aim of study

In much of the world today, many encounters between public service providers and service users have the character of a 'discourse of reporting' (Määttä 2015), that is, public administration is characterized by the implicit and explicit presence,

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production, and usage of written texts. The mandatory reporting is performed according to given legal and administrative rules and regulations, genres, and routines. This is indeed true for the reporting that takes place in asylum interviews, where asylum applicants put forward their reasons for seeking asylum. Also, in the course of asylum interviews, where a written record is produced, references to other written documents such as laws, instructions, medical records, and IDs are often made.

Of key interest in the present study is the overriding request for written documentation. In a number of studies, Maryns (2005, 2006, 2013) highlights the critical importance and complex nature of the production of written minutes in the Belgian asylum process, where English is used as a *lingua franca*, and caseworkers are trusted to translate spoken English into written Dutch or French for the record. In his study of interpreter-mediated asylum and police interviews in Finland, Määttä (2015: 22) argues that the implicit and explicit presence of written texts that participants must relate to in a discourse of reporting can help explain certain problems that arise in this kind of interviews. Drawing on interpreter-mediated Japanese-English police interviews, Nakane (2014) demonstrates that interpreter mediation brings new dimensions to the interaction dynamics of these interviews. Her investigation however, does not specifically highlight that a written record is composed in one of the two languages spoken as the police interviews unfold. This study aims at elucidating the impact of this parallel record keeping on the spoken interaction in an interpreter-mediated asylum interview, and, conversely, the implication of the inherent specific communicative conditions for the passage from talk to text; from talk in two languages to a monolingual text.

## 2 Theoretical and methodological background

Earlier investigations of written reports of monolingual interrogations with suspects have shown that these reports often hide who is the source of a particular wording and that much of the suspect's uncertainty is reduced or disappears completely (Jönsson and Linell 1991; Rock 2013; Van Charldorp 2011). Similar investigations of interpreter-mediated police or asylum interviews are few—the studies of Määttä (2015) and Määttä et al. (2021) being important exceptions. Rather than looking at the passage from spoken interaction to written texts, investigations highlight other aspects such as the dynamics of the interpreter-mediated interaction (e.g., Jacquemet 2014, 2015; Keselman 2009; Maryns 2006; Nakane 2014; Wadensjö 1997) or the risks involved in assigning just anyone (non-educated bilinguals, police officers, family and friends) to serve as interpreter (e.g., Berk-

Seligson 2009; Dahlvik 2019; Hale 2008; Keselman 2009; Maryns 2006; Pöllabauer 2015).

Nakane's (2014) aforementioned study highlights aspects of interaction that are unique to the consecutive mode of interpreting such as turn-taking principles and repairs. 'Turn-taking', a term established in the tradition of conversation analysis (CA)—a branch of (micro) sociology—refers to participants' organization of talk as it unfolds utterance by utterance in social encounters, and 'repair'—also a CA term—refers to measures taken by speakers and listeners to handle (potential) interactional problems, e.g., immediate correction of an ongoing formulation, audible word search (examples of 'self-initiated repair') and hinting to problems with comprehending something the co-interlocutor is saying ('other-initiated repair') (Schegloff et al. 1977; Schegloff 2007: 100–106). Repair initiatives are characteristic of spontaneous talk in interaction.

Nakane (2014) shows how, in interpreter-mediated police interviews, the specific turn-taking order affects the trajectory of questioning, and demonstrates how the monolingual speakers' ability to monitor repair processes becomes restricted. For example, if a primary party makes a self-repair, interpreters tend to relay only the speaker's reformulation and not what a speaker just repaired, for reasons of time efficiency or because they want to avoid creating embarrassment or ambiguity. Hence, the fact that the original speaker made a self-repair is concealed from listeners not sharing his or her language. Moreover, when repairs do occur in the interpreters' speech, listeners cannot easily sense if these originate from the preceding speaker's talk or from the interpreter's own need to self-repair (Wadensjö 2018: 63, 66–67).

Like Nakane (2014), this study draws on CA theory and method (e.g., Drew and Heritage 1992; Schegloff 2007). Using microanalyses of transcribed sequences taken from the audio recording, we follow step-by-step how participants respond to each other's communicative actions as the interaction proceeds while simultaneously relating more or less to the emerging written record.

The analyses also draw on earlier studies of interpreter-mediated face-to-face interaction in other institutional settings. Unlike monolingual conversations, where questions and answers typically come in a sequence, a delay is created in consecutively interpreted conversations: question—relayed question—answer—relayed answer. Moreover, the social function that 'second moves', to use another CA-term, ordinarily have in monolingual exchanges, namely, to strengthen participants' social connection (see Lerner 1993), seems to be at least partly put out of play in interpreter-mediated encounters, where a 'first move' hardly ever is followed by a syntactic completion—a second move—but rather by a rendition in the other language.

As has been demonstrated in numerous studies of interpreter-mediated interaction generally (e.g., Bolden 2000; Gavioli 2015; Nakane 2014; Straniero Sergio 1999; Wadensjö 1992, 1998, 2018), and of ditto asylum interviews specifically (e.g., Keselman et al. 2010; Linell and Keselman 2011; Licoppe and Veyrier 2017, 2020; Pöllabauer 2005, 2015; van der Kleij 2015), the specific turn-taking pattern in these encounters, the fact that interpreters need to take every second turn at talk, but in principle talk not on their own but on the others' behalf, creates a certain social insecurity, if you wish, a 'communicative wobble room' (Wadensjö 2008:187, following Erickson's (2001) metaphor for the variability of interlocutors' local "reading" of one another in social interaction). From the point of view of a narrator, the specific turn-taking pattern implies fragmentation, which tends to cause asylum seekers to lose the thread when presenting their narrative, Tipton (2008) argues.

Defining interpreting not as a kind of translation exclusively, but as a specific kind of communicative interaction, Wadensjö (1992, 1998) shows that interpreters' utterances have two basic functions, namely, as renditions of the primary parties' talk in a new language and as coordinating moves that enable the ongoing exchange. Most of the interpreter' utterances are indeed renditions, hence their coordinative function most of the time happens implicitly. In some of the interpreters' utterances, however, the coordinating function is performed explicitly, for example when interpreters ask for clarification of something a speaker just said.

The Swedish Migration Agency requires interpreters to adhere to good interpreting practice as formulated by the governmental body that authorizes interpreters in Sweden, namely, the Legal, Financial, and Administrative Services Agency, or Kammarkollegiet (2019). In short, interpreters are expected to interpret all talk in both languages to the best of their ability, stay impartial, not express their own opinions, and keep all information confidential. The Agency's case-workers are expected to be aware of these professional principles. Obviously, how the principles play out in practice will depend on a range of factors. For instance, it goes without saying that the interpreter's proficiency in the relevant languages and his or her interpreting skills are essential for how an asylum interview functions as a communicative situation. No doubt, the situation is in part also shaped by how the monolingual participants adapt their speech production to the specific conditions of the interpreter-mediated conversation, for instance, whether they talk in short or long chunks, and whether or not they avoid asking what Berk-Seligson (2009: 119) terms 'semantically overloaded questions', that is questions that include two or more propositions within one turn at talk. In addition, the communicative setting is influenced by the requirements and the wishes expressed by the authority, and by how the individual participants understand these

requirements, if aware of them. For sure, also participants' various factual knowledge as well as their empathic ability (or lack thereof) plays a role. Moreover, the current political situation in the receiving and in the asylum seekers' countries of origin might potentially shape asylum interviews. These additional factors will not be discussed in this article however, due to limited space.

### 3 Applying for asylum in Sweden

When someone applies for asylum in Sweden, a brief application interview is conducted. In the next step, the applicant is called in for a longer investigative interview with a caseworker at a Swedish Migration Agency office. The purpose of this interview is to produce a basis for a decision concerning whether or not the applicant has the right to asylum in Sweden and, if so, on what grounds. Ordinarily, the applicant attends the asylum interview together with a public counsel. In parallel with conducting the interview, the caseworker types on a computer, documenting in Swedish, the language of the public body, questions and answers as the interview unfolds. As a rule, an interpreter assists, interpreting back and forth between Swedish and (one of) the applicant's language(s). It is the responsibility of the Migration Agency to assign public counsels as well as interpreters and the cost is covered by governmental funds. Hence, asylum narratives are ordinarily composed in (at least) two languages. Eventually, the applicant is given the opportunity to go through the minutes in order to make corrections if needed. This part is usually taken care of by the public counsel, who arranges a separate meeting with the applicant. The minutes can be read aloud in chunks by the public counsel and interpreted back to the applicant's language by an interpreter, or the interpreter can be asked to interpret it *prima vista*, that is read the text in Swedish and simultaneously interpret for the applicant in the other language. Asylum interviews are only exceptionally audio recorded, if so by the public counsel, even if voices have been raised demanding such recordings to be routinely done by the Migration Agency (Rehnberg et al. 2020), as this is done in other countries, such as Australia (Smith-Kahn 2022). Subsequently, the public counsel submits any corrections to the Swedish Migration Agency, together with arguments for why the applicant should be granted asylum in Sweden. Thereafter, a decision is taken, formally by an appointed senior official, based on the minutes from the interview and on other information gained, for instance, via the Swedish Migration Agency's country of origin information database, sometimes also from a complementary, second interview with the asylum seeker.

## 4 Data set

The material on which this study is based has been collected in Sweden within the framework of a larger project focusing on asylum narratives. The larger project examines different aspects of narration in the asylum process by drawing on five cases and the attendant written documentation, sound recordings and transcriptions of eight asylum interviews, follow-up sessions between the applicants and the respective public counsel, and the researchers' retrospect interviews with the participants. The study has been approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority, and all participants have agreed that the research group can use the relevant documentation. Proper names and other information that potentially could reveal the identity of individuals has been changed. The larger project is predicated on the notion that asylum narratives are collaborations between those engaged in putting them down on paper, rather than the product of an asylum seeker's telling alone (Maryns 2006; Smith-Kahn 2017; Spijkerboer 2000; van der Kleij 2015). This implies that asylum narratives are regarded as co-constructed in a general sense but not in the sense of syntactic collaboration across turns at talk, as observed in monolingual social interaction (e.g., Lerner 1993). On the contrary, the lack of contiguity between primary parties in interpreter-mediated encounters may impede shared and mutual understanding, also without the parties noticing this (Wadensjö 1998: 237–238).

This article draws on a sound recording and transcriptions of a longer investigative asylum interview (which eventually was followed by a complementary interview conducted by the same case worker).<sup>1</sup> The documentation analyzed also includes a copy of the minutes written down during the asylum interview, and a copy of a submission to the Swedish Migration Agency handed in by the public counsel. The submission involved a protest, claiming that one specific sentence that was attributed to the applicant in the minutes must be deleted since the applicant did not recognize the words as his.

The asylum interview in question, which took 2 h and 15 min, was conducted with the assistance of an educated and state authorized, free lancing, Swedish-Russian interpreter. Following the institutional routines, the minutes were written in Swedish. The asylum applicant had communicated in Russian in his first contact with the migration authority, fearing that an interpreter from his country of origin could be associated with its regime, and not even imagining that an interpreter in his first language—a minority language in that country—would be found in Sweden. Hence, he agreed to speak in Russian in the interview. He also reported that he understood some Swedish.

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<sup>1</sup> The article is an elaborated version of a peer-reviewed paper published in Swedish, in *Humanetten* No. 46, 2021 (Wadensjö et al. 2021).

The recorded talk has been transcribed and translated into English by members of the research group. When English translations appear non-idiomatic, this is intentional and meant to reflect non-idiomatic and/or spontaneous spoken Russian or Swedish.

The asylum interview was arranged as follows: The caseworker and the asylum seeker were placed on opposite sides of a rectangular table, while the public counsel sat next to the asylum seeker. The interpreter was sitting at one end of the table, and the researcher was placed right next to her. The researcher had placed a tape recorder on the table, switching it on when permitted to do so. The caseworker sat in front of a computer monitor and typed as the interview proceeded. The monitor and the text that emerged were visible only to the caseworker.

In this article, the aforementioned protest against a sentence in the minutes—indeed an incomprehensible sentence ascribed to the asylum claimant (see below)—is taken as a point of departure. In order to trace its origin, we scrutinize the corresponding oral exchange in the recorded and transcribed sequence of the asylum interview. This sequence lasted 3 min and 25 s and enables a reconstruction of how, more precisely, the passage from oral to written text took place. It also reveals possibilities and limitations when it comes to participants' immediate sharing of how they make sense of talk as interaction unfolds.

## 5 Three and a half minutes of spoken interaction

The public counsel's written plea to the Migration Agency, which was handed in after her and the asylum applicant's follow-up session, included the following comment, here translated from Swedish:

Page 6, paragraph 10—*"I incite ethnic groups against each other while the Uighurs and the Chinese are a government."* The applicant does not recognize this sentence and it should be deleted.

The alleged quotation of one of the applicant's responses is found in the minutes of the asylum interview, page 6. The text corresponds to a point in time, where the interview had been going on for a quarter of an hour. During that time, the asylum seeker mentioned that the police in his home country had taken his passport in order to prevent him from leaving. The caseworker twice asked follow-up



questions concerning this circumstance. Subsequently, she recorded the answers in the minutes along with a comment made by the interpreter (page 6, paragraph 10):<sup>2</sup>

[Caseworker:] Can you tell me what happened. When did they take the passport?

Applicant: This is how I told them that they called and came, but it so happens when they came to take me away that I have to pull myself together to gather my thoughts. Then it turns out that on November 20, the police came to me. It so happened that the police came to me and started doing the investigation, afterwards they accused me of extremism. So and accused me of inciting ethnic groups against each other between the Uighurs the Chinese. I incite ethnic groups against each other while the Uighurs and the Chinese are a government.

Interpreter: The interpreter tried to find out which region the answer was November 20.<sup>3</sup>

In the written record quoted above, participants' talk was presented in the form of three utterances. This is the entire written record of an oral exchange that in reality lasted three and a half minutes and involved far more than three turns at talk. In the remainder of this section, the audio-recorded exchange will be presented bit by bit, from the caseworker's question in excerpt 1, line 1 (here referred to as 1:01) to her closing of the topic in excerpt 8 (8:60). A transcription key can be found at the end of the article.

Excerpt 1 begins with the caseworker first asking for a story of a particular event, then for a specification of time, and then, with an extended *å::* (*a::nd*, 1:02), she again indicates that a narrative about this specific occasion is requested rather than just the date when it took place.

Excerpt 1

- 01 Caseworker: kan du berätta? vad som hände. när kom dom  
*can you tell? what happened. when did they come*
- 02 Caseworker: å tog passet å::  
*and took the passport a::nd*
- 03 Interpreter: расскажите об обстоятельствах, когда они отбирали  
*tell about the circumstances, when they took/when did they*
- 04 Interpreter: у вас паспорт и так далее.  
*take the passport from you and so on.*

<sup>2</sup> In her original minutes, the caseworker left her own questions unattributed, identifying the others by either *S:* (i.e., *sökande*, Eng. *applicant*) or *T:* (i.e., *tolk*, Eng. *interpreter*). The minutes are sometimes quite hard to read, as here, since the caseworker occasionally leaves out question marks and other standard punctuation.

<sup>3</sup> The minutes omit a clarifying dash here, and the bipartite sentence should be understood as *The interpreter tried to find out which region—the answer was 'November 20'*.

- 05 Applicant: они у меня собрали паспорт это вот е::: я я я а::: я же  
рассказывал о  
*they took the passport from me it turns out e::: I I I a::: I told  
about*
- 06 Applicant: том что они приезжали о том что звонили е:: а:  
*that they came many times didn't I that they called e::: a::nd*
- 07 Applicant: потом приезжали и::: потом в третий раз (.) нет, нет это  
*then they came several times a::: then the third time (.) no, no*
- 08 Applicant: получается нет а:: то есть а: нет получается  
*it turns out no bu::t that is an:d no it turns out like that,*
- 09 Applicant: короче вот после того как они все приехали,  
*in short that is afterward when they had come,*
- 10 Interpreter: de e såhär jag har berättat att dom har ringt å har kommit å  
*it's like this I have told that they have called and have come and*
- 11 Interpreter: sånt. men de blir så, de blir så, de blir så, när dom hämtade  
mej,  
*so on. but it turns out, it turns out, it turns out, when they came  
to take me away,*

As can be seen in excerpt 1, the caseworker's follow-up question is short, but nevertheless semantically overloaded (Berk-Seligson 2009: 119). Moreover, the caseworker does not particularly emphasize neither *what* (1:01), nor *when* (1:01), so the interpreter does not get a clear indication of whether the question primarily concerns the course of the event or the date when it happened, or both. The interpreter relays the question quickly and monotonously, which means that it in Russian sounds as vague as it did in Swedish. Indeed, it comes across in Russian as a question concerning both what happened at a certain instance and being about when something took place (1:03–04).

The asylum applicant's subsequent answer is even more ambiguous, seemingly due to the speaker's problems with finding words to express his thoughts. He begins by reminding of what he has already said about the police taking his passport. Using words like *polučaetsja* (*it turns out/it so happens*) (1:08) *koroče* (*shorter/in short*, 1:09), and extended vowels he initiates self-repairs. In other words, he discursively marks that he is searching for ways to express himself and wants to keep the turn at talk. At one point he also says *njet a:: to est'* (*no bu::t that is*, 1:08), which again indicates that he wants to repair something just said and suggest a rephrasing. Discourse of this kind is extremely challenging for an interpreter: not only is it difficult to memorize, but the

interpreter also risks embarrassing the speaker if she tries to imitate his or her struggle to find the right words (cf. Wadensjö 1998: 170–175). In this case, the interpreter reflects the asylum applicant's formulation problems by repeating a Swedish equivalent of *polučaetsja* (*it turns out/it so happens*) three times in a row (1:11). She does so without hesitation however, so if the caseworker was focused on writing and wasn't watching the interviewee, the fact that he has severe formulation problems might have passed unnoticed to her, even if these problems are made more explicit in what follows:

Excerpt 2

- 12 Applicant: ещё собраться я не могу сейчас.  
*also pull myself together it's hard/I can't now.*
- 13 Interpreter: jag måste kunna samla mig också, mina tankar.  
*I have to pull myself together also, my thoughts.*
- 14 (.)
- 15 Applicant: e::: получается полиция а::: они приехали ко мне 20  
ноября,  
*e::: it turns out the police a::: they came to me on November 20,*
- 16 Interpreter: det blir så den 20 november polisen kommer hem ti-  
*it turns out on November 20 the police are coming home t-*
- 17 Interpreter: kom till mig. ursäkta.  
*came home to me. sorry.*

In a monolingual conversation, someone's comment on his or her own speech production, such as the applicant's (*also pull myself together it's hard/I can't now*, 2:12), would have made it clear to listeners that he or she has taken a break from the main narrative. In an interpreter-mediated conversation, however, it may be less evident that such meta comments are meant as just that, even if the interpreter gives his or her rendering in a different tone of voice, as is the case here (in 2:13). Nevertheless, the applicant's meta comment ends up in the minutes as part of the asylum narrative. After the applicant's next turn, the interpreter again renders his turn-keeping *polučaetsja* (*it turns out/it so happens*, 2:15). However, neither here nor anytime during the interview did she try to imitate other turn-keeping strategies, such as his frequent use of long, extended vowels (*e:::*, *a:::*, 2:15). The interpreter might be counting on these hesitation markers being perceivable anyhow, over language barriers, but not imitating them also implies that she avoids being perceived of as someone having troubles finding words, alternatively, as someone parroting a speaker in a face-threatening way.

When the interview continues, the applicant's speech production is still hesitant:

Excerpt 3

- 18 Applicant: и:: полиция они получается, ко мне домой пришли, и:::  
*a::nd the police they it turns out, came to my house, a:::nd*
- 19 Applicant: начали всё обыскивать дома.  
*started to search around everywhere at home.*
- 20 Interpreter: det blev så att polisen kom hem till mig, å dom började (.)  
*it turns out that the police came home to me, and they started (.)*
- 21 Interpreter: göra sin rannsakan,  
*doing their investigation/interrogation,*

When the applicant again mentions that the police came to his home and took his passport, the interpreter uses a word associated with legal discourse—namely, *rannsakan* (*investigation/interrogation*, 3:21)—but not *husrannsakan* (*house search*), which would be the legally correct term when a house is being searched by the police. The interpreter could have rendered this utterance using more everyday words, as the Russian verb *obyskivat'* (3:19) is used both in the sense *perform a house search* and as *search* more generally. In the interpreter's quick choice of style, she opts for a more formal level in Swedish. This style level is in line with the frame of reference of both the caseworker and the legal counsel. When having a choice between various possible interpretations, interpreters sometimes tend to opt for a rendition that fits best into the listeners' frame of ideas, in order to promote a continued dialogue (Berk-Seligson 1990, 2009; Hale 2008; Wadensjö 1998). In this case, the choice of the Swedish word *rannsakan* strengthens the legal frame of reference in the asylum story as it is put down on paper.

In order not to risk missing details, interpreters can sometimes tend to quickly insert a short rendition as soon as they sense a micro-pause in the discourse flow as their opportunity to talk (Skaaden 2013; Wadensjö 1998). Although this technique may increase the risk of making the conversation more fragmented than necessary, the interpreter's utterance in the other language provides the narrator with a kind of feedback signal, one that ideally encourages the speaker to continue. In the conversation being studied here, it often happened that the applicant provided a semantically meaningful unit in a turn-closing prosody—that is, it sounded as if he had said what he wanted to say so far—and then uttered a conjunction in the form of an extended vowel, such as *a:::nd* (4:22), something that typically signals that the speaker has more to say but is searching for words. Yet, the turn-closing prosody signaled a possibility for someone else to take the turn at talk, and this is exactly where the interpreter inserts a quick, short rendition (4:23–24).

## Excerpt 4

- 22 Applicant: и после этого они меня о::обвинили в  
экстремизме. [и::: якобы  
*and after this they a::ccused me of*  
*extremism.* [a:::nd allegedly
- 23 Interpreter: [efteråt dom  
[afterward they
- 24 Interpreter: dom anklagade mej i extremismen.  
*they accused me of the extremism.*

For an interpreter, it can be a challenge to determine whether a quickly inserted rendition is justified or if it is better to wait until the speaker clearly allocates the turn so as not to disturb the speaker's train of thought (cf. Tipton 2008). In the exchange shown in excerpts 4 and 5, the applicant does not seem to lose the thread. After recounting what he has been accused of, he effectively claims the ownership of the next turn by repeating his last word (cf. Bockgård, 2004), namely, *yakoby*; *allegedly* (4:22 and 5:25), and continues from there to explain how the accusation against him had been motivated.

## Excerpt 5

- 25 Applicant: якобы я вызываю е:: н- н- национальную рознь м:: (. )  
*allegedly I'm provoking e:: e- e- ethnic enmity b:: (. )*
- 26 Applicant: якобы я вызываю национальную рознь мм мм мм между  
*allegedly I'm provoking ethnic enmity be- be- be- between*
- 27 Applicant: уйгурами и китайцами.  
*the Uighurs and the Chinese.*
- 28 Interpreter: så och anklagade dom mig att jag hetsar folkgrupperna mot  
varandra,  
*so and they accused me of inciting ethnic groups against each*  
*other,*
- 29 Interpreter: att jag hetsar folkgrupper mot varandra mellan uigurerne och,  
*of inciting ethnic groups against each other between the Uighurs*  
*and,*
- 30 Interpreter: между уйгурами и?  
*between the Uighurs and?*
- 31 Applicant: и китайцами [этими  
*and the Chinese [these*
- 32 Interpreter: [och kineserna.  
[and the Chinese.
- 33 Applicant: и этими китайцами которые живут в этом Синьцзяне,  
*and these Chinese who are living in the Xinjiang,*

- 34 Applicant: в автономном районе.  
*in the autonomous region.*
- 35 Interpreter: ме- то есть между уйгурами и китайцами?  
*be- that is between the Uighurs and the Chinese?*
- 36 Interpreter: правильно? я говорю.  
*it's correct?[what] I'm saying.*
- 37 Applicant: да. между уйгурами и китайцами, якобы я выставлял,  
*yeah. between the Uighurs and the Chinese, allegedly I have posted,*

Excerpt 5 involves an instance where the coordinating function of an interpreter utterance becomes explicit, that is, when the interpreter talks on her own behalf. More specifically, by repeating in Russian, with a questioning intonation, something the applicant just said: *between Uighurs and?* (5:30), she is inviting the applicant to repair. The applicant immediately fills in: *and the Chinese, these* (5:31). The last part (*these*) overlaps with the interpreter's Swedish rendition (5:32). Focusing on completing the sentence she has started in Swedish (in 5:28–29), the interpreter seems to miss the applicant's clarification: that talk was about the Chinese living in the Xinjiang area, as seen in the following (5:33). This piece of information comes at a time when the interpreter still needs to make sure that she has heard the previous utterance correctly before she can update the caseworker.

Exploring closely the construction of this sequence, one can note that the interpreter's *between Uighurs and?* (5:30) had the intended effect: the applicant filled in the information with a second move, something that together with the first move forms the syntactic continuation *between Uighurs and?* (5:30) *and the Chinese* (5:31). In a monolingual conversation, one would expect a 'third move' (in CA terms) to follow, namely, a response to the second move that either confirms or rejects its appropriateness as a continuation (Bockgård 2004: 281). The interpreter-mediated communicative format puts this mechanism out of play. The interpreter instantly says *and the Chinese* (5:32), albeit not in the applicant's language but in Swedish. Her utterance is designed as a rendition, and the confirming third move is therefore—strictly speaking—missing.

As the interpreter focuses on conveying what she asked for, for the record (5:32), she also seems to have missed the applicant's attempted specification, namely, the *these* (5:31) coming in an overlap and appearing again when the applicant reclaims his turn (5:33): The applicant again confirms the correctness of *between the Uighurs and the Chinese* (5:37) before making a new attempt to mention what he was accused of doing. It appears from the interpreter's next contribution that she has heard him mention a *region*, but not which one (6:38). Hence, she tries to clarify that as well:

## Excerpt 6

- 38 Interpreter: да понятно. [в каком районе?  
*yes that's understood. [in which region?/when about?*
- 39 Applicant: [xx (.) а?  
 [xx (.) what?
- 40 Interpreter: в каком районе вы сказали?  
*in which region/when about, you said?*
- 41 Applicant: это было двадцатого ноября.  
*this was on the twentieth of November.*

At first sight, this excerpt gives the impression that the applicant indeed has lost his train of thought, when the interpreter again asks for a repetition (6:38 and 6:40) of something he just said. But this is not necessarily the case: if the applicant here believes that the interpreter has heard that he mentioned Xinjiang (5:33) and is now focused on answering the caseworker's question *when?* he may have understood *v kakom raione?* metaphorically as *when about?*, rather than concretely as *in which (geographical) region?* (6:38; 6:40).

The asylum applicant's quick response indicates that he is keen to show that he knows the exact date (6:41); the way his answer is manifested in the minutes, however, it may have cast doubts upon rather than attested to the applicant's willingness to answer the caseworker's question. The interpreter continues, clearly focusing on the record keeping:

## Excerpt 7

- 42 (.)
- 43 Interpreter: .hhh. okej. (.) i alla fall,  
 .hhh. okay. (.) anyhow,
- 44 Interpreter: att jag e::: hetsar folkgr- grupper mot varandra.  
 (Literally: *that I incite ethnic groups against each other.*)  
*of e::: inciting ethnic gr- groups against each other.*
- 45 Caseworker: TYPES
- 46 Interpreter: mellan uigurerna å: kineserna i en region. å::  
*between the Uighurs and the Chinese in a region. a::nd*
- 47 Interpreter: tolken försökte få fram vilken region,  
*the interpreter tried to find out which region,*
- 48 Caseworker: TYPES
- 49 Interpreter: svaret blev. det var den tjugonde November.  
*the answer was. this was on the twentieth of November.*
- 50 Caseworker: TYPES (.) vilken region? [frågade du?  
 (.) which region? [did you ask?

- 51 Applicant: [нет  
[no
- 52 Interpreter: tolken frågade, vilken region nämnde han, men  
*the interpreter asked, which region mentioned he, but the*
- 53 Interpreter: svaret blev det blev det var den tjugonde November.  
*answer was it was that was on the twentieth of November.*

In this exchange, the interpreter prepares herself to speak after a micro-pause (7:42). She inhales audibly, says *okay* (7:43) and abides somewhat before she starts relaying. After another micro-pause, she says *anyhow* (7:43), something that can be taken as the interpreter creating a new starting point that, in this context, ties back to where she stopped rendering into Swedish and began the clarifying side sequence in Russian only (5:30). But the rest of her first rendition in Swedish for some time (*of e::: inciting ethnic gr-groups against each other*, 7:44), comes out and is noted as a fragment. A Swedish equivalent to the Russian *yakoby* (*allegedly*, 4:22; 5:25; 5:37), a word that the applicant uses repeatedly, is now missing. Basically, the Russian *yakoby* is used to express that *someone else* is claiming what you are saying, and it can be translated in different ways into Swedish. (There is no such straightforward translation available as the English *allegedly*.) The interpreter had previously rendered it as *they accused me of* (4:24 and 5:28) but here, when the interpreter again renders the applicant's utterance, now dictating for the record, there is no initial reminder that the applicant is rephrasing what someone else had accused him of. She just repeats the accusation of *inciting ethnic groups ... etc.* (5:28) (the English ing-form ("inciting") in this position corresponds to *att jag hetsar* in Swedish, lit. 'that I incite') In writing, the caseworker did not link the accusation (7:44) to the previous *they accused me of* (4:24; 5:28), but records it as a fact: "I incite ethnic groups against each other."

The sequence reproduced in excerpt 8 clearly shows that the interpreter, no less than the case worker, is oriented toward the ongoing writing practice. The interpreter fills in information as the caseworker's keyboard goes silent, renders the applicant's utterances as well as her own clarification question concerning a region, and explicitly expresses that she herself initiated the preceding clarification sequence (*the interpreter asked*, 7:52). All of this is in accordance with her professional ethics. Nevertheless, in this sequence a seed is sown for a misunderstanding that is recorded and not further investigated, clearly linked to the event's character as a discourse of reporting. The protest coming from the applicant in the form of a *net* (*no*, 7:51), when the caseworker says *region* in Swedish, doesn't seem to have been heard—at least, the others pay no audible attention to it. (The interpreter doesn't relay the caseworker's question (7:50) and her own reply (7:52–53) into Russian.) It is also unclear whether or not the



caseworker thinks that the name of the region that the interpreter has asked for is at all important at this point. She doesn't seek to clarify it further but returns to her initial question (1:01), and now, around 3 min later, it appears—in the sound recording—as an invitation to the applicant to tell about how it happened that he lost his passport, and not as a request for a specification of a certain time or date. But the caseworker is speaking in a very low voice.

Excerpt 8

- 54 Caseworker: okej. kan du berätta? om när dom tog ditt pass.  
*okay. can you tell? about when they took your passport.*
- 55 Interpreter: когда собрали? när?  
Ru: *when did they take?* Sw: *when?*
- 56 Caseworker: mm,  
57 (.)
- 58 Applicant: ну::: в тот момент они всё собрали получается паспорт.  
*we:::ll on that occasion they took everything it turns out the passport.*
- 59 Interpreter: de blev exakt e:h vid den stunden som de tog passet. med sig.  
*it turned out exactly e:h at that moment they took the passport. away.*
- 60 Caseworker: TYPES okej.  
*okay.*

Words in the “wrong” language may happen to pop up when bilinguals talk, and that holds true also for experienced interpreters (Skaaden 2013: 75–76). Excerpt 8 shows that the interpreter needs to check also the caseworker's question (8:54). Her repair initiative first appears in Russian (*kogda sobrali?*; *when did they take?*, (8:55) which would indicate that she had set out to address the applicant, but is immediately repeated in Swedish (*när?*; *when?*, 8:55), which indicates that she is rather addressing the caseworker. The way the sequence continued shows that both the caseworker and the applicant perceived themselves as the one being addressed.

The question *when?* in Swedish (8:55) is followed by the caseworker's feedback token *mm* (8:56), which can easily be understood as a confirmation of correctness and which invites a continuation. After a micro-pause (8:57) the applicant takes the turn, starting somewhat hesitantly (*we:::ll*, 8:58) but without waiting for a new rendition from the interpreter, seemingly understanding her clarifying question *kogda sobrali?* (*when did they take*, 8:55) as her regular second turn, hence, as a rendition of the caseworker's preceding question (8:54). The answer he formulates (8:58) does not contain any details about the incident when he lost his passport. Nevertheless, the caseworker closes with *okay* 8:60) and doesn't return to this

question any more during the interview. The minutes do not reveal anything about possible miscommunication.

## 6 Concluding discussion

The present study shows that an asylum interview, and consequently the asylum narrative, is shaped by the caseworker's questions, the asylum seeker's answers, and the interpreter's rendering of their utterances in the other language. The exchange explored (here presented in the form of 60 lines) consists of 37 turns at talk. In the minutes, this talk was written down as three utterances: a question from the caseworker, an answer from the applicant (in Swedish translation), and a comment on this answer from the interpreter. The analysis of the corresponding real-life sequence reveals that the parallel record keeping indeed affected the asylum interview's content and progression. The monolingual parties accommodated their contributions to the presence and actions of the interpreter, whose own actions were at least partly shaped by the overarching, global condition—the need for detailed record keeping.

As in previous research on monolingual record-keeping (e.g., Jönsson and Linell 1991; Rock 2013; Van Charldorp 2011), the present study shows that talk, when registered as written text, tends to transform in various ways. As Määttä (2015) reminds us, the reporting is performed according to given institutional, administrative regulations, genres, and routines. Moreover, as interpreter-mediated talk involves two languages and the record is kept in one, the asylum interview, and subsequently the written asylum narrative, is shaped also by the conditions implied by its specific communicative format—the specific turn-taking pattern involving translated turns, and the monolingual speakers' restricted possibility to monitor repair processes (Nakane 2014). During the interview in question here, the asylum applicant often has problems finding words in Russian, and often signals that he wants to repair something said and start again. Occasionally (as shown in excerpt 2) he is explicit about that what he says is not intended to add content but rather to signal a time-out from the narrating proper. The minutes, however, do neither indicate these various purposes, nor do they mention any potential impact of Russian being the applicant's third language.

The fact that interpreters sometimes have to choose between different possible translations of a word or phrase is trivial, and so is the fact that the applicant cannot detect—let alone control—the connotation associated with selected translations. No doubt, the potential ambiguity of words increases rather than decreases when two languages are involved and the participants see different contexts as given. The interpreter's professional discretion involves disambiguating in

the other language what the speakers utter. In a discourse of reporting, the interpreter's translation choices will set more permanent and detailed traces than in encounters where the interpreter's task is limited to getting two individuals to talk to each other without any records being kept.

Moreover, in face-to-face interaction, the interpreter constantly needs to consider when to utilize upcoming micro-pauses to deliver renditions of short sequences and when to wait until the speaker clearly allocates the turn. Reasons *for* quickly inserting a rendition in a micro-pause also when speakers signal that they want to go on talking may be 1) that the other primary party (i.e., the listener) will be instantly kept up to date, 2) that a rendition in the other language can be heard as a feedback signal to the current speaker, confirming that the message is heard and that the speaker can go on talking, and 3) that the risk of the interpreter forgetting a detail is minimized. Reasons *against* may be that the speaker risks losing the thread and that the story produced comes out more fragmented than necessary, rather than coherent (cf. Tipton 2008). The current analysis shows that incoherent fragmentation of an asylum narrative also can result from the primary participants' limited control over repair processes during the interview in which they take part. The caseworker had limited access to the asylum seeker's many initiatives to self-repair, like, for instance, those introduced by the discourse marker *polučaetsja* (*it turns out/it so happens*), and to the interpreter's repair-initiatives directed to the applicant in Russian, like *mezhdū uġurami i?* (*between the Uighurs and?*, 5:30). The applicant, in turn, had limited control when the caseworker prompted, in Swedish, the interpreter to repair: *vilken region?* (*which region?*, 7:50). The written minutes, quoted in the beginning of the previous section, testifies about the serious effects of this limited control.

Excerpt 6 highlights that unfamiliar proper names can be hard to catch, which is hardly unique to interpreted conversations. In this particular case, the geographical name Xinjiang, and the fact that the interpreter does not immediately grasp it, is the source of a misunderstanding that leaves a trace in the written asylum narrative. During the interview, the applicant seemed eager to supply the specific information asked for: *this was on the twentieth of November* (6:41), when he seemingly takes the interpreter's question *v kakom raione?* (6:40) in a metaphorical sense as *when about?*, while the interpreter more likely had intended it concretely as *in which region?*. In the minutes, the applicant's reply—naming a date rather than the Chinese region in question—can easily be read as a sign of the applicant being unwilling to provide the sought-after information. Notably, in the follow-up session between the applicant and the public counsel, where the applicant is supposed to point out possible flaws in the minutes, this misunderstanding is completely missed, as the public counsel only reads the caseworker's questions and the sentences ascribed to the applicant. Hence, the comment

ascribed to the interpreter in the minutes—*The interpreter tried to find out which region – the answer was ‘November 20’*—did not become subject to backtranslation and subsequent checking.

As demonstrated, the minutes becomes a party to the asylum interview in quite a concrete way, in that the interpreter adapts her turns at talk to the caseworker’s pace of typing, and also in that the applicant’s talk (8:51), coming in parallel with the interpreter’s record-oriented talk, goes unheeded by both the interpreter and the caseworker. No doubt, conducting an interview while simultaneously keeping the minutes of it can challenge a caseworker’s attention and ability to not only make text out of speech but also to create a supportive atmosphere for an asylum seeker to present his or her grounds for asylum.

If the invitation to narrate freely shown in excerpt 1 was ambiguously formulated, not clearly emphasizing whether information was requested primarily about *when* “they came to take the passport” (1:01–02), or about the course of this event, the caseworker’s next invitation of that kind (excerpt 8) to the researchers, listening to the recording in Swedish, clearly seems to be focused on the *what* of the event. But in the specific local context of the interview, the applicant treated a fragment *when did they take* (8:55) as the very question to be answered. That is, he did not hear the *when* as the interpreter’s explicit coordination move, her repair initiative as a linguistic expert to clarify what the case worker just said (8:54). He heard it as yet another question concerning *when*—and subsequently answered with an exact date. Seemingly, the specific turn-taking order and the primary participants’ limited control over repair processes in the interpreter-mediated interview can shape an asylum story in an obscure and unpredictable way.

Finally, the above analysis of the audio recording has clarified the link between the spoken phrase *I incite ethnic groups against each other* and the written minutes. The recording could not explain however, the quite puzzling last part of the same sentence—*while the Uighurs and the Chinese are a government*. Since there is no trace of this formulation in the audio recording, we conclude that it must be some kind of leftover from the caseworker’s text production, and that she did not have, or took, the time to proofread the minutes. The public counsel’s submission, where she argues that the entire phrase should be deleted, was eventually added to the decision basis of the case. We can only speculate about the impact of this specific phrase on the final decision, but the applicant was eventually not granted asylum, partly on the grounds that he had provided vague, inconsistent, and poor in detail information regarding the threats that he believed existed against him if he were to return to his home country.

In this article, we have shown how the discourse of reporting can affect the content and progression of an asylum interview, due to linguistic ambiguity and limited transparency between languages, and due to pragmatic ambiguity,

including the complexity of turn-taking in interpreter-mediated encounters. We have also demonstrated how the passage from oral to written text—and back again—can involve sources of miscommunication when asylum stories are compiled, and that subsequent instances of miscommunication easily can slip attention. This suggests that critical reflections on the nature and functions of language and of interpreter-mediated interaction in relation to record-keeping must be integrated into the education of caseworkers and public counsels, no less than into interpreter training. Moreover, the study provides arguments for why documentation of asylum interviews should be made routinely not only in the form of written minutes but also via audio recordings.

**Transcription key** (simplified after Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson 1974)

<i>italics</i>	translation into English of talk originally spoken in Swedish and Russian
[	start of overlapping talk
,	continuing intonation (usually with rising or sustained tone)
.	terminating intonation (usually with a falling tone)
?	questioning intonation (usually with rising tone)
e:::	long vowel (example)
(.)	a short silence (micro-pause)
xx	inaudible word
.hhh	audible inhalation

**Research funding:** This work was funded by Östersjöstiftelsen – The foundation for Baltic and East European Studies (no. 3374/3.1.1/2016).

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