


Working paper:

Public service interpreting in Madrid: evaluation and challenges in a multicultural context / Interpretación en los servicios públicos de Madrid: evaluación y desafíos en un contexto multicultural

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Abstract: In the current multicultural society, the increasing migratory flow present in various geographical regions of Spain has heightened the demand for interpreting services. Despite this growing necessity, the social and humanitarian aspects of interpreting remain one of the least explored areas within the field of translation and interpreting. This research seeks to present a comprehensive and up-to-date overview of public service interpreting in the Community of Madrid. To achieve this objective, a field analysis will be conducted using both qualitative and quantitative methodologies, as previously implemented in the city of Córdoba (Policastro-Ponce & Merino Cabello, 2024). The primary aim of this study is to thoroughly examine the functioning of interpreting services across diverse public institutions and to assess the usefulness of this approach in identifying the specific needs of service users.

Keywords: Interpreting; Migrant population; PSI; Public services

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Resumen: En la actual sociedad multicultural, el creciente flujo migratorio presente en diversas regiones geográficas de España ha incrementado la demanda de servicios de interpretación. A pesar de esta creciente necesidad, los aspectos sociales y humanitarios de la interpretación siguen siendo una de las áreas menos exploradas dentro del campo de la traducción e interpretación. Esta investigación busca presentar una visión integral y actualizada de la interpretación en los servicios públicos en la Comunidad de Madrid. Para alcanzar este objetivo, se llevará a cabo un análisis de campo utilizando metodologías tanto cualitativas como cuantitativas, como las implementadas previamente en la ciudad de Córdoba (Policastro-Ponce & Merino Cabello, 2024). El objetivo principal de este estudio es examinar en profundidad el funcionamiento de los servicios de interpretación en diversas instituciones públicas y evaluar la utilidad de este enfoque para identificar las necesidades específicas de los usuarios.

Palabras clave: Interpretación; Población migrante; ISP; Servicios públicos

1. Introduction

In recent years, migratory flows have been steadily increasing, generally due to the expansion of international tourism and globalization. Nevertheless, the most significant factors driving migration are economic, demographic, social, political and environmental factors. In this context, adequate language training or prior knowledge of the host country's language is essential for migrants to achieve their objectives. However, such advantages are only accessible to individuals who have the opportunity to pursue formal education or acquire language skills within their family environment. For asylum seekers, a direct correlation exists between language proficiency and the level of integration and inclusion in the host society. Language acquisition is therefore a critical factor for gaining employment, exercising citizenship rights, and fostering positive social interactions (ACCEM, 2024). However, before migrants can begin learning the language and integrating into the host society, they must receive linguistic support to access their basic rights during their first interactions with Spanish institutions. This highlights the critical role of interpreting services in helping migrants address their fundamental needs, enabling them to later concentrate on acquiring proficiency in Spanish.

In European Union countries that serve as transit zones between Africa and Europe, particularly Spain, there has been a notable rise in the arrival of individuals under adverse conditions. Despite the evident need to provide basic services for those fleeing their countries in search of refuge, language interpreting services are often overlooked. For instance, Spain's Organic Law 4/2000, of 11 January 2000, concerning the rights and freedoms of foreigners and their social integration, does not address the necessity of translation and interpreting services for the reception of foreign nationals.

Given the continuous increase in the number of non-Spanish speakers arriving in Spain and their urgent need for legal, healthcare, and educational assistance, it is essential to establish high-quality interpreting services in these critical areas. Contrary to popular belief, interpreting is not limited to bridging linguistic barriers but also encompasses cultural differences that further complicate the understanding between migrants and public service providers. In this context, intercultural competence is vital for achieving accurate interpretations, alongside the array of other skills obtained through formal interpreter training (Pena Díaz, 2016).

In Spain, services catering to migrants' needs often lack access to qualified interpreting professionals. Instead, they rely on the limited language skills of staff members, volunteers, or even the users' family members serving as ad hoc interpreters. Such practices violate several ethical principles, potentially jeopardizing confidentiality, impartiality, and other critical aspects. Consequently, the quality and efficiency of these services may be significantly reduced (Foulquié-Rubio et al., 2019). In this regard, Martin (2003) emphasizes the urgent need for official recognition of interpreting as a fully established profession by public institutions and other relevant sectors.

Building on the premise that interpreters' presence in public services and enhanced language assistance are imperative, this study aims to analyze the provision of linguistic services to migrant population that interacts with public institutions in Madrid on a daily basis.

A secondary objective of this research is to examine the communicative needs of the migrant population residing in this geographic region. This analysis will be informed by a demographic study of the population, utilizing a methodological framework previously developed for the city of Córdoba (Policastro-Ponce & Merino Cabello, 2024).

Based on these findings, a field study will be conducted in collaboration with professionals from various public institutions. This research will employ primary sources such as surveys and interviews, enabling the collection of both qualitative and quantitative data. The ultimate aim is to evaluate the interpreting services available in these institutions, assess the current state of the profession, and understand the challenges faced by practitioners in intercultural interactions.

2 Steps towards PSI

Public service interpreting (PSI) in Spain continues to be less recognized as a profession if compared to other well-established forms of interpreting, such as conference interpreting. Despite being one of the southern European countries that annually receives the highest number of migrants (Banco de España, 2024), Spain's lack of recognition for PSI as a profession exacerbates the difficulty of standardizing interpreting services within public institutions.

Countries such as Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom have been pioneers in the professionalization of public service interpreting. Several decades ago, these nations successfully implemented mandatory, regulated, and high-quality interpreting services in response to increasing migration and cultural diversity. This progress was made possible through collaboration between state institutions (Hlavac *et al.*, 2018). Spain now finds itself facing the urgent need to adapt to the growing number of migrants arriving in the country and develop a system for the provision of linguistic assistance such those implemented in the aforementioned countries.

In Spain, professional interpreting services are scarce into the organizational structures of public institutions (Ministerio de Asuntos Exteriores y Cooperación, 2011). In the absence of a pre-established system, institutions often rely on interpreters with some legal expertise or sworn interpreters. However, this approach overlooks the specific skills required for PSI in asylum and international protection contexts, such as emotional management and the ability to maintain impartiality in emotionally charged situations arising from complex communicative circumstances (Mahyub, 2023).

Given the increase in migratory flows, urgent measures are required to improve communication with migrant populations. This requires advancements in research, training, and practice to achieve the recognition of PSI as an academic discipline and to facilitate its professionalization (Valero-Garcés, 2019).

In line with this necessity, numerous PSI-focused meetings and conferences have been organized in recent years. Notably, the International Conference on Translation and Interpreting in Public Services, hosted by the University of Alcalá de Henares (UAH), gathers specialists from around the globe who contribute to the advancement of PSI research. Furthermore, the UAH offers a master's program in Intercultural Communication, Translation, and Interpreting in Public Services, which prepares translators, interpreters, and professionals from related fields to work in public service contexts.

Likewise, interest in the study of interpreting in public institutions, as well as efforts to enhance these essential services for migrant populations have grown significantly in recent years. Pioneering contributions to PSI research in Spain have been made by scholars such as Valero-Garcés (2006; 2011), Abril Martí (2006), and Martín (2003; 2006). These works have provided a foundational basis for much of the current research. Of particular relevance to this study is Martín's (2006) research, *The Reality of Translation and Interpreting in Public Services in Andalusia*, which examines the characteristics of foreign populations in Almería and Málaga, as well as the specificities of PSI practice in these regions. In a similar vein, Policastro-Ponce and Merino Cabello (2024) have analyzed the provision of linguistic assistance in Córdoba, paying special attention to the profile of migrants in this city and their specific needs.

Building on the research carried out by Martín (2006) and Policastro-Ponce and Merino Cabello (2024), this study focuses on analyzing the current state of PSI in the Community of Madrid. It begins by characterizing the migrant population and proceeds to investigate whether the communication needs of this population in their interactions with public service institutions are being adequately addressed through interpreting practices.

3. Methodology

The primary objective of this study is to gather information on the demand for and provision of interpreting services within public institutions in Madrid. As mentioned above, this analysis replicates a similar study previously conducted in the city of Córdoba, which yielded highly positive results (Policastro-Ponce & Merino Cabello, 2024). Following the methodology established in the prior research, the present study begins with a social analysis of the migrant population in the Community of Madrid. This initial step is crucial to emphasize the importance of examining the specific linguistic needs in particular environments on an individualized basis.

The research focuses on evaluating the current situation in the Madrid Community, with particular attention to whether a "communication possibility" exists between public service users and service providers. This concept is central to the study and refers to the establishment of real and seamless communication, free from language barriers, that enables service providers to adequately assist users while fostering mutual understanding.

To achieve its objectives, the study first collects updated sociological data on the migrant population residing in the Madrid Community. This involves classifying individuals according to their country of origin and their corresponding official or co-official languages. Such categorization facilitates the identification of linguistic disparities between potential public service users and service providers, thus highlighting specific interpreting needs.

Subsequently, a field study was conducted employing a mixed approach that integrates both quantitative (anonymous surveys) and qualitative (personal interviews) methodologies. These data collection methods were carried out through direct, personalized engagement with three distinct participant groups associated to each of the fields of public service interpreting and translation (PSIT) identified by Abril Martí (2006): health, legal, and humanitarian services.

In this way, the demographic and linguistic data obtained from the first stage of our research will be corroborated with findings from the second phase of the field study, comprising surveys and interviews conducted with professional interpreters and public service staff. The primary aim of this phase is to assess whether the migrant population is effectively assisted by public institutions through the provision of adequate interpreting services. The contents of both the interview and the surveys will be detailed in section 5 of this paper, as well as the number of respondents/interviewees we rely upon and other relevant aspects.

4. First stage: analysis of migrant population's needs.

4.1 Characteristics of migrant population in the Community of Madrid

The Community of Madrid has a total population of 6,825,005 inhabitants, making it the third largest autonomous community in Spain in terms of population size (INE, 2022). In 2024, the migrant population experienced an increase of over 86,000 individuals, surpassing the overall growth rate of the Spanish population (Madrid City Council, 2024).

A distinction can be made between migrants from European Union (EU) countries and those from non-EU countries, as their countries of origin often influence the characteristics of their stay in the host country. For example, migrants from EU member states such as Germany or Italy tend to stay for shorter periods of time, typically motivated by recreational or tourism-related objectives. Conversely, migrants from non-EU countries, such as Pakistan or Ukraine, often reside in the host country for extended periods due to employment opportunities or social reasons, particularly given the current socio-political circumstances in their countries of origin.

This distinction is significant, as it affects their access to healthcare services. Migrants from EU countries, a total of 275,333 individuals in 2022 (INE, 2022), are more likely to utilize private healthcare services. However, this group also frequents public healthcare centers, particularly in cases of healthcare tourism (EOI, n.d.). By contrast, economic constraints typically lead non-EU migrants, numbering 647,900 in 2022 (INE, 2022), to rely on public healthcare services rather than private options.

Furthermore, identifying the most in-demand languages among the migrant population in the healthcare sector is crucial for understanding the linguistic needs within Madrid's public healthcare services. Table 1 illustrates the most numerous migrant population groups by nationality, along with the official and co-official languages of their countries of origin.

Romania	144,694	Romanian
Morocco	77,369	Arabic and French
Venezuela	67,710	Spanish
Colombia	67,354	Spanish
China	60,148	Chinese
Peru	47,024	Spanish
Italy	43,464	Italian
Honduras	36,337	Spanish
Ecuador	33,405	Spanish
Paraguay	26,264	Spanish
Dominican Republic	22,823	Spanish
Ukraine	22,497	Ukrainian
Portugal	19,717	Portuguese
Bulgaria	18,293	Bulgarian
Bolivia	16,369	Spanish
France	16,302	French
Philippines	16,253	English
Brazil	14,798	Portuguese
Poland	13,045	Polish
Argentina	12,915	Spanish
United Kingdom	11,831	English

*Table 1. Arrivals of migrant population in Madrid and their language of communication.
Source: Own elaboration from data extracted from INE (2022).*

It is important to note that, in some cases, particularly in African countries, not all individuals are proficient in the official or co-official languages of their region. This is because they belong to smaller population groups that communicate primarily in their own dialects, such as Kurdish or Bambara. This linguistic diversity further complicates communication between public service providers in Spain and the users, as it is uncommon for public service workers in Spain to speak these African languages.

Migrants from these nations are often categorized as refugees or asylum seekers (CEAR, n.d.). This demographic typically faces significant economic challenges and limited opportunities upon arrival in Spain. These circumstances are reflected in the considerable obstacles they encounter in accessing efficient and high-quality interpreting services, which are critical for facilitating their interactions and meeting their needs in public institutions.

In contrast, migrants from EU countries generally possess greater economic resources, enabling them to seek assistance in private hospitals. These institutions often offer interpreting services or customer support designed to facilitate communication between healthcare professionals and foreign patients who lack proficiency in Spanish (Pérez-Luzardo Díaz and Fernández Pérez, 2018).

In regard to the legal field, particularly within police departments, the Administration typically lacks a dedicated team of professional interpreters and instead depends on services outsourced to external companies (Cayón Sáez, 2016). Interactions between personnel from State Security Forces and Corps and members of the migrant population are not confined to police stations but also occur in locations such as Adolfo Suárez Madrid-Barajas Airport—an uncommon practice in other provinces in Spain. In these instances, interpreters are engaged

to address matters related to asylum applications, human trafficking, and drug trafficking. These interpreters, who are primarily professionals hired through external companies, also play a critical role in delivering sensitive information, such as informing migrants of their deportation to their home countries.

Professional interpreting services are legally required only in judicial and legal aid contexts (Law 1/2000; Organic Law 2/2009) and asylum proceedings (Royal Decree 203/1995) when a foreign individual is unable to understand the language or communicate with legal counsel and other relevant parties. However, the role of the interpreter in these proceedings remains inadequately defined: according to Article 124 of the Criminal Procedure Act, in urgent situations, an individual deemed proficient in the required language may be temporarily authorized as an interpreter. This exacerbates the challenges faced by speakers of lesser-diffused languages (LLD), due to the limited availability of qualified and professional interpreters.

On the other hand, the provision of interpreting services in the healthcare sector is neither clearly defined nor legally mandated. Article 12 of Organic Law 2/2009 grants migrants registered in Spain's municipal census the right to healthcare under the same conditions as Spanish citizens. However, it does not explicitly require the provision of professional interpreting services, leading to disparities in healthcare access due to language barriers. While interpreter services are provided free of charge in legal proceedings, only certain public hospitals in Madrid, such as Ramón y Cajal, offer in-person professional interpreting services at no cost. Although all hospitals in Spain provide a flat-rate telephone interpretation service, many healthcare professionals remain unaware of this resource. Consequently, when migrants cannot afford an interpreter or when one is unavailable—particularly for speakers of LLD—healthcare providers often rely on family members or acquaintances for translation or use pictograms to facilitate communication, as reported by interviewees of this study. As a result, language availability also remains a significant challenge in this field, especially for LLD speakers.

Finally, although NGOs play a significant role in facilitating intercultural communication (Valero-Garcés, 2006), interpreting services within the humanitarian and social sectors remain limited. The migrant populations typically dependent on these organizations often originate from North Africa or conflict-affected regions. These individuals have endured traumatic experiences, including human trafficking and migration under extreme conditions, and might be victims of attacks, natural disasters, and wars. Consequently, the individuals served by NGOs are especially vulnerable and thus are often unable to access private interpreting services. When the administration fails to provide professional interpreters, NGOs frequently rely on referrals, acquaintances, or even other service users to facilitate communication during initial interviews. One participant in our study noted that volunteer interpreters often accompany newly arrived migrants to other public services provided by the organization.

4.2 Sociodemographic study

Once we have a clear understanding of the nationalities and languages of the primary migrant population groups (Table 1), we can identify three levels within the variable “communication possibilities”. This concept is central to this research and, as explained above, it refers to the presence of seamless communication free from linguistic barriers, thereby enabling the public entity to deliver optimal services to users. Thus, the highest form of communication possibilities would occur in a context where both the user and the service provider are able to achieve mutual understanding without the need for intermediaries. Based on this, the migrant population can be classified into the following groups:

- Migrant population group with a high level of communication: this includes individuals who speak Spanish. Communication with public services is feasible without the need for interpreters, enhancing assistance and the resolution of their needs. Migrants from Spanish-speaking countries in South America are included in this group.
- Migrant population group with a medium level of communication: this category includes individuals who do not speak Spanish, which poses a challenge for communication. However, communication may still be possible as many come from European countries with a linguistic affinity to Spanish or speak English or French. These languages are widely spoken in Spain as a second language, and there is a greater availability of service staff who understand them. Additionally, professional interpreters for these languages are more readily accessible in Spain.
- Migrant population group with a low level of communication: this group consists of individuals who speak less commonly spoken languages in Europe or specific dialects, such as Wolof or Bambara, which significantly complicates communication. According to Figure 1, this group represents 41% of the migrant population in Madrid and primarily relies on professional interpreters to access public services.

Therefore, there is a significant communication challenge between public services and migrants, particularly those in the third group. The previous classification of communication levels highlights difficulties in accessing professional interpreters and disparities in effective communication for African languages or LLD speakers. Generally, this group may have greater difficulties and more specific needs in adapting to a new country, system, language and culture, which can be mitigated with language assistance.

According to the data presented in Table 1, there is an estimation of 377,850 migrants in Spain with high level communication possibilities, primarily originating from South American countries. On the other hand, a total of 545,383 migrants are presumed to experience communication challenges, at least upon arriving in the host country and until they are able to learn Spanish. Specifically, regarding the “communication possibilities” variable, 167,851 migrants within Table 1 are expected to face moderate communication challenges, though these issues are generally easier to resolve than those of other groups.

The comparison of Table 1 and communication possibilities further indicates that an estimated 40.89% of the migrant population, representing 377,532 individuals, might encounter significant difficulties in communicating with staff at public institutions (Figure 1). This analysis brings attention to two key points. First, the specificity of language and the availability of interpreters are critical to ensuring effective communication. Second, the increasing linguistic diversity and the high number of migrant users in Madrid may pose a barrier to the availability of professional interpreters in the public services of the Community.

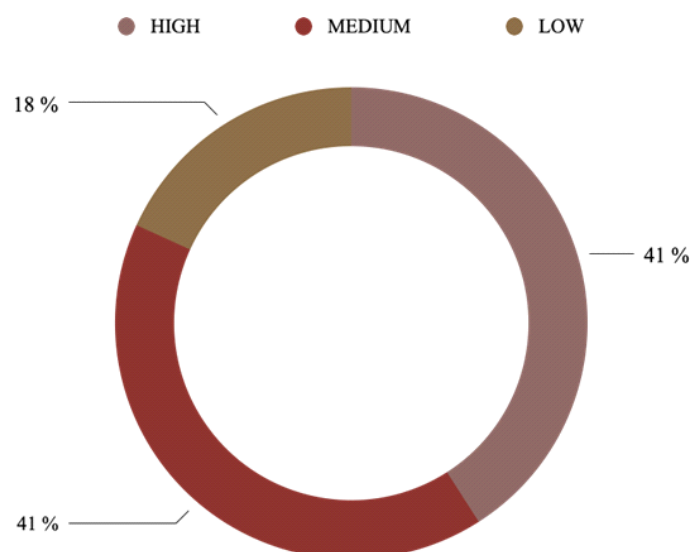


Figure 1. Possibility of communication in Madrid. Source: Own elaboration.

5. Second stage: is PSI a reality?

PSI occurs across a wide range of contexts that shape the nature of communication. Situations can be hybrid within the same context, meaning, for example, that a forensic expert may be questioned in a trial to provide medical information, or a patient may be required to sign a legal document in a hospital. Thus, as Abril Martí (2006) points out, this division should not be seen as a strict separation, since fields tend to merge, especially in migratory contexts.

Considering this potential hybridization, this paper attempts to provide a general delineation of the various areas of action for interpreters in public services in Madrid. In this way, we will first explain the characteristics of our field study, specifying the contents of the interviews and surveys carried out in this research. Then we will focus on the results obtained from both methods, providing specific information regarding relevant aspects like areas of action, linguistic assistance provision and communication barriers and obstacles.

5.1 Field study

In order to collect information about the availability of interpreting services in public institutions, two distinct online surveys were created, as previously mentioned. The purpose of these surveys was to determine how staff at institutions handle the daily interaction with foreign populations requesting services, as well as to identify any perceived language needs in the service provision. For this study, it was crucial to incorporate two perspectives directly linked to the primary participants in the communication process: public service providers and professional interpreters working in each of the fields examined in this research.

First, public service providers and interpreters from the institutions involved in the study sample were approached in person to explain the research objective and obtain their consent to participate. Afterward, the surveys were distributed, specifically designed and administered through the Google Forms platform. The data collection period ran from March 1st to May 30th, 2023, resulting in 14 responses from organizations in various sectors of Public Administration in Madrid.

The survey addressing service providers was divided into three sections with multiple-choice questions: the first section focused on identifying the institution and the work field; the second section addressed the profile of the migrants who are typically assisted and the languages they speak; and the third and most significant section sought to explore how interpretation services are provided to this population, as well as the qualifications and profiles of the interpreters. Finally, respondents were given space to share their personal experiences working with non-Spanish-speaking individuals.

Additionally, several questions were posed regarding the profession of social interpreters and the need for their regulation and professionalization, emphasizing the recognition of this profession within society. Similar questions were included in the interpreter's survey, which was completed by a total of 6 respondents.

Finally, this study also relies on personal interviews as way to complement the results obtained from the surveys. The interviews were conducted both in person and by phone and allowed us to gain deeper insights into the experiences of individuals working with immigrants. Their insights have been crucial in understanding linguistic assistance of migrant population. Some interviews were conducted informally, even during interpretation services. For privacy reasons, the identity of the interviewees has been withheld.

5.1.1 Public institutions survey and interview

The participation in the survey was not as extensive as that in other studies carried out with similar purposes. However, we can observe that all three areas of specialization within Public Service Interpreting (PSI) are represented in our study (Table 2).

Public institution
Healthcare service of Madrid (SERMAS)
Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union and Cooperation (MAEUC)
Public defenders
Spanish Red Cross volunteers
Cáritas Diocesana
Responsible for the Temporary Reception Center for Foreigners at the Red Cross
Officers from the National Police Station of Alcalá de Henares
Officers from Barajas Airport

Table 2. Participants of public institutions in surveys and interviews.

Source: Own elaboration.

In the following chart (Figure 2), it can be observed that 35.7% of respondents belong to the legal or judicial field, followed by the healthcare field, which accounts for 28.6% of the total. The social and consular fields follow with 14.3% and 7.1%, respectively, in terms of the number of respondents.

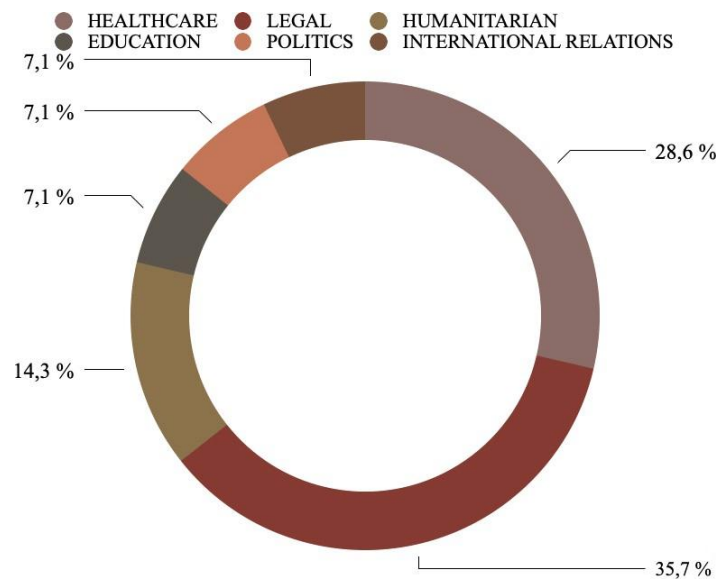


Figure 2. Fields of the public institutions surveyed in Madrid. Source: Own elaboration.

Based on Abril Martí's (2006, p. 115) study, which provides an overview of the different "areas of institutional contact", we observe that the largest percentage of respondents in public services in Madrid work within the legal field (Figure 2). This information suggests that legal or judicial interpreting is more prevalent in the Community of Madrid, largely due to the substantial migrant population and the concentration of the country's primary legal institutions in this region.

The following graph (Figure 3) presents the respondents' answers regarding the number of migrant individuals they attend to in their respective institutions. Considering these results, it can be concluded that the influx of non-Spanish-speaking individuals in the organizations surveyed is medium to high, with 50% of respondents stating that they assist many migrants and only 7% that have never done so. The highest values correspond to entities working with immigrants, such as NGOs and associations.

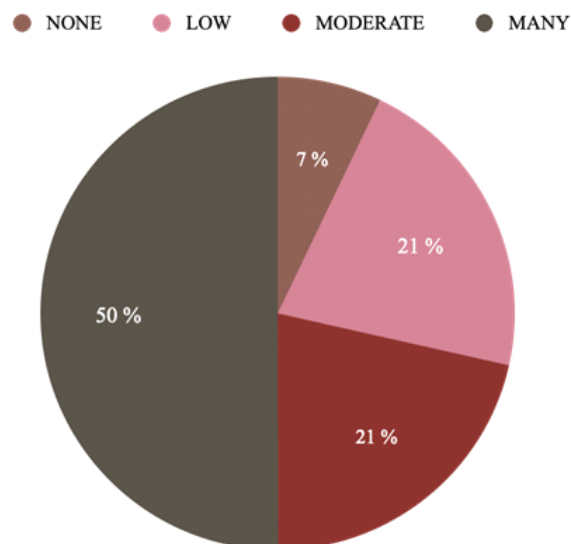


Figure 3. Migrant population attendance at public institutions in Madrid. Source: Own elaboration.

In the geographical area under study, there is a significant influx of migrants who visit local migration authorities (Ministerio de inclusión, seguridad social y migraciones, 2024), police stations, and judicial institutions for legal or administrative purposes (Ministerio de inclusión, seguridad social y migraciones, 2022). Linguistic and cultural barriers may arise during these interactions, which can only be effectively addressed through the assistance of a professional interpreter. In such cases, the role of interpreters is indispensable, particularly when users seek to communicate with the Administration of Justice. As Gascón Nasarre (2011, p. 32) states, "it is difficult to judge a case or defend a person if there is no fluid communication with the affected party, witnesses, or, where appropriate, the foreign victim".

In the Community of Madrid, interpreting within the judicial context is more widely recognized by both the administration and society at large. The Administration relies on private companies that, in turn, employ freelance translators and interpreters to work at police offices and courts (APTIJ, n.d.).

The chart below (Figure 4) illustrates the most requested languages in the organizations that participated in the survey. The most common languages are English (64.3%), French (64.3%), and Arabic (57.1%), followed by Russian (28.6%), Romanian (21.4%), and African languages (21.4%).

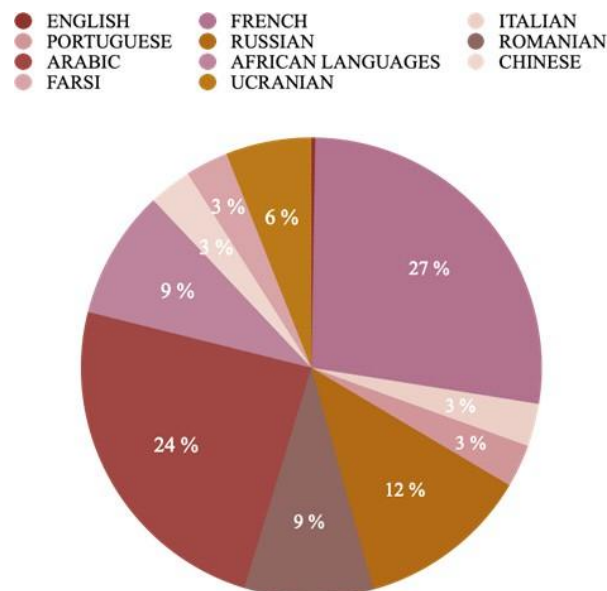


Figure 4. Most requested languages in the surveyed organizations. Source: Own elaboration.

Based on these results and the previous analysis of the migrant population in Madrid and their linguistic needs, it can be inferred that, in general, users who speak English and French are likely to have their linguistic needs adequately met by the staff in public institutions. However, speakers of Arabic and African languages may encounter greater challenges in communication. In the same way, while the strictly linguistic needs of English and French speakers may be adequately addressed, it is also essential to consider additional factors that influence communication, such as cultural background and non-verbal communication. These elements can hinder effective communication, even in situations where service providers and users share a common language.

Regarding the number of individuals performing the role of interpreters, the study results vary significantly, as this largely depends on the type of organization involved. For example, in the case of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union, and Cooperation, interpreting tasks are carried out by a team of over 10 professional interpreters. In contrast, for NGOs and associations, the number of individuals performing this role is either unknown or very small, with such work generally being carried out by volunteers and ad hoc nonprofessionals.

The requested level of training of professional interpreters in the field of public services is one of the most crucial aspects of this fieldwork, as it reflects the reality of how interpreting is valued within public services. This importance of being trained to work as an interpreter is largely determined by the Administration, whose regulations have a direct impact on the training of future interpreters and on the continued professional development of those already working in the field. In this respect, the data in Figure 5 reveals a concerning reality: only in 33.3% of cases, the organizations surveyed have access to an official interpreting service. Instead, linguistic mediation is often provided by an employee with some language proficiency. In 25% of the organizations, assistance is offered by someone who possesses a certain level of language skills, either certified or based on presumed oral fluency. Only 8.3% of cases indicate that graduates in Translation and Interpreting serve as mediators between the user and the professional. Furthermore, an additional 8.3% of the sample shows that the graduate in Translation and Interpreting also holds specialized training in the social or public service sectors.

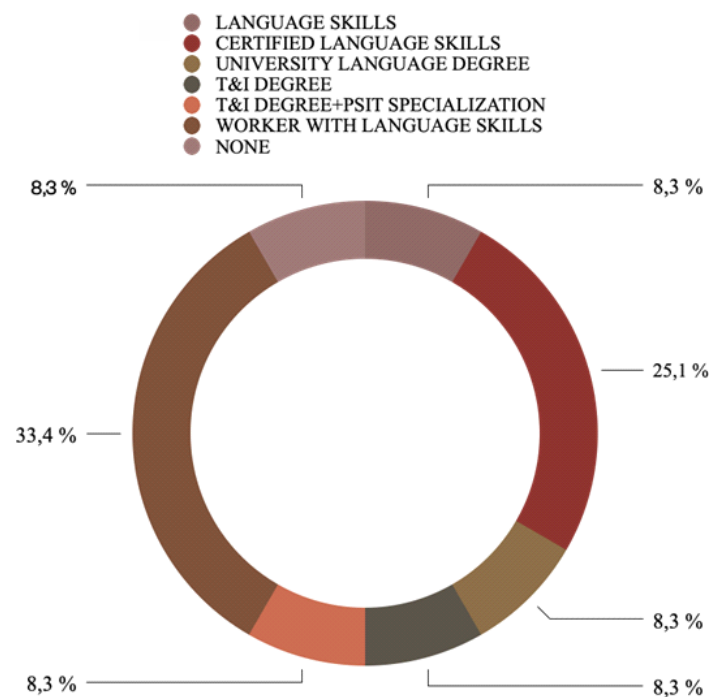


Figure 5. Training background of interpreters from public institutions in Madrid. Source: Own elaboration.

When respondents were asked about working agreements when providing or requesting interpreting services, they highlighted concerns regarding service contracting. This aligns with the longstanding calls for improvement that many researchers have advocated for since the inception of Public Service Interpreting (PSI) studies. As Figure 6 shows, 25% of those surveyed indicated that the interpreters working with the public service do so on a service contract basis, which highlights the precariousness of their work, as it is contingent

upon demand and the conditions set by the contracting company. Additionally, 41.6% of respondents indicated that interpreting work is carried out by professional interpreters hired through job platforms, for specific services, or through public examinations. Meanwhile, 25% of interpreters are untrained individuals working on a voluntary basis. Only 16.7% of the surveyed organizations employ in-house interpreters, the majority of whom are affiliated with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, European Union, and Cooperation.

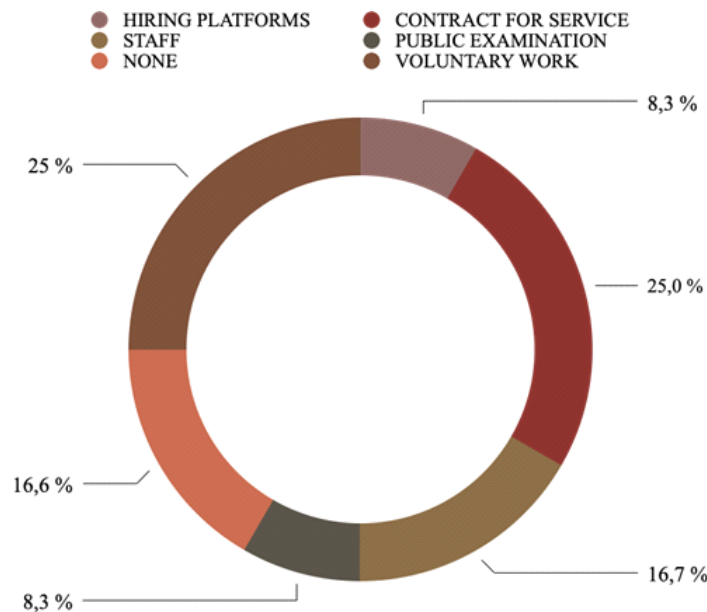


Figure 6. Working agreement of interpreters working in public institutions in Madrid.
Source: Own elaboration.

Regarding how public bodies request interpreter assistance, 54.5% of the responses revealed that they use a professional recruitment website or portal. On the other hand, 18.2% mentioned that they turn to acquaintances of the service or even other users who can assist with mediation.

The most common difficulty reported in the final section of the survey, which focused on personal experiences and opinions, was the lack of immediacy in the service. Since it is an outsourced service, it is often impossible to provide interpreter assistance at the time and in the manner required. This can negatively affect the public service provision and the conditions of the users. For example, at Madrid airport, migrants waiting for an asylum interview often have to wait for hours while the Ministry of Interior's outsourcing company finds a suitable interpreter. This issue has been highlighted by interviewees and echoed by NGOs which have called on the administration to address the problem (García, 2024; Hernández, 2024).

In healthcare setting, respondents expressed concern about the lack of rigor in service provision, as the process is cumbersome, especially in situations where time is critical for appropriately assisting the user or patient. In such cases, healthcare providers must call a number, enter the code for the desired language, and be redirected to an interpreter who handles the transfer between the professional and the user in a non-face-to-face manner. Given the limited time for consultations (7 minutes), many people resort to applications like Google Translate for speed, although, according to respondents, the quality of the service provision is significantly compromised.

Also related to healthcare, one respondent noted that sometimes interpreters are not familiar with medical terminology or struggle to understand the source language, which leads to ineffective interpretations and impedes both the interpreter and healthcare staff from providing adequate service. This issue is related to the fact that many interpreters in healthcare settings are volunteers, as mentioned earlier, further undermining the professionalism of the service.

In the legal field, one respondent pointed out a lack of professionalism and rigor among interpreters. Although police officers may attempt to adapt their speech to the receiver, specific terminology related to asylum or immigration matters, combined with the broad variety of dialects within a language, can lead to distortions of the original message.

Finally, 57.2% of the respondents consider that there is a need for improvement in the interpreting services of the organisations they belong to, taking into account the needs and the continuous influx of foreign users they receive (Figure 7).

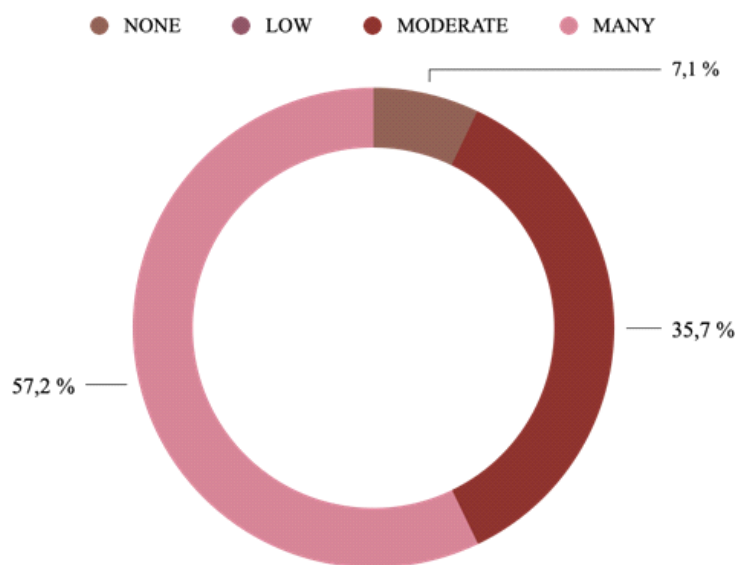


Figure 7. Need for improvement in the interpretation services. Source: Own elaboration

512 Interpreters survey and interview

In the following section, due to space limitations, the main results obtained from the interpreters' survey and interview will be summarized. These consist of the same questions as the previous ones but are approached from a different perspective, aiming to gather insights into the interpreters' profiles and their experiences in these contexts. Unlike the study carried out in Córdoba (Policastró-Ponce & Merino Cabello, 2024), the participation of interpreters in this research was limited. However, their responses provide some representation of the reality of their work in public services.

First and foremost, it was crucial for this fieldwork to obtain information on how professional interpreters are recruited, particularly in terms of the type of contract, working hours, and the training and selection processes implemented by the companies or public bodies that employ them. Of the total number of responses received, only 25% had a permanent employment contract, 50% had a service contract, and the remaining 25% did not have an employment contract, providing their services on a voluntary basis. While these

results may not be fully representative, they highlight the reality that most professional interpreters are hired for specific services, without a fixed salary or set schedule, making their employment situation precarious (Figure 8).

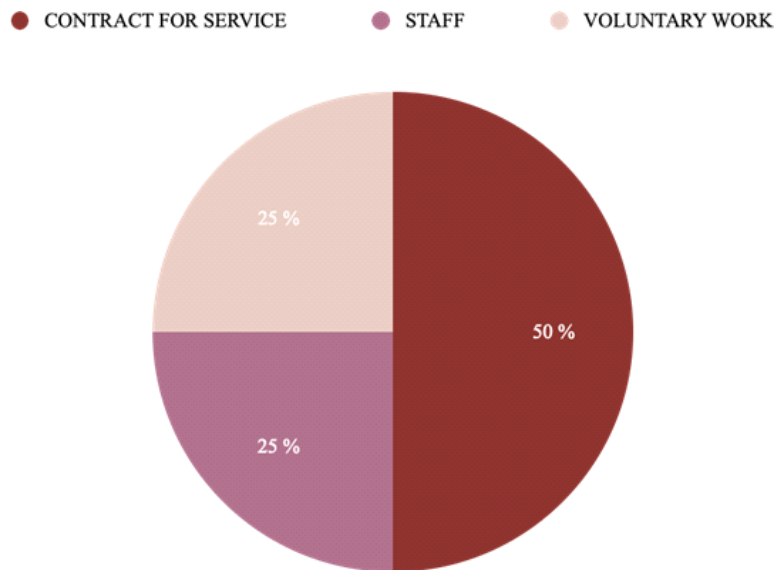


Figure 8. Hiring of the interpreting service in public institutions in Madrid. Source: Own elaboration

A significant 66.7% of respondents indicated that they had undergone a personal interview to secure a job as an interpreter. However, it is noteworthy that only one respondent had taken a language test or a practical interpreting test as part of the hiring process.

The most common training background among respondents is in immigration-related matters, as it is essential to understand the various administrative procedures that foreign users, such as asylum seekers, must navigate. These procedures are often complicated and, at times, even unfamiliar to individuals who have been living in Spain for some time. Furthermore, as illustrated in the following graph (Figure 9), it can be observed that the same interpreters work across different fields of specialization, suggesting a potential lack of specialization in any particular area.

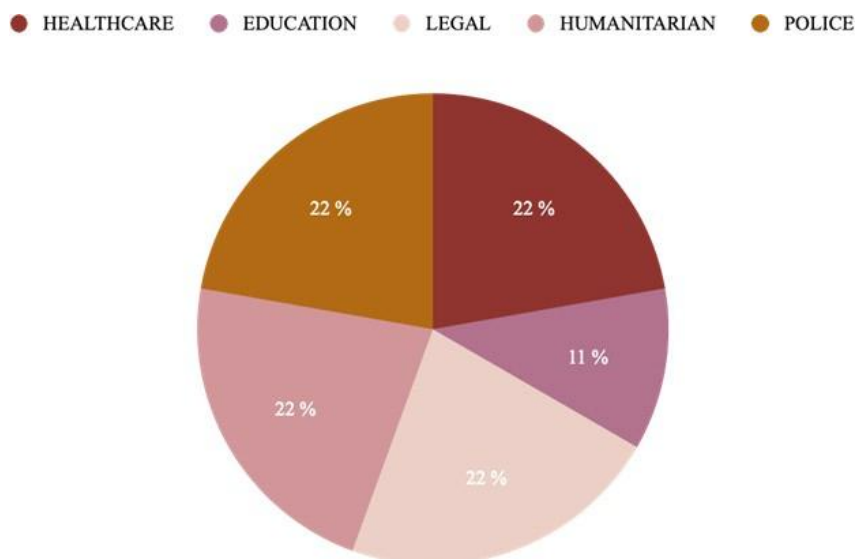


Figure 9. Field of work of interpreters in Madrid. Source: Own elaboration

Additionally, we asked the interpreters about the most frequent nationalities of the people they provide linguistic assistance for. The main objective of this question was to highlight the need for interpreting services in view of the possibility of communication, following the classification made previously (Table 3).

Origin of migrant population	Most frequent demand of languages	Languages offered by the interpreter
African countries	French	Spanish
East Europe countries	Arabic	English
Morocco	English	French
Colombia		Portuguese
Venezuela		Arabic
Brazil		Berber

Table 3. Nationality, demand and offer on languages of the interpreters. Source: Own elaboration.

Based on the information gathered, it can be concluded that the presence of an interpreter specialized in languages such as Arabic is crucial. Without such expertise, communication between the parties would be virtually impossible, as established by the analysis of the foreign population and their linguistic needs.

Beyond the professional interpreting task, it was essential for this study to understand the additional roles performed by interpreters, as their duties often extend beyond simple language transfer and can include other responsibilities at the request of the agency.

Among the most common tasks carried out by the interpreters and mediators interviewed, the most frequent was assisting with document completion. When explaining the contents of a document, service providers often ask the interpreter to help the user fill out forms and other documents with all the necessary information. It is also common for interpreters to accompany users to other service organizations, where their presence is required to manage documentation.

Additionally, an interviewee, who is both a professional interpreter and a Spanish Sign Language interpreter, highlighted the importance of educating service providers about the specific needs and behaviors of deaf individuals to ensure a better understanding of their actions and requirements. The respondents shared similar opinions regarding the management of the service. Most indicated that the services and environments provided by the institutions were not well-suited to the needs of users. Moreover, the lack of proper coordination with relevant institutions further complicated their work.

Another interviewee, this time working in the legal field, emphasized that the outsourcing of interpreting provision to a single company in this geographical area, as previously mentioned, hinders the ultimate regulation of the profession. With the administration approving the actions of this company, the working conditions of interpreters remain stagnant, and there is little effort to improve them.

Respondents also expressed concern about the lack of resources and commitment from public administrations, which place the responsibility of assisting foreign users in the hands of third-party companies. Even if other professional roles assisting these users are regulated and improved, the lack of proper recognition and favorable working conditions for interpreters will prevent the quality of services provided to foreign users from reaching an adequate standard.

Furthermore, respondents agreed that interpreters should receive more extensive training in social issues and matters related to foreigners. They stressed the importance of considering migration trends, humanitarian crises, and gender issues, which are significant in Spain. Several interpreters also mentioned the emotional challenges of working with users from conflict zones, who often arrive in Spain seeking refuge. The emotional toll is especially noticeable when interpreters are involved in interviews with individuals who are victims or suspected victims of human trafficking, or those persecuted for political reasons. Another respondent also emphasized the need for public service workers to learn how to collaborate effectively with professional interpreters to ensure that the work of interpreting is not compromised or distorted.

Finally, it is worth noting that an interviewee expressed the satisfaction and gratitude that comes from working with foreigners and helping them communicate. The humane treatment and appreciation from users help alleviate the difficulties that may arise in the course of their work.

6. Conclusions

The aim of this research was to analyse the practice of interpreting in the public services of the Community of Madrid, considering various aspects that might have an influence on this profession. The previous study carried out in Cordoba served to put forward a classification of three areas of PSI, a methodology that has been applied in the analysis of the Community of Madrid. Likewise, the characteristics of interpreting were described in terms of its application in Madrid's public services.

The secondary purpose consisted of analysing, from a theoretical-practical perspective, the importance of the interpreter in these services, as well as the communicative needs of the population that uses them. This purpose was achieved through field work divided into several stages, beginning with an analysis of the foreign population and their communication possibilities in public institutions. The results obtained were complemented with opinions and testimonies of respondents and interviewees, revealing that the linguistic assistance given to this population in Madrid is insufficient, which negatively affects the quality of essential public services.

The participation of interpreters and mediators in the surveys was essential to include the perspectives of all parties involved in the communication. The results reiterated the lack of interpreting services, despite the high demand and importance of this function for the migrant population. It is important to mention the contribution of social and foreign assistance entities, such as the Red Cross, which provided crucial support in both regions to make linguistic needs visible in the assistance of foreigners. Despite certain limitations, such as the refusal to collaborate coming from public security institutions and other organizations, it was possible to evaluate the institutional perception of PSI.

Disparities in access to effective and efficient communication, as represented by the three groups of communication possibilities in specific languages, may lead to inequalities in healthcare, legal assistance, and, ultimately, the exercise of basic rights.

Therefore, after this study, it is considered necessary for organizations to become aware of the multiple barriers that the migrant population may encounter when arriving in Spain, with language being an obstacle that affects each of the steps necessary for a dignified and quality stay in our country.

This study has made it possible to evaluate PSI from a general approach, based on the linguistic needs of the foreign population. It has been shown that the need to improve the provision of interpreting services is consistent in all geographical areas, regardless of the economic resources of the regional administrations. Besides, this study has helped to highlight the value of the work of professional interpreters.

Finally, it has been shown that the sociodemographic study carried out in Córdoba can serve as a basis for future research in different geographical contexts. This research is valuable for institutions aiming to provide effective and efficient interpreting services that meet the actual linguistic needs, rather than focusing solely on the most spoken languages in EU countries. It is recommended that this study be extended to other regions of Spain to address the barriers created by language and culture, and to enhance awareness of the connection between linguistic support, equality, and social integration.

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