

# Negotiating the Terminological Borders of 'Language Mediation' in English and Italian

A Discussion on the Repercussions of Terminology on the Practice, Self-perception and Role of Language Mediators in Italy

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the confusion regarding the use of the terms 'language mediation' and 'cultural mediation' in Italy by looking at some of the key factors that define this activity, and by comparing it to the way in which the term itself and the reference to both profession and academic discipline is used differently in the Anglo-Saxon tradition. The paper further argues that the development of 'language- and cultural mediation' as a profession in Italy has an entirely separate trajectory from the development of language mediation as an academic discipline, the latter being far more recent and largely tied to university policies. The paper suggests that the very terms cultural *mediation* and language *mediation* suggest that inherent in any meeting of cultures and/or languages lies a state of conflict and a need for redress. We argue however that this assumption is a result of poor role definition that can be overcome by creating more clarity in the tasks and mandates ascribed to language and/or cultural mediators.

*Keywords:* conflict, cultural mediation, interpreter roles, language mediation, paradigm shifts.

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\* Although the two authors have collaborated closely on the paper, Cinzia Spinzi is primarily responsible for sections 1, 2, 4, 4.1, 7 and Mette Rudvin for sections 3, 3.1, 5, 6, 6.1.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Although the dynamics and socio-political parameters of immigration vary greatly across European borders, the steady rise in immigration over the last two decades has gradually transformed Italy into an increasingly multicultural country similar to most other European nation states. As a result of profound demographic changes, 'immigration' has itself become a subject of academic and institutional inquiry in a very wide range of disciplines, from sociology to anthropology, cultural studies, geography, politics, international relations, law, economics, psychology, medicine, literature and language studies. One of the off-shoots, both professional and academic, of the burgeoning population mix is the emergence of the practice of intercultural and inter-linguistic mediation. This practice came into being quite naturally, and to some degree spontaneously, in the 1970's and 1980's as a response to the urgent problem of migrants needing to access public services, in particular essential services such as medical, legal, educational, employment and welfare.

Thus, in this specific historical context the notion of 'mediation' emerged as a process in which a third party was commissioned to resolve communication obstacles between migrant and institution and more broadly to facilitate integration. Despite the fact that more than forty years have passed since the first significant immigration flows and despite numerous European Directives aiming to improve migrants' access to justice through language services (including translation and interpreting services), the professional role of the language mediator in Italy is still in need of a legal framework, of clarification of role and professional mandate. Indeed, role clarification is greatly compromised by the blurred borders that fail to clearly define the various activities related to translation (written, oral, sight, etc.) but focus exclusively on the rotating pivot of transferring semantic meaning from one language to another without considering contextual factors. This complex interface has contributed to the terminological turmoil around the word 'mediation' as an activity different from translation and interpreting without being able to pin down exactly what this difference entails.

Thus, the main aim of this article will be to nudge the discussion around the terminological confusion in a more constructive direction by critically exploring its borders. In other words, this paper responds to the need for clarification of the terms used to describe the activity of language assistance and the nature of the process of mediation itself, its distinctive traits, its core principles and ethical values. We will focus on the terminological confusion which is still persistent in Italy; then we will move on to

address the need for language mediators and training, and how their core principles resemble or differ from those of interpreters. The paper aims to contribute to the clarification of this issue by looking at some of the key factors that define this activity, as it is understood in Italy, and then by comparing it to the way in which the term itself, and the reference to both profession and academic discipline, is used in English-speaking countries (see, for example, Roberts 2013).

## 2. LANGUAGE BACKGROUND AND IMMIGRATION IN ITALY THE LAST TWO DECADES

Human language is a way for the human mind to imagine, envision and make sense of the world and at the same time also a tool to represent it; it is thus a primary channel for communication and to form allegiances and cohesion between individuals and groups. However, whilst language is the prime vehicle of human communication, by the same token it is also a source of *miscommunication*, potentially leading to tension and conflict and requiring redress strategies. Language is thus an instrument for both building and dismantling unity and internal cohesion.

As in most countries, in Italy language is a source of diversity as well as unity. Despite the general diffusion of standard Italian, a wide range of dialects (cf. Kinder 2008) has led to linguistic multiplicity, particularly predominant in the bilingual Italian-German region of Alto-Adige in northern Italy. Adding to this panorama we now find a plethora of new languages used by millions of incoming migrants from Asia, Africa, Eastern Europe and South America. Today, foreigners in Italy total ca. 4.9 million, of which approx. 3.9 million non-EU citizens; the 'top 5' being Romania, Albania, Morocco, China and Ukraine (source: <http://www.istat.it> and Caritas 2014).

Furthermore, since the start of the Arab Spring large numbers of people have arrived in Italy by sea: according to the Ministry of Internal Affairs (<http://www.gov.it>), more than 100,000 persons in 2014 only. What is worth underlining is that in its socio-linguistic profile Italy is different from the countries with strong historical colonial ties such as the UK; Italy has few economic and cultural connections with ex-colonies and historically there is no major predominance of one particular ethnic community over another. We find, rather, a wide array of ethnic provenances, and an estimated 200 new languages (Bagna, Barni, and Vedovelli 2007; Barni 2008).

It is only in the last 20 years, however, that immigration has become a more stable component in Italian society. One might expect that with the structural geographical conditions (a long coastline) that make Italy a prime target for immigration, the country has attempted to meet this challenge by providing adequate humanitarian, social, medical, legal and language-related services for migrants. This is not the case, however; such services remain largely inadequate, if only for the sheer size of the problem.

Clearly, migration patterns are not always steady or predictable in terms of numbers or ethnic origin, but depend on numerous variables at world level. According to recent data from the ISMU Foundation (<http://www.ISMU.org> [10/06/2014]) and ISTAT, immigration is slowing down rather than increasing<sup>1</sup>. For example, whilst the number of Moldavians and Ukrainians is decreasing, other migrant groups are increasing, especially people from countries affected by civil wars, such as Nigeria, Afghanistan, Mali and the Ivory Coast or from countries with high levels of social tension coupled with poverty such as Pakistan and Bangladesh.

The naturally long coastline in combination with increasingly restrictive policies on the part of other European countries that make direct access difficult makes Italy a natural and attractive target for migrants. Indeed, Italy is often perceived as a transitional territory to gain access to and then proceed on to more lucrative job markets and welfare states further North, especially Germany, functioning as a “fallback choice with respect to more ‘natural’ destinations” (Colombo and Sciortino 2004, 50).

As noticed by Thomassen (2010, 23-24), at the political and social level, a certain ambivalence is notable in Italy: whereas the government does not have a well-defined ‘integration model’ to follow, at the social level “attitudes toward immigrants and their offspring are increasingly polarised into ‘for’ or ‘against’ positions”. The infrastructures supplied by the Italian government over the last few decades to provide assistance for those migrants who come to Italy in search of employment, with or without work contracts, are still far from adequate, in spite of the efforts made especially locally. Because of the many law-and-order related problems that have emerged in the wake of this immigration, successive governments have implemented a number of security-oriented measures reflecting the political platforms of each individual government. Since the 1990’s a series of different laws have come into force, followed by the Security Set 94/2009.

Needless to say, the problems related to language barriers between migrants and Italian speakers are numerous, impeding what should ideally be a gradual integration into the host society. Where government-

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.istat.it/it/archivio/110521>. Last accessed June 2014.

regulated policies brought about to address integration issues generally, and language issues specifically, have been lacking, voluntary organization (a wide range of NGO's as well as the Catholic Church) and local government bodies (municipalities, Regions and Provinces) have stepped in to meet these needs, at first as emergency stop-gap measures and later in a more structured and permanent fashion.

What is most relevant for the purposes of the present discussion, however, is that the 'assistance-model' approach for providing language services (*language- and (inter)cultural mediation*) adopted in the early decades of the major immigration flows has arguably led to a form of integration and language service based on the notion that the interpreter/translator/communication facilitator mediates actively between Italian speakers and non-Italian speakers. In other words, the diversity in cultures and languages between the new ethnic communities and the Italian-born community was initially seen as a source of possible tension and conflict to be overcome through the act of 'mediation' rather than simply through the provision of language services and facilitated access to institutions and services. The natural interface between language- and cultural mediation and the activities of translation and interpreting, as well as a poorly-defined job description of that same act of 'mediation', have contributed to the terminological confusion.

### 3. LANGUAGE- AND CULTURAL MEDIATION IN ITALY.

#### OBJECTIVES, TRAINING AND ETHICAL AND PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

Although current political rhetoric and restrictive immigration policies are not encouraging, the emergency measures adopted for 'tackling immigration' are, at local levels in many cases, very slowly giving way to more long-term policies of integration and, roughly speaking, a more 'multi-ethnic' or 'multicultural' society<sup>2</sup>. One of the policies that has been adopted, the one that is most relevant to the present discussion, is to

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<sup>2</sup> We will not here discuss the difference in meaning and usage between 'multicultural', 'multi-ethnic', 'cross-cultural', 'intercultural', etc.; suffice it to say that this broad range of terms relating to the co-existence of different ethnic groups in a given county, and the communication between these groups, has undergone – and will continue to undergo – subtle and less subtle shifts according to changes in policies, politics, collective attitudes, disciplinary shifts, focal points in academia, demographic changes, etc. In this paper we attempt to apply a usage that simply denotes this state of co-existence regardless of whether or not it is more or less successful, peaceful, desirable, etc.

promote integration by sponsoring training programmes for language- and (inter)cultural mediators. As we shall see, this covers a broad range of activities that include pro-active measures such as conflict-prevention, project-planning and implementation, but also translation and interpreting activities. Such community based training programmes for (inter)cultural mediators differ not just in pedagogical approach but in role description, code of practice and objectives, from language mediation programmes offered at universities, and differ even more from traditional interpreter training programmes at academic institutions.

Public and private institutions in need of language services frequently recruit on the understanding that 'knowing the language is sufficient' leading to a situation where the use of untrained interpreters, especially for languages of limited diffusion (LLDs), is prevalent. Very few institutions are willing to invest the time, money and effort necessary to recruit or train professionals. Consequently, the recruitment of interpreters is still profoundly ad-hoc: hospitals, social services, police stations, district and city courts, immigration services and offices, and refugee services have little systematic provisions for recruitment, assessment, training or accreditation at local or national level. It is still not unusual for hospitals and police stations to resort to restaurant staff, cleaning staff, friends and family – including children – when in need of an interpreter.

### 3.1. *Cultural mediator training objectives*<sup>3</sup>

Interestingly, the cultural mediator enjoys more recognition and training opportunities – by municipal, regional or provincial bodies and NGO's – than people functioning as interpreters and translators in field-specific domains, such as the legal, medical or educational fields. In the Italian tradition the mediator is encouraged and trained to be an active, participatory agent, expected to prevent conflicts and misunderstandings deriving from the clients' lack of information about Italian institutions and vice versa. Although the level of training is often high with highly relevant core subjects, local authorities tend to set their own standards of recruitment, training and accreditation and as yet no national curricula, standards or objectives have been established. Another limitation is that these training programmes are generally offered by local authorities or

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<sup>3</sup> Section 3.1 is drawn largely from Rudvin 2002. See e.g. Luatti 2006 for a detailed account of sectorial and professional aspects of Cultural Mediation in the Italian setting. See Falbo 2013 on language mediation and interpreting in the legal sector in Italy.

NGO's, and tend to be run on a limited project-funded basis with little sustainable continuity which means that once the project has come to an end, the provision of training ceases<sup>4</sup>.

The encompassing objective of cultural mediation training courses is to 'facilitate the entry of immigrants into the host community and to ease their interaction with Italian institutions and between majority and minority groups', the goal thus being to teach participants the skills needed to reach these objectives, in the words of one of the trainers of a 700-hr course in Bologna (Constantino and Pinelli 2002, 338). Typically, these courses view the mediator as a fully interacting community participant who shares responsibility by supporting and implementing conflict-avoidance strategies, identifying and anticipating potential areas of conflict by bringing the two 'identities' of host and migrant culture closer together, i.e. "moving from divergence to convergence" (Constantino and Pinelli 2002, 338). Specific competencies that students are expected to acquire are: how to reach a diagnosis, perform practical bureaucratic tasks, apply for asylum, interact with other children in class, etc. The task of interpreting frequently falls under the larger umbrella of cultural mediation, in other words it is simply seen as a communication strategy necessary to reach a particular goal for which the mediator shares responsibility.

In support of this general view and institutional policy among service providers, it might be worth mentioning some interesting data which emerged through interviews put to doctors at several hospitals in the Region of Emilia Romagna (see Rudvin 2002). The doctors frequently saw the interpreters not only as language facilitators – and often but not always as cultural brokers – but as 'care-givers' expected to support the patients and meet their psychological and emotional as well as language needs. In this survey, a number of discrepancies emerged relating to the cardinal rules of impartiality-neutrality and confidentiality which suggest that even if they are in principle upheld as ethical fundamentals by the service providers, at the practical level they can be easily relinquished. Thus, for the service providers, practical considerations may outweigh consideration of ethics or principle; the more practical aspects in the day-to-day running of the institution tend to have more weight. We see thus that the terminological ambiguity impacts concretely on professional role and ethics. One might furthermore speculate whether or not interpreters trained according to what we might call a 'community-based model', i.e.

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<sup>4</sup> Rudvin (2010) provides more information on aspects of role and training of interpreters and language mediators in the Italian health-care sector.

not coming from a linguistic background or trained as conference interpreters, will react differently to service providers' requirements.

What is happening in Italy seems in many ways to be the reverse of what has happened in most other Western countries where the interpreting profession and interpreters themselves adopted a more mechanical view of translating and only subsequently opened up to the need to fully engage with cross-cultural communication modes in interpreter training. This eventually led to an increased awareness of the differences in cross-cultural communication models and how these affect the interaction between the foreign-language client in institutional discourse situations, reflecting precisely the 'cultural turn' in interpreting and translation theory which suggests that culture, and not just language, governs translator/interpreter-mediated communication (see section 5 below).

Mainstream interpreting theory focussed almost exclusively on semantics, interpreting techniques, cognitive aspects related to interpreting, institutional discourse, etc. for the simple reason that most of the literature and theory has traditionally been situated in the realm of conference interpreting. Where conference interpreting then 'spills over' into public service interpreting with the ideal of the 'neutral', 'machine-like' interpreter, this view informs the interpreter's conception of him/herself, we argue. It is exclusively aimed at the interpreting encounter as such, not at the interpreting encounter as one step/part in the holistic integration process of a foreign worker in the host society or a non-Italian speaking child at school, for example, which would be the case in Italy as we saw at the beginning of this section.

In certain sensitive domains involving severe trauma and vulnerable clients, the 'mediation modality' in a more client-centred approach will arguably tend to emerge more naturally. The groups involved in such situations are in a particularly vulnerable position: recent migrants disoriented in a confusing and often hostile host country; victims of abuse unfamiliar with the language and system of the very institutions to whom they must lay bare painful and personal facts and solicit justice; deaf in a speaking environment that takes little heed of their specific needs and victims of torture or political or other repression (as may be the case with refugees). Ideally, the two different professional roles – mediator and interpreter – should not only be clearly delineated and differentiated, but made available to minority group representatives, filling two different but complementary functions when needed. The cost of providing such services, however, may not be realistic, especially for languages of limited diffusion.



What we find then is a discrepancy between the interpreter's role and the weight given to the different elements surrounding and in part constituting this activity (e.g. culture and integration). This poses a problem for the standardization of interpreter training and the establishment of a code of ethics that does not only take into account the traditional norms of good interpreting practice, but also the needs of the wider community. By relinquishing the idea of a once-and-for-all solution delimiting the interpreter's task and role, it might be more useful to consider the objectives that are unique to each context and situation. Rather than delimiting, defining and prescribing universal solutions, a dialogue-based approach between service providers, interpreters and clients at an institutional level of information exchange and negotiation of tasks and responsibilities is advisable in order to accommodate the 'real-world' needs and demands of interpreters and their clients.

#### 4. LANGUAGE MEDIATION AS AN ACADEMIC DISCIPLINE

It is interesting to note that the development of the *profession* of language- and cultural mediation in Italy, closely tied – as we have suggested above – to its migration history and arising as a response to specific demographic developments, has an entirely separate trajectory from the development of language mediation as an *academic discipline*. As an academic discipline, language mediation has developed in a completely different fashion and far more recently, in line with individual university policies, but also government reforms relating to university curricula. Until recently, the impression has been that these two domains – professional and academic – have had very little knowledge of each other, indeed each was often unaware of the nature of the other, if not of its existence. As discussed in the literature (Garzone 2009; see Falbo 2013; Rudvin and Spinzi 2013; Falbo and Viezzi 2014) and, as mentioned above, the term 'cultural mediation' is used as an umbrella term which includes forms of translation and interpreting. Phelan and Martin (2010) compare the terminological confusion in Italy with the situation in Ireland and state that cultural mediation in Ireland as in Italy is strictly linked to immigration, reiterating the importance of distinguishing interpreters from cultural mediators who are seen as promoters for interculturalism, but above all as those who provide patients with "extra help in order to access services". As a word of caution, Franz Pöckhacker highlights the risks of putting 'interpreting' and 'mediation' on the same level:

However, the point I am trying to make... is to draw attention to the inherent ambiguity and confusion that may result from the equation of 'interpreting' and 'mediation', and to the consequences of this indefiniteness for progress in the field of community interpreting. Even within a particular language – such as English – it is difficult, if not impossible, to ensure a common understanding (in the broader social rather than academic sphere) of concepts like translation, language and culture as well as mediation. But beyond this inherent conceptual complexity, a broader, international consensus on 'interpreting as mediation' is greatly at risk from linguistic traditions, legal dispositions and even group-based preferences in various sociocultural contexts that may take shape as conflicting terminological choices. (Pöchhacker 2008, 21-22)

The term 'mediazione linguistica' appeared for the first time in Italy in 1999 with the University Reform which introduced the 3+2 undergraduate – postgraduate/specialization model. The course was called 'Scienze della Mediazione linguistica' (Science of Language Mediation) reduced to 'mediazione linguistica' in 2004, when the new courses were implemented by the Italian Universities (cf. Blini 2008). The 1999 law did not include the term 'mediation' but in other official documents derived from this, the term appears under the label of 'mediazione interculturale' and in some cases 'mediazione linguistica e culturale'. The term is also absent in the law which regularizes the academic disciplinary sector today known as "Lingua e Traduzione" (Language and Translation) where the process of mediation is referred to in terms of translation and interpreting. What is clear is that the term was created by Italian academic institutions to comply with these new rules and that the proliferation of university degree courses in 'mediazione linguistica', 'mediazione linguistico-culturale' and 'mediazione interculturale' from the early 2000's was a response to government reforms requiring the classification of language-related undergraduate degree courses in the disciplinary macro-sector that was named 'mediazione'. This umbrella term embraced a wide range of textual discourse activities related very generally to the interface between cultures and languages<sup>5</sup> and at a communicative/discoursal level into the macro-category of 'intercultural communication' (also discussed in Garzone 2009). These new courses interfaced with and overlapped with the existing degrees of translation/interpreting at the private and public Interpreting and Trans-

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<sup>5</sup> This falls very naturally into and overlaps with degree courses in Modern Languages and the growing recognition of the cultural underpinnings of any given language and language community; it also interfaces with the growing contact between Italian and foreign students, for example through the Erasmus programme.

lation institutes (now Schools or Departments, earlier Faculties). These Departments traditionally focussed on conference interpreting or possibly business interpreting, technical and/or literary translation (but not exclusively – some offer(ed) courses on audio-visual translation for example). The Interpreting and Translation Departments were of course facilitated in setting up programmes and curricula in the new 'language mediation' discipline, and naturally reflected their more 'technical' nature, whilst the Departments of Modern Language lacked the staff expertise, resources and infrastructures to offer interpreting or translation 'proper' (for example the high-investment interpreting booths needed to train conference interpreters). The 'language mediation' courses offered at Departments of Modern Languages thus adopted very wide and very flexible curricula in which the term 'language mediation' was interpreted loosely, leading to a syllabus in which a wide range of language and translation activities and sectors were included. The object of study seems to be any interface or meeting between different cultures and languages. The training objectives of the three-year university courses contain different subjects which aim to train students to accommodate communication between languages and cultures, very generally speaking. Students thus acquire translation skills in the course of the training period, but not necessarily those skills suitable for or needed for the *profession* of 'language/cultural mediator' roughly in the sense of 'community interpreter' (see below).

This gradual development from the early 2000's thus evolved parallel to the *profession* of language/cultural mediation in two very distinct trajectories with a very different understanding and interpretation of the word 'mediation' and of the term 'language mediation'. The new profession of cultural mediator thus lacks an academic tradition, network and theoretical foundation.

Some of the negative spin-offs of the two-pronged trajectory of the evolution of mediation-related studies and professions in Italy could thus be summarized as:

- lack of communication, recognition and understanding between academia and the institutions that need and/or furnish these services;
- terminological and semantic confusion regarding the nomenclature;
- role confusion as perceived by professional mediators and by students/trainees at university;
- vastly different training programmes offered to students at universities, with lack of clarity in terms of their 'professional profile' and future possibilities for work;
- difficulty creating curricula in academia that responds to 'a unified discipline';

- confusion with other types of mediation: legal mediation, family/divorce mediation, diplomatic mediation, etc.;
- confusion when Italian academics write for English-language publications and speak at international conferences referring to 'language mediation' (and even more simply the translation of these terms from Italian into English).

#### 4.1. *The voice of the students*

With the aim of examining how the term 'mediation' is perceived by Italian learners in the academic world, a survey was conducted at the University of Palermo where an undergraduate course of Language Mediation is offered at first degree level. Not all the interviewees responded but the answers received are sufficient to get a reliable picture of the terminological issue and also sufficient to make suggestions and recommendations.

Only 9% of the respondents have personal work experience whereas the others answered the questions relying on their academic studies and personal background. Apart from the structured questions related to personal data, the most relevant questions are of the open type in line with the aim of collecting qualitative information regarding the general idea of mediation, the difference between language- and cultural mediation, and how students feel about the skills supplied by the academic courses.

In reply to the general questions on mediation, different responses emerged, but what emerged as the core of respondents' perception of the term was the idea of 'standing-in-between two parties with the aim of facilitating the communication'. Other attempts of conceptualisation may be glossed as 'helping the parties seek a mutually satisfying resolution of the dispute', 'modality of communicating in different contexts', 'oral translation', 'partial intervention', 'even lawyers are mediators'.

The responses for 'language mediation' showed a tangible overlap with oral translation/interpreting and frequently connected to a more specific discourse, namely diplomacy and international relations. With the term 'cultural mediation' the semantic axis moves towards the relevance of cultural aspects such as habits and values, stressing predictably the importance of coexistence between different cultures. The questions related to the expectations both for the language mediation courses provided and for a professional career show confusion with the role of interpreters. This was strengthened also by the demand for more practical courses and the acquisition of translating and interpreting competences. Intercultural competence is not mentioned in the needs required.

The data provided by these students enrolled in language mediation courses and thus motivated both to acquire the relevant skills through academic study programmes, but also to employ these same skills in their future careers, strengthens our claim above that the role and terminological confusion concerning language mediation in the institutional vs. academic settings is in dire need of clarification. Equally necessary is a much closer interface and concrete collaboration between these two domains and practices – creating curricula, establishing mandates and role boundaries, proposing accreditation programmes, etc., – so that the two – profession/institution and academia – can constructively and synergetically merge to strengthen a much broader profile of trained and professional mediators that have the skills and competencies to act as communication facilitators in a very wide range of settings (institutional: legal, medical, educational, diplomatic; corporate; cultural: tourism/media, etc.).

#### 5. HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES ON 'INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION' AND 'MEDIATION'<sup>6</sup>

We suggest that the general domain of 'mediazione linguistica', in the academic sense (as described in section 4) and only partly in the professional domain, interfaces in Anglo-Saxon and north-European academia with a number of disciplines, none of them however containing the term 'mediation'<sup>7</sup>. Rather, there is a strong disciplinary interface between what we term here broadly as 'intercultural communication' and the Italian tradition of 'language mediation', although their historical trajectories are clearly different. To provide a fuller picture of the evolution of what is in fact a very broad and interdisciplinary domain of inquiry we have broadly summarized the diachronic trajectory of 'intercultural communication'

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<sup>6</sup> See Atkinson 2014; Byram 2014; Hall 2014; R. Jackson 2014; Martin et al. 2014; Risager 2014; Shuter 2014; Weaver 2014 for details on the development of intercultural communication in academia. We have chosen two recent Handbooks published by Routledge this year as our source of data as we believe as sources they are both authoritative and representative: *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Intercultural Communication* (J. Jackson 2014) and *The Global Intercultural Communication Reader* (Asante et al. 2014).

<sup>7</sup> In English the term 'language mediation' has little currency (although this may change in the future) compared to the frequency with which it is used in Italian; furthermore, we believe that the associations with the word 'mediation' may be different in English than in Italian. We have not considered terms in other languages (German, French, Dutch), although this might be a profitable avenue for future research.

and in doing so illustrate the impact of meanings and usages on interpreter roles.

We describe this trend as evolving through a general paradigm shift in the humanities, beginning with modern *Anthropology* as it evolved through the works of Malinowsky and Boas and as it moved away from the earlier sphere of colonial ethnographical investigation. The term *Intercultural Studies* and *Culture Studies* emerged fully in the post-war period in the domains of diplomacy, international relations, politics and business management and at the interface of these disciplines with anthropology and language studies (Hall's seminal work in the 1950's was a catalyst for comparative cultural studies, for example). The increasing contact between nations, cultures and languages that was brought on by the giant leaps in technology and transport led to enormous investments by governments and corporations to optimize the opportunities presented by trade, diplomatic relations and by cultural exchange generally. With increasing international contact, processes such as 'acculturation', 'culture shock' and 'conflict management' became objects of study. Intercultural communication has since then mushroomed into a super-discipline – or umbrella discipline – that embraces (or is embraced by) domains that are as far apart as business studies and language acquisition. Alongside this internationalization process and increased attention to intercultural communication, another domain emerges that by nature is comparative, namely *Language Learning* and *Second Language Acquisition*; here, the acquisition of cultural knowledge and competence becomes a vehicle for language learning and so the focus shifts significantly.

From the late 1970's in Anglo-Saxon academia *Cultural Studies* (representing a new constructivist, anti-positivist and non-essentialist paradigm in the humanities) created a passage, or an historical continuum, with the acknowledgement of the importance of culture as a social construct embedded in and constructive of all human communication, and along with this a self-reflexive attitude of the Self as an imperfect or incomplete interpretative filter of 'reality'. Cultural studies brought together a range of disciplines (anthropology, sociology, history, literature, language studies, art history, psychology, political science and politics, etc.) and academic literature burgeoned under this new umbrella, finding a highly productive interdisciplinary interface investigating and generating new areas of research and institutional practice. Cultural Studies were closely followed by *Postcolonial Studies* (in its earliest representation through Said) and, more generally *postmodernism* representing tropes and spaces of in-between-ness, the writing-space between languages and cultures in a diachronic, asymmetrical contact situation challenging historical and

existing power relations between Writer/Observer and his/her object of investigation. Postmodernism especially, but also postcolonial studies deeply influenced the new era in *Literature* (Literary Theory, Feminist Theory and the new cross-over disciplines represented by Barthes, Bourdieu, Derrida). In a very different vein, other crucial spin-offs of the development in language studies that are informed by the broad cultural and constructivist term are *Applied Linguistics* and *Socio-Linguistics* (Hymes, Gumperz, Scollon, Tannen to name only a very few).

Few scholars today support the positivist essentialist nation-culture-language paradigm, but have moved towards a much more fluid and dynamic understanding of 'linguacultures' (for use of this term see Risager 2014) where the interface of culture-sets and the polyvalent and dynamic nature of language (through diachronic change or diatopic variation) is seen to be the domain of a far more complex and amorphous language identity. Recognizing the relativity of cultural norms, intercultural communication and in particular 'Critical Cultural Awareness' – a critical evaluation of one's own and others' cultures – allows us to compare and mediate between different cultural norms (Baker 2011). This more fluid notion of 'intercultural' identity and intercultural competence is perhaps a more interesting methodological approach in an increasingly globalized communicative situation and combines well with Risager's notion of 'world citizen' (Risager 2014). This is seen particularly in disciplines that study language change and variety, such as ELF studies.

*Translation Studies*, in its earliest form is deeply bound to linguistics and partly to language learning, but through the 'cultural turn' in the late 1980's it draws increasingly on anthropology, sociology, literary studies and particularly cultural studies, feeding subsequently into *Interpreting Studies* a decade or so later. In an attempt to define the borders between the mediator and the translator, Taft (1981, 53) looked at the 'cultural mediator' in terms of facilitator of the communication between people from different cultures and looks at translation as one of the activities which characterizes the mediator, who "must be to a certain extent bicultural".

The connection between translation (in a wide sense of the word) and intercultural communication is an obvious one, almost a self-defining term in its quintessential intercultural manifestation. However, due to the essentialist nature of early Translation Studies, and perhaps even more of Interpreting Studies, the change in perspective from a prescriptive to a descriptive approach was slow in coming. Juliane House (2009) in one of her recent studies on translation in an intercultural-functionalist framework makes this connection explicit. Otto Kade (1968) used the German



term ‘Sprachmittlung’ meaning ‘language mediation’ in a general sense and located translation and interpreting as the two main conceptual branches of this domain.

More recently, in the post ‘cultural-turn’ era of Translation- and Interpreting Studies, immigration-related issues have increasingly been integrated in TS and IS analyses, especially in the sub-discipline of *Community Interpreting*<sup>8</sup> (also referred to, roughly synonymously, as *Public Service Interpreting*). Such studies also draw on statistics, empirical case studies, political, economic and demographical analyses, and not least the literature describing and investigating public institutions and public services. More specifically, one might sum this up as the need for effective communication in public institutions in pluri-lingual and pluri-cultural contact situations.

It is precisely in the sub-discipline of Community Interpreting, moulded by the chronology of intercultural communication that has been traced above, that the Italian term ‘mediazione linguistica’ finds its closest equivalent. Indeed, the profession of ‘mediazione linguistica’ evolved as a response to concrete, tangible needs of migrants and non-Italian speakers to access institutions and public services in order to safeguard at least the most fundamental civil rights and to function successfully in society. This ‘intermediary’ role between institution and non-Italian speaker is precisely the mandate of the ‘mediatore linguistico-culturale’. ‘Mediazione linguistica’ is closely tied to institutional practices as a response to demographic change, i.e. society’s response (government policy as well as non-official channels, especially the voluntary sector), whilst language mediation, in its academic guise – a guise that mushroomed into existence decades later – corresponds to those academic practices informing Translation Studies and more generally text-analytical (often written rather than oral) processes in an intercultural, or cross-cultural, framework<sup>9</sup>.

At this point it might be interesting to probe the deep-structure connection between intercultural studies, as outlined above, and ‘language mediation’. The nexus that lies at the heart of both the ‘intercultural’ and ‘mediation’ paradigms is the complex and intrinsic Language-Culture bond, and forms its core defining concept. This nexus has been and con-

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<sup>8</sup> See Rudvin 2006 for a much more detailed analysis of the paradigm shift in the humanities leading to the ‘cultural turn’ in Community Interpreting. See Hale 2007 for a detailed account of Community Interpreting.

<sup>9</sup> By intercultural we mean a dialogic and proactive interface between cultures and languages, whilst by cross-cultural we intend an approach that, albeit of a comparativistic nature, does not necessarily address or suggest solutions to any communication setbacks arising from this interface.



tinues to be probed in practically all of the disciplines and sub-disciplines mentioned above as well as through neo-Whorfian and neo-Vygotskian frameworks of investigation. Enabling and implementing this nexus is the interface between languages and cultures (language-language/culture-culture/linguaculture) as they come into contact. The in-between space(s) in this interface have been designated, through the various developmental phases of the disciplines mentioned above, through an articulate and eloquent array of nomenclature, perhaps most famously in Homi Bhaba's "3<sup>rd</sup> space" (2004). The interface here might look something like this:

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INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION / MEDIAZIONE LINGUISTICA

*Objects and objectives of study*

Intercultural dialogue (enabling effective communication between parties belonging to different linguistic and cultural domains).

'Languages in contact' as the intrinsic site of a mediation process through language and other semiotic channels.

'Cultures in contact' as the intrinsic site of a mediation process through the channel of language and other semiotic channels.

Management of potential conflict (in a 'soft' sense, cultures in contact that may lead to misunderstandings and lack of effective communication, often unknowingly).

Conflict mediation (in the strict sense of the word as the practice of resolving conflicts that have emerged as a result of incompatible socio-cultural practices, or the inability to communicate these practices to the other party due to the lack of an adequate linguistic channel).

*Methodology*

Macro and micro analyses of texts and of discourse practices in contact situations.

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Whilst the intercultural communication trajectory as described above does not contain any reference to mediation (except for rare instances, see Fantini 2014, for example, 'language as mediator') and thus, by token, to any inherent notion of conflict or tension, Italian nomenclature of a broadly similar domain and discipline specifically focuses on this notion of tension, albeit often through a diluted notion of 'conflict'.

## 6. DOES MEDIATION IMPLY CONFLICT? THE IDEOLOGY OF ‘MEDIATION’

We suggest that the term ‘mediation’ intrinsically suggests some form of covert or overt tension or conflict and subsequently the redress of this conflict through the activity/process of ‘mediation’ – i.e. a proactive, constructive, dialogue-based social practice. The ideological assumption behind this connection (i.e. the assumption of an inherent state of conflict in any interaction between interlocutors speaking different languages or belonging to different cultures and therefore requiring redress through a mediator) in the context of intercultural communication is, we believe, not entirely tenable at a more surface level. It may be claimed however with more conviction at a ‘deep level’, i.e. that any meeting of languages, let alone cultures, implies a mis-match of semantic and cognitive domains (in a strong Whorfian or possible Vygotskian sense) and thus the presence of tension or conflict in a very diluted, or covert, sense of the word<sup>10</sup>. In English, we argue, ‘mediation’ belongs primarily to a domain that suggests – and redresses – overt tension and conflict in the established professions such as law and psychology, social services, diplomacy – very broadly speaking – or other professions that by definition often engage two opposing parties. In a simple google.co.uk search of ‘mediation’ the first two pages of items, many of them from dictionaries, refer precisely to ‘dispute settlement’. Tellingly, we find two Italian websites among the items on the first two pages, bearing out our claim that the word is more frequent in Italian, especially in non-conflict or dispute settlement contexts. When we keyed in ‘cultural’ as a qualifier, several references to the Russian scholar Lev S. Vygotsky emerged. Vygotsky was one of the first scholars to suggest, or at least articulate, the idea that knowledge is constructed through the cognitive mediation of experiences (Vygotsky 1986). Charles Fernyhough describes the historical development of the Vygotskian term mediation in the following quote:

The term mediation has a long history in the behavioral sciences, frequently being used to describe a situation where one entity plays an intermediary causal role in the relation between two other entities. In the more limited context of sociocultural theories of development, it can refer to the process whereby individuals’ understanding is refracted through the experience of others (e.g., Chesnokova, 2004). In its stricter Vygotskian sense, mediation involves the use of culturally-derived psychological tools, such as utterances

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<sup>10</sup> Or conflict in this very diluted sense: “A state of mind in which a person experiences a clash of opposed feelings or needs” (either cultural or ideological), *Oxford English Dictionary* (<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com> [10/06/2014]).

in spoken or sign language, in transforming the relations between psychological inputs and outputs. [...] the use of semiotic mediation in representing and reasoning about the mental states of others can crucially offset some of the cognitive challenges of these processes. (Fernyhough 2008, 230)

Although statistically relevant as a recurring item in an English language (co.uk) google search, the fact that 'mediation' is a translation from Russian, does not give us any conclusive evidence regarding its use in the English-speaking tradition.

In those instances where 'mediation' appeared in connection with the EU, the picture is slightly different and does actually refer more specifically to translation and interpreting activities, as in the Italian tradition. However, this could be in part due to the input from other member state languages and cultures that use the term 'mediation' roughly as a synonym for translation or interpreting.

We suggest, although we do not as yet have adequate data to uphold this hypothesis, that the difference in nomenclature between these domains in English and Italian is partly due to the historical, demographic and political reasons illustrated above, but possibly also to more subtle differences in how the term 'mediation' is cognitively perceived in Italian and in Anglo-Saxon cultures – the former more collectivist, high-context and prone to more indirect discourse strategies, and the latter more prone to using direct communicative strategies and interpreting the notion of 'mediation' as tension-driven and related to concrete situations of conflict. In English, the word 'dialogue' might be closer, we suggest, on the semantic axis, to 'mediation' in Italian (it is worth mentioning that most language and cultural mediators working in Italy today are not Italian so the role confusion may be even greater).

The danger with the Italian situation is that if the message that is given to the language- and cultural mediator in any professional setting is that of a proactive agent acting on his/her own initiative to solve inherent conflicts or tension at either a surface or a deep level, s/he is not equipped to handle this highly delicate and cognitively challenging mandate unless trained to do so. Conflict management – even in a very broad sense of the word – is often absent from the curriculum of such training courses. Such highly specific competencies are acquired through high-level training (psychology, group dynamics, etc.) and should be provided over and above the more 'passive' knowledge of a very broad range of cultural and linguistic skills. Emotional 'self-protection' skills, as are provided to those working in conflict areas, should also be provided if the mediator's mandate is that of a proactive conflict-solving agent.

The inherent ideological bias (ideological here in a positive sense) of the disciplines and practices through which both intercultural communication and ‘*mediazione linguistica*’ as a profession have evolved, is by definition embedded in a multicultural domain (its nature being languages and cultures in contact) and is thus tied closely to dialogue building, engagement with- and research into disempowered communities, engagement with issues relating to immigration, to learning about other cultures and issues such as ‘tolerance’, ‘peace-building’, etc. (see Byram 2014, 86 and 90). This ideological parameter is clear in most areas of intercultural communication except perhaps in the corporate domain where the final objective is clearly that of securing financial gain. It is also less clear perhaps in the purely text-based practices of translation or language acquisition. It may be less explicit in the Italian academic tradition of ‘*mediazione linguistica*’, and yet the underlying ‘ideology’ governing this tradition, as found in Departments of Modern Languages across the country, is still that of enabling communication and ‘dialogue’ between users of different ‘linguacultures’.

## 7. CONCLUSION

Our aim in this paper has been to probe the interfaces and borders between the domain of intercultural communication in the Anglo-Saxon traditions and ‘language mediation’ in the Italian tradition. We have looked at how these disciplines evolved in their respective historical backgrounds and how they are positioned in their socio-political and institutional-academic contexts, and how in Italy they are manifested in very different ways in academia vis-à-vis language mediation as a profession. We have also discussed the nature of the process of ‘mediation’ suggesting that there is an erroneous underlying assumption of a state of covert or overt conflict in any given meeting between different languages and/or cultures. Lastly, we have looked at some of the key elements that define these practices of social engagement suggesting that the interface between intercultural communication and ‘*mediazione*’ is to be found in the ubiquitous Language-Culture nexus. By providing this comparative historical trajectory and looking at how these domains overlap, we hope to have clarified some of the confusion surrounding them.

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