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Language background and language self-assessment of Spanish-Swedish public service interpreters in Sweden / Perfil lingüístico y autoevaluación lingüística de intérpretes en los servicios públicos de español y sueco en Suecia

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Abstract: Advanced language proficiency is a requirement for public service interpreting, and yet, research has not described this construct holistically in interpreting studies. Previous studies have suggested that public service interpreters primarily have a migration background and asymmetrical language proficiency. The present study reports findings of these aspects from a questionnaire that was conducted to investigate the linguistic background of Spanish-Swedish public service interpreters in Sweden. A total of 118 Spanish-Swedish interpreters answered the questionnaire. Results show that the interpreters have asymmetrical language proficiency but do not primarily have a migration background. Moreover, it is indicated that asymmetrical language proficiency and migration background have an impact on the likelihood of public service interpreters being state-authorized. However, there is a need for further research on these aspects to better understand details regarding both public service interpreters in Sweden and public service interpreters internationally.

Keywords: Public service interpreting; Language self-assessment; Migration background; Asymmetrical language proficiency; Spanish-Swedish interpreters

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Resumen: La competencia lingüística avanzada es un requisito para la interpretación en los servicios públicos. A pesar de ello, este constructo continúa sin ser estudiado en su totalidad en el ámbito de la interpretación. Estudios previos sugieren que los intérpretes en los servicios públicos (ISP) tienen principalmente origen migratorio y una competencia lingüística asimétrica. Este estudio presenta los resultados de una encuesta elaborada con el fin de investigar el perfil lingüístico de los ISP de español-sueco en Suecia. La encuesta fue completada por un total de 118 intérpretes de esta combinación lingüística. Los resultados confirman que este grupo de intérpretes tiene una competencia lingüística asimétrica, pero su perfil no tiene necesariamente un origen migratorio. Asimismo, el estudio indica que la probabilidad de ser intérprete autorizado/a en los servicios públicos también se ve afectada por estos factores. Aun así, es necesario profundizar en la investigación sobre estos temas para entender mejor los aspectos relacionados tanto con la población de intérpretes en Suecia como con la interpretación a nivel internacional.

Palabras clave: Interpretación en los servicios públicos; Autoevaluación lingüística; Origen migratorio; Competencia lingüística asimétrica; Intérpretes de español-sueco

1. Introduction

Public service interpreting is an activity in which advanced language proficiency is essential in the interpreter's working languages (Blasco Mayor, 2015; Tiselius, 2024). It has been argued that interpreting requires language abilities on an Advanced High level (according to the levels of ACTFL, 2012) as well as an ability to understand and communicate in several linguistic registers, regional language variations, as well as accents (Angelelli, 2007). Similarly, Blasco Mayor argues that "interpreters require a C2 level of language proficiency" (2015, p. 115), i.e. the most advanced level according to the levels of CEFR (Council of Europe, 2023), reinforcing the statement that advanced language proficiency is necessary for public service interpreting. Yet, research on language proficiency in interpreting is scarce (Angelelli, 2007; Blasco Mayor, 2015; Tiselius and Englund Dimitrova, 2019; Thomsen, 2023; Tiselius, 2024), and there is no complete agreement among researchers regarding the definition of the construct of language proficiency in interpreting (Angelelli, 2007).

Typically, public service interpreters who work in the public sector use the short consecutive interpreting technique, i.e. interpreting utterance by utterance. Other modes are also used (e.g. simultaneous interpreting or chuchotage, and sight interpreting from a text), but the short consecutive mode, also called 'dialogue interpreting', is the most common. Therefore, dialogue interpreting refers to the interpreting technique and not to the context or setting (e.g. Tiselius and Englund Dimitrova, 2019).

Central in dialogue interpreting is the alternating oral translation into the two languages of the event, i.e. a type of interpreting in which directionality is a prominent feature of the task. The dialogical nature of public service interpreting requires consequently advanced language proficiency in both of the interpreter's working languages, including speech reception and speech production. However, the interpreter's language proficiency, an important cornerstone of this complex linguistic task, has, as far as we have been able to establish, received little research attention to date, especially in public service interpreting (Tiselius, 2024).

Moreover, neither public service interpreting in Sweden nor public service interpreters' language proficiency have been specifically the focus of previous research. In fact, previous research on the interpreting population in Sweden has focused on interpreters in general (SOU 2004:15; SOU 2005:37; SOU 2018:83), and there is only one recent study describing a

specific language group. That study (Thomsen, 2023) describes state authorization and training regarding Spanish-Swedish public service interpreters in Sweden, showing that the age distribution of Spanish-Swedish state-authorized interpreters is skewed and that a majority of this interpreter population has interpreter training. On the other hand, we found an important research gap concerning public service interpreters' language proficiency and linguistic background, and there is a need to disentangle the possible impact that these aspects might have on public service interpreters.

Keeping this context in mind, the present study focuses on describing both the concept of (asymmetrical) language proficiency and the linguistic background of public service interpreters in Sweden. More specifically, the present study describes the linguistic background of Spanish-Swedish public service interpreters in Sweden based on the interpreters' self-perception and self-assessment regarding specific aspects. The study builds on two assumptions discussed by previous literature: (1) public service interpreters have a migration background (Gustafsson, 2023) and (2) public service interpreters have asymmetrical language proficiency (Tiselius & Englund Dimitrova, 2019). It is based on the same survey data as Thomsen (2023), but, due to a lack of knowledge concerning the linguistic background of this specific language group, the aim is to gain knowledge of these aspects using the Spanish-Swedish interpreter population in Sweden as a case study.

2. Background and main concepts

2.1 Defining language proficiency

A large number of studies have focused on language proficiency, not only in the fields of (socio)linguistics (Dąbrowska, 2012; Hulstijn, 2015; Rydell, 2018), bilingualism, and second language acquisition (Norrman, 2020; Bylund et al., 2021), but also in interpreting studies (Angelelli, 2007; Blasco Mayor, 2015; Thomsen, 2018; Tiselius and Englund Dimitrova, 2019; Thomsen, 2023; Tiselius, 2024). Language proficiency is a cognitive requirement for interpreting that is related to cognitive development, interpreting experience (Blasco Mayor, 2015), and educational level (Hulstijn, 2015).

There are several ways of defining the construct of language proficiency, but typically, the construct is divided into a continuum or a dichotomy. A continuum indicates that language proficiency is looked upon as gradual and changing over time, e.g. throughout childhood and adulthood. The most common assumption is based on the concept of age of acquisition, meaning that learning an L2 during childhood is assumed to have proficiency benefits compared to learning an L2 during adulthood (Bylund et al., 2021). According to this viewpoint, learning a language is based on gradual linguistic acquisition but also on the fact that there is an assumed age limit for a language learner to show nativelike characteristics (ibid). It has also been pointed out, regarding the continuum point of view, that language learning is infinite in both L1 and L2, indicating the impossibility of defining a maximal value of language proficiency (Hulstijn, 2015). On the other hand, when it comes to language proficiency viewed as a dichotomy, Hulstijn (2015) introduced the concepts of basic language cognition (BLC) and higher language cognition (HLC). BLC pertains to the language that the vast majority of L1 speakers share, whereas HLC refers to an extended language acquisition influenced by individual characteristics such as age, intelligence, level of education and professional career. Although the BLC-HLC theory is considered a dichotomy, the concepts of BLC and HLC frequently coexist. This means that individuals, depending on their level of language proficiency, can have only one of the two proficiencies, but frequently possess both. For that

reason, speakers commonly master languages at both BLC and HLC levels, but differences can be seen when comparing native speakers and non-native speakers. A fundamental difference between BLC and HLC is that while BLC is limited to speech reception and speech production, HLC also includes both reading and writing skills (ibid), indicating that HLC involves more advanced language abilities than BLC.

When applying the dichotomy point of view on public service interpreting, research studies describe interpreters as either having sufficient language proficiency for interpreting or not mastering the language on a level advanced enough to interpret (Angelelli, 2007; Tiselius and Englund Dimitrova, 2019). In fact, this perspective divides interpreters into two groups, one that has complete language capacity to work as an interpreter, and the other, where lack of sufficient language competence will create challenges for them as interpreters. Specifically, Tiselius and Englund Dimitrova argue that “the dialogue interpreter needs to be bilingual at BLC level and master several of the HLC aspects, in both L1 and L2, in order to interpret to and from two different languages” (2019, pp. 308-309).

Moreover, an important aspect of the BLC-HLC theory worth considering in interpreting studies is the fact that language proficiency includes various factors. These factors can differ between languages and between individuals and are described as dependent on individual characteristics, e.g., interpreting experience, and level of education. Therefore, in addition to the concept of asymmetrical language proficiency, public service interpreters have also been described as having diverse linguistic and educational backgrounds, as well as being a heterogeneous group that commonly is formed by L2 speakers of the majority language (Tiselius and Englund Dimitrova, 2019; Thomsen, 2023).

2.2 Assessing language proficiency

Language proficiency assessment is frequently carried out by using language tests or self-assessments to evaluate a speaker’s proficiency level. There are several language tests used for assessing language proficiency, e.g. the ACTFL Proficiency Placement Test (APPT), the Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) testing online, Diploma de Español como Lengua Extranjera (DELE), Test in Swedish for University Studies (Tisus) and Dialang. Specifically, Dialang has been described by Huhta (2010) and has been used by previous research on public service interpreting (Tiselius & Englund Dimitrova, 2019; Adler, 2023) to determine and assess interpreters’ language proficiency.

Commonly, language tests use scales with different levels of proficiency as an assessment tool. However, language assessment can also be carried out by self-assessment or self-evaluation of language competence and language skills, e.g. by conducting interviews or collecting linguistic data based on participants’ responses in a questionnaire (McNamara, 2000; Blasco Mayor, 2015; Díaz-Galaz, 2020; Kaushanskaya et al., 2020; Forsberg et al., 2021; Tiselius, 2024).

The self-assessment method is used primarily to investigate language from a participant’s point of view as well as to provide an insight into the participants’ reflections on, for example, their own linguistic background. The Language Experience and Proficiency Questionnaire (LEAP-Q) has been used for this purpose, describing the questionnaire as “an effective, efficient, valid, and reliable tool for assessing bilingual language status” (Marian et al., 2007, p. 960). Since self-reports and self-assessment of language proficiency have generally been confirmed to be a reliable predictor of actual language proficiency when screening the linguistic background of individuals, they will also be used in the present study.

2.3 Language proficiency in public service interpreting

Public service interpreters are often assumed to have advanced language proficiency (Angelelli, 2007; Mellinger & Jiménez, 2019; Tiselius, 2024). Generally, public service providers and public service users believe that public service interpreters have equally advanced (symmetrical) proficiency in their working languages. This assumption is based on the dialogical nature of public service interpreting, which leads to the presupposition that, since the interpreter needs both speech production and speech reception in the two languages throughout the entire interpreter-mediated conversation, the interpreter must also be equally proficient in both languages (Tiselius, 2024). However, some previous research argues that public service interpreters have asymmetrical language proficiency, indicating that interpreters have one stronger and one weaker working language (De Bot, 2000; Tiselius & Englund Dimitrova, 2019). Other studies have implicitly indicated that interpreters have asymmetrical language proficiency. That being said, asymmetrical language proficiency does not imply that public service interpreters' knowledge of one of their working languages is shallow, it only refers to the fact that the relationship between the two languages is asymmetrical and that one of these languages can be considered stronger than the other (see Section 2.5 for further definitions of these terms in the present study).

Moreover, previous research on interpreting has shown that public service interpreters seem to apply more interpreting strategies when interpreting in a weaker working language compared to when interpreting in a stronger working language (Thomsen, 2018). This indicates not only that public service interpreters may have asymmetrical language proficiency, but also that the language asymmetry influences the interpreter-mediated conversation. Darò et al. (1996) found that the number of mistakes made by simultaneous interpreters is influenced by directionality, e.g. increased information loss when interpreting into an L2. Another study describes interpreting students as having a greater need for language development (specifically for listening comprehension) in their L2 compared to their L1 (Blasco Mayor, 2015), which implicitly suggests the asymmetrical competence of their languages.

Furthermore, previous research has also hypothesized an implicit relationship between cognition and asymmetrical language proficiency, suggesting that interpreting into a weaker working language (frequently the interpreter's L2) increases cognitive load (Tiselius & Englund Dimitrova, 2019). From this point of view, Tiselius and Sneed (2020) describe cognitive load in interpreting by using eye-tracking. Interpreters were concluded to gaze to the void more frequently when interpreting into a weaker working language, thus indicating differences due to asymmetrical language proficiency. Although that study does not examine asymmetrical language proficiency directly, assumptions can be made regarding the influences of (asymmetrical) language proficiency on the interpreters' cognitive load, i.e. interpreting into a weaker language is presumably more cognitively demanding than interpreting into a stronger language. Cognitive load has also been investigated by Whyatt (2019), arguing that working from L1 to L2 as well as from L2 to L1 is cognitively demanding for translators. Whyatt (2019) also points out that the translator's cognitive effort differs for L1 and L2. In bilingualism studies, Calabria et al. (2018) state that processing demands for individuals with limited language proficiency were particularly taxing, thus indicating a relationship between level of language proficiency and cognitive processing.

Ultimately, although the above-mentioned results originate from three different fields (interpreting, translation, and bilingualism), they all indicate that cognitive processing differs in L1 and L2. Therefore, it seems evident that asymmetrical language proficiency needs to be

taken into consideration when researching public service interpreting.

2.4 Migration background

Previous research describes public service interpreters as a heterogeneous group (Tiselius & Englund Dimitrova, 2019; Mellinger & Jiménez, 2019; Valero-Garcés, 2023) primarily with a migration background (Gustafsson, 2023). To understand the concept of migration background, we must define the concept of 'heritage speaker'. According to Carreira (2004), there are three requirements to define a heritage speaker: being a member of a heritage language community, having a bond to the heritage language through family background, and being proficient in the heritage language. Mellinger & Jiménez further describe the heritage language speaker as being raised in a home where the heritage language is spoken, but also point out that "speakers do not typically demonstrate full parity between the heritage and societal languages" (2019, p. 958).

In the case of public service interpreting in Sweden, as indicated by Gustafsson (2023), most public service interpreters are L2 speakers of Swedish due to their migration background. To complicate matters even further, there are different types of bilingualism, indicating that the concept of migration background is complex. Interpreters can be "simultaneous bilinguals" or "sequential bilinguals", referring to the point in life when they became bilingual (Norrman, 2020, p. 37; Bylund et al., 2021, p. 20). Sequential bilinguals typically learn their L1 from birth and their L2 later in life, while simultaneous bilinguals acquire two languages directly from birth (Bylund et al., 2021). Moreover, considering these types of bilinguals, four types of migration background can be identified among public service interpreters in Sweden: (1) those born in Sweden growing up with immigrant parents, (2) those born in Sweden growing up with one immigrant parent and one parent speaking the majority language, (3) childhood immigrants (typically not born in Sweden), and (4) adulthood immigrants. These four types of interpreters are all bilingual, simultaneous or sequential, but acquired their L2 at different ages.

2.5 Native language as a concept

Throughout this study, native language will be used for the language an interpreter acquired first, while L1 will be used for the language that interpreters consider their strongest language and L2 for the language they consider their second strongest language. This terminology has been used previously by Tiselius and Englund Dimitrova (2019), defining stronger and weaker languages as specific for each interpreter and context. The goal is not to argue that a language is strong or weak, but simply to reflect the relationship between interpreters' self-perceived level of language proficiency in their two languages. Deciding on this terminology is relevant since these terms have been used differently by different researchers. Generally, a native language, also called a "heritage language" (Mellinger & Jiménez, 2019, pp. 954-955), is understood as the first language learned and the language in which an individual has the most advanced proficiency (Hulstijn, 2015). A native language and an L1 therefore frequently coincide. However, as we will see in this study, a native language (or heritage language) is not necessarily bound to the level of proficiency (Mellinger & Jiménez, 2019), but rather to cultural heritage and the order in which the languages were acquired.

3. Data collection

Data collection consisted of a questionnaire distributed to Spanish-Swedish public service

interpreters in Sweden during the fall of 2022. Before initiating the project, an ethical clearance was obtained from the Swedish Ethical Review Authority, reference number 2021-06687-01. The questionnaire examined interpreter training and interpreting experience as well as perceived language proficiency and language background. While general results of interpreter training and interpreting experience were presented in Thomsen (2023), the present study focuses on specific aspects of the interpreters' perceived language proficiency and language background.

3.1 Questionnaire design and pilot study

A total of 24 questions were included in a study-specific questionnaire. The survey consisted of five sections: (A) biographical information, (B) previous education and interpreter training, (C) language proficiency and language background, (D) interpreting experience, and (E) other questions. As stated above, the present study focuses primarily on section C, which included a total of seven questionnaire items. To name but a few, these items addressed questions about the number of spoken languages, the frequency with which they were spoken and with whom, as well as a ranking of languages from the most proficient to the least proficient.

During the initial stages of the project, a pilot was carried out using two methods. First, the items were discussed extensively in a group of translation and interpreting researchers at Stockholm University. Afterwards, a group of approximately ten public service interpreters were invited to fill out the questionnaire and give comments on possible improvements to the survey design. Since the target group of the study was formed by Spanish-Swedish interpreters, the pilot only included interpreters working between Swedish and a language other than Spanish. Once final modifications had been completed, the questions were inserted into an online software, Survey & Report, provided by Stockholm University, which also included a digital form for informed consent.

3.2 Participant recruitment

Participants were recruited primarily through contact information retrieved from the Swedish National Directory of Qualified Interpreters (Kammarkollegiet, 2023). This national directory, administered by Kammarkollegiet [the Legal, Financial and Administrative Services Agency], is an online directory in which contact information and qualifications of state-authorized interpreters and trained interpreters is provided (Kammarkollegiet, 2017). Kammarkollegiet also oversees state authorization of public service interpreters in Sweden, including three types of state authorization, i.e. general authorization, authorization with specialisation in medicine, and authorization with specialisation in law. To specialise in medicine or law, the candidate must first secure general authorization. A written and an oral task-relevant examination are required for each authorization type and the main goal is to provide high-quality interpreters to society (Kammarkollegiet, 2017).

A total of 135 Spanish-Swedish interpreters were available in the directory at the time of data collection and they were all invited by e-mail to fill out the online questionnaire. The inclusion criterion was working as a public service interpreter between Spanish and Swedish in Sweden, covering all authorization and training statuses as well as unauthorized and untrained interpreters. Since the national directory of qualified interpreters only contains state-authorized and trained interpreters, contact information for unauthorized and untrained interpreters had to be retrieved through other channels (since their contact information was not available in the national directory). Furthermore, participation in the national directory is

voluntary and far from all interpreters choose to participate (some interpreters do not want to appear in the directory), thus making the directory incomplete. To reach out to interpreters not available in the directory, i.e. those that had chosen not to appear in the directory or those that lacked state authorization and/or training (meaning they were not eligible to appear in the directory), collaboration with interpreter agencies was initiated. Since the registers of the interpreter agencies are not available or accessible to the public, unlike the online directory of Kammarkollegiet, collaboration with interpreter agencies was essential for the study. The interpreter agencies' registers only include interpreters working for the specific agency at the moment and are administered by each agency individually. The link to our online questionnaire was therefore sent to each agency. Subsequently, they distributed the questionnaire to their Spanish-Swedish public service interpreters.

It is also noteworthy that many interpreters are included both in the online directory of Kammarkollegiet and in the registers of the different agencies. Thus, there is a certain overlap in numbers (SOU 2018:83). Anticipating potential duplicates, part of the information provided to the participants before filling out the questionnaire emphasized that the questions should be answered only once by each participant. Despite that, after thorough analyses, i.e. comparing participant responses manually, four duplicates were discovered. After disregarding these four duplicates, a total of 118 public service interpreters were concluded to have submitted their answers to the questionnaire, which as Thomsen (2023) underlined, encompass most of the Spanish-Swedish interpreter population in Sweden.

3.3 Data analysis

During the initial stages of data analysis, responses were cleaned in Excel, ensuring that responses were written the same way throughout the whole document, to facilitate statistical tests in IBM SPSS Statistics Version 29. Descriptive statistics were primarily presented as frequencies and inferential statistics by using Pearson's Chi-square test for differences between interpreter groups.

4. Results

Results are based on the participants' self-assessment and self-perception of their language proficiency and linguistic background. All interpreters were highly proficient in both Spanish and Swedish, since these were the languages used when working as a public service interpreter. However, interpreters also reported proficiency in other languages, and some of them even declared proficiency in as many as eight languages. Altogether, language proficiency in a total of 23 different languages was reported by the interpreters, and most of the interpreters (113) declared proficiency in at least three languages. The most common languages reported, except for Spanish and Swedish, were English (109), French (45), German (29), Italian (20) and Portuguese (19). In the following sections, the interpreters' self-assessments and self-perceptions of these aspects are presented.

4.1 Native language and strongest language

Table 1 shows an overview of the participants' self-reported native language, strongest language and second strongest language. All interpreters considered one of their working languages, i.e. Spanish and Swedish, to be stronger, except for one interpreter who considered Spanish and Swedish to be equally strong; three interpreters did not answer the question.

There was an equal distribution between Spanish and Swedish native speakers – 56 reported being Spanish native speakers while 53 reported being native in Swedish. However, the distribution of self-reported strongest language was unequal – 46 interpreters reported Spanish as their strongest language and 66 interpreters reported Swedish as their strongest language.

Regarding self-reports of their second strongest language, a total of 21 interpreters considered a language other than their working languages (Spanish and Swedish) to be their second strongest language. Among these 21 interpreters, a total of 18 interpreters considered English as their second strongest language (2 reported Danish and 1 reported French), with Spanish or Swedish as their third strongest language.

	Native language	Strongest language	Second strongest language
Spanish	56	46	56
Swedish	53	66	37
Other languages	4	2	21
Spanish + Swedish	2	1	-
Bilingual other languages ¹	3	-	-
N/A	-	3	4
Total	118	118	118

Table 1. Self-reports of native language, strongest language and second strongest language of Spanish-Swedish public service interpreters in Sweden.

As shown in Table 1, most of the interpreters considered their strongest language to be the same as their native language. However, ten interpreters reported Swedish as their strongest language, although Spanish was reported as their native language. Moreover, Table 2 shows an in-depth description of these ten interpreters and the primary language they used when speaking to their parents, their partner, and their children. For easy viewing, only Spanish and Swedish have been included in Table 2. In the case of parents, the question referred to both the present and the past to include all interpreters independent of age. Furthermore, the questions regarding partners and children included the option of “not applicable”.

When scrutinizing the ten interpreters in Table 2, all of them declared Swedish as their strongest language, Spanish as their second strongest language (and native language), and English as their third strongest language. All interpreters spoke Spanish with their parents (except one who reported only Swedish), indicating that they grew up speaking Spanish. When it comes to Swedish, results indicate that the language has been used more frequently than Spanish. Moreover, most of the interpreters spoke Swedish with their partners (except one that reported only Spanish) and all interpreters used Swedish in their free time, three of them even indicating that Swedish was the only language used during free time. Regarding children, the self-reports do not indicate a clear pattern across the interpreters since three interpreters reported only Spanish, two reported only Swedish, and four interpreters reported both Spanish and Swedish.

¹ Bilingual other languages include Spanish or Swedish but not both.

	Parents		Partner		Children		Free time	
	Spanish	Swedish	Spanish	Swedish	Spanish	Swedish	Spanish	Swedish
Interpreter 1	X			X	X		X	X
Interpreter 2	X			X	X	X		X
Interpreter 3	X		X	X	X	X		X
Interpreter 4	X		X		X		X	X
Interpreter 5	X	X		X		X	X	X
Interpreter 6	X		X	X	X		X	X
Interpreter 7		X					X	X
Interpreter 8	X				X	X	X	X
Interpreter 9	X					X		X
Interpreter 10	X			X	X	X	X	X
Total n	9	2	3	6	7	6	7	10

Table 2. Languages spoken in different contexts by interpreters who reported Spanish as native language and Swedish as strongest language.

Table 3 further describes these ten interpreters to gain a better understanding of their pattern of Swedish as their strongest language, although Spanish was reported as their native language. The table gives an overview of the interpreters' educational background as well as the primary language used in their education.

	Elementary school		High school		University	
	Spanish	Swedish	Spanish	Swedish	Spanish	Swedish
Interpreter 1		X		X		
Interpreter 2		X		X		
Interpreter 3	X		X			X
Interpreter 4		X		X		X
Interpreter 5	X	X		X		X
Interpreter 6		X		X		
Interpreter 7		X		X		
Interpreter 8	X		X			X
Interpreter 9						
Interpreter 10						
Total n	3	6	2	6	0	4

Table 3. Primary language used in previous education by interpreters who reported Spanish as native language and Swedish as strongest language.

Nearly all interpreters in Table 3, except two that did not answer the questions, indicated Swedish as the primary teaching language at all education levels, i.e. elementary school, high school, and university. These results imply that these interpreters grew up in Sweden, either having been born in Sweden as simultaneous bilinguals or sequential bilinguals or having migrated to Sweden during childhood as sequential bilinguals. Two interpreters (interpreter 3 and 8) reported Spanish as the primary language in elementary school and high school but indicated Swedish as the primary language at the university level. These results indicate that these interpreters migrated to Sweden during adulthood, thus learning Swedish as sequential bilinguals. One interpreter (interpreter 5) reported both Spanish and Swedish as teaching languages in previous education, indicating that Spanish was only used during the first two years of elementary school and thereafter primarily Swedish. None of the interpreters reported Spanish at the university level.

4.2 Native language and state authorization

A total of 56 interpreters indicated Spanish as their native language and 53 interpreters reported Swedish as their native language. In Table 4, the interpreters' self-reports of native

language are divided into state-authorized interpreters and unauthorized interpreters. Among interpreters who indicated Spanish as their native language, a majority of 40 were unauthorized while only 16 were state-authorized. Conversely, the distribution of state authorization among Swedish native speakers shows that a majority of 34 interpreters indicated having state authorization while only 19 reported being unauthorized.

Moreover, a chi-squared test of independence was performed to examine the relationship between state authorization and native language (Spanish, Swedish). The relation between these variables had a significant effect ($\chi^2(1) = 13.883, p < .001$). Therefore, results show that interpreters with Swedish as a native language were more likely to be state-authorized than interpreters with Spanish as a native language.

Authorization Status	Native language			Total <i>n</i>
	Spanish	Swedish	Other ²	
State-authorized	16	34	3	53
Unauthorized	40	19	6	65
Total <i>n</i>	56	53	9	118

Table 4. Self-reports of native language divided into state-authorized and unauthorized Spanish-Swedish public service interpreters in Sweden.

5. Discussion

The present study has described the linguistic background of Spanish-Swedish public service interpreters in Sweden, based on interpreters' self-reports and self-assessment in a questionnaire regarding perceived language proficiency and state authorization. Previous studies on the questionnaire tool LEAP-Q have shown that there are strong correlations between self-assessment of language proficiency and actual language proficiency measures (Marian et al., 2007), indicating the reliability of the responses provided by the interpreters in the present study. The present study tests two fundamental assumptions: (1) public service interpreters have a migration background (Gustafsson, 2023), and (2) public service interpreters have asymmetrical language proficiency (Tiselius & Englund Dimitrova, 2019). Although the second of these assumptions is confirmed by the present study (as we have seen in Table 1), both migration background and language proficiency prove to be complex concepts when it comes to Spanish-Swedish public service interpreters in Sweden. That is why they will be discussed in sections 5.1 and 5.2.

5.1 Migration background of Spanish-Swedish public service interpreters

Migration background has been described according to the definition of heritage language by Carreira (2004) and Mellinger and Jiménez (2019). There are several ways to describe migration background for Spanish-Swedish public service interpreters, e.g. being born/not born in Sweden, speaking Spanish with both of your parents/one parent only or migrating to Sweden during childhood/adulthood (see section 2.4).

The assumption of public service interpreters having a migration background describes interpreters as L2 speakers of the majority language (Gustafsson, 2023). However, Table 1 shows that there is an equal distribution of Spanish-Swedish interpreters speaking the majority

² The column for other includes participants who reported languages other than Spanish or Swedish, bilingual in Spanish and Swedish or bilingual in other languages as their native language.

language (Swedish) as a native language as well as speaking Spanish as a native language. Furthermore, there are several L2 speakers of Spanish in Sweden, suggesting that several native speakers of Swedish have (basic) language proficiency in Spanish. We must also keep in mind that Spanish is a typical “school language” in Sweden (Skolverket, 2021), frequently taught to native speakers of Swedish during both childhood schooling and at university level. It is, in fact, one of the most common languages learned during childhood schooling in Sweden, with at least 40 % studying Spanish in elementary school (Skolverket, 2021). Therefore, we can conclude that the assumption regarding migration background, made by previous research, does not apply to Spanish-Swedish public service interpreters in Sweden, as illustrated by Table 1.

Additionally, an important difference regarding migration background can be observed when comparing the native language of state-authorized and unauthorized interpreters. As shown in Table 4, most of the state-authorized interpreters declared being native speakers of Swedish, thus indicating that unauthorized interpreters primarily have a migration background. It can only be hypothesized why interpreters with a migration background are less likely to hold a state authorization, but one possible explanation can be seen when scrutinizing the parts of the examination. According to Kammarkollegiet (2017), the written exam includes three parts primarily given in Swedish, i.e. linguistic knowledge of Swedish, theoretical knowledge (in Swedish) of areas that interpreters commonly encounter when working, and a translation task from Swedish into Spanish. Undoubtedly, Swedish is, by far, the most tested language of the two. The exception is the translation task from Swedish into Spanish, which includes testing of both Spanish and Swedish. It could, therefore, be argued that having a migration background reduces the likelihood of completing the examination successfully.

5.2 Asymmetrical language proficiency of Spanish-Swedish public service interpreters

Regarding asymmetrical language proficiency, the present study has shown that most of the Spanish-Swedish interpreter population in Sweden consider one of their working languages stronger. These results are in line with previous research on public service interpreting and asymmetrical language proficiency (Tiselius & Englund Dimitrova, 2019), indicating that interpreters generally have a stronger working language and a weaker working language. However, as pointed out in Section 2.3, the weaker language is not necessarily weak, nor should the interpreters’ working languages be assumed to be their strongest languages. For example, several of the interpreters in the present study self-reported that their second strongest language was a language other than their working languages, thus implying asymmetrical language proficiency.

Interestingly, the present study also shows that native language is not bound to the level of proficiency, but rather to context and language exposure. The self-reports of the interpreters in Table 2 and Table 3 show that some of them had grown up as native speakers of Spanish, i.e. their native language presumably was their strongest language until at least elementary school, and yet, these interpreters claim that Swedish was their strongest language today. This implies that native language is not necessarily bound to an individual’s strongest language, as Mellinger and Jiménez (2019) pointed out, and that asymmetrical language proficiency can possibly be reversed depending on context and language use. This is also the case for some of the interpreters in Table 2 and Table 3, switching their strongest language from Spanish to Swedish.

6. Conclusions

The basic conclusions of our study as a result of the analysis of information gathered from Spanish-Swedish public service interpreters in Sweden focus on perceived language proficiency and linguistic background.

First, it is essential to underline that Spanish-Swedish public service interpreters in Sweden do not primarily have a migration background. Second, they have asymmetrical language proficiency. In fact, there was an equal distribution between Spanish and Swedish native speakers and most of the interpreters considered one of their working languages to be stronger than the other, reinforcing the idea of asymmetry. Additionally, there is also an important relationship between migration background and language proficiency, which affects state authorization as a public service interpreter in Sweden, as shown in Section 5.1.

Further studies can be carried out to add more descriptive information to the literature regarding public service interpreters and language proficiency. Some examples are studies focused on language backgrounds other than Spanish-Swedish, both in Sweden and internationally. Moreover, the concept of migration background needs to be further investigated to disentangle the demographic background of public service interpreters in general. Furthermore, there is also a considerable research gap regarding the comparison of self-assessment of language proficiency and actual language testing of language proficiency. Finally, although previous research has argued that self-assessment of language proficiency is a reliable tool for language assessment (Marian et al., 2007), additional research is needed to confirm this statement in specific contexts.

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