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SETTING THE BAR BEHIND BARS: PRISONER INTERPRETING IN NIGERIA AND SOUTH AFRICA

ABSTRACT

As a continent with over 2 000 indigenous languages, Africa is complex regarding linguistic diversity. Whereas fluency in a major language is vital for communication in most bureaucratic, legislative and governmental environments, this skill is sometimes lacking in certain sensitive areas in Africa, such as prison facilities and courts. The term prisoner interpreting *refers to the facilitation of communication by an interpreter between a prisoner or detainee and another party who do not share a common language; however, research regarding prisoner interpreting is currently marked by a huge hiatus. The aim of this study was to describe what prisoner interpreting in Nigeria and South Africa may entail; it was undertaken due to the lack of research in this domain. The setting is contextualised by providing background on community interpreting for prisoners and the substandard prison environment, and the necessary communicative competence required of interpreters is investigated. It was found that cultural considerations and dialectal differences are prominent factors to keep in mind when interpreting for prisoners. Power dynamics are examined, the first finding being that language status is problematic if a major language – in this case, English – is privileged above others. Moreover, it was determined that there are often large power gaps between parties. Regarding responsibility and role, it was established that parties in the interaction often have conflicting goals and the interpreter is tasked with deciding whether to comply with norms, or to challenge them. It can be deduced that prisoner interpreting in both Nigeria and in South Africa constitute unique challenges and require the community interpreter to meet a significantly high standard of exspectations.*

Keywords: *communicative competence, community interpreting, power dynamics, prison(er) interpreting, role*

CLARIFICATION OF TERMINOLOGY

- Community interpreting: A form of bi-directional interpreting of dialogue, constituting a triadic interaction with a client or clients, an end-user or end-users, and an interpreter in community, legal or public service settings (Remael & Carroll 2015, p. 2).

- Majority or major language: A dominant, conventional and so-called grammatically proper language that has gained wide acceptance and application by a nation (Shoshana 2011, p. 58). The best example of a major language, applicable to both Nigeria and South Africa, is English.

- Minority or minor language: A language linked to power issues, usually, though not always, spoken by a minority group (Pedley & Viaut 2019, p. 137). In cases where most of the population speaks a minority language, the language in question lacks power to some extent; examples are indigenous African languages.

- Prison: An institution that confines prisoners and pretrial detainees (Olojede & Mohammed 2020, 32).

- Prison guard: A prison or corrections officer who supervises prisoners (Olojede & Mohammed 2020, p. 32).

- Prison interpreting: Facilitating communication in a prison facility between a prisoner and another party who do not share a common language.

- Prisoner: A person who is devoid of their freedom and is confined due to forcible restraints and captivity (Olojede & Mohammed 2020, p. 32). This paper's definition of prisoner includes pretrial detainees, that is, untried or unconvicted prisoners awaiting legal proceedings (Gordin & Cloete 2013, p. 1168). Since court interpreters in South Africa are most often not highly trained individuals, court interpreting is viewed as a form of community interpreting (Pienaar & Cornelius 2015, p. 199).

- Prisoner interpreting: For this study, I suggest the term prisoner interpreting as opposed to prison interpreting, which is widely used in the literature. This decision is based on the grounds that prisoner interpreting is not restricted to interpreting in prisons, but includes interpreting in courts for pretrial detainees. Prisoner interpreting is, thus, the act of facilitating communication between a prisoner and another party when the two do not share a common language.

1. INTRODUCTION

In multilingual and multicultural prison facilities, such as those in African countries, language barriers are instrumentally challenging (Martínez-Gómez 2018, p. 155). Impaired communication leads to inadequate access to facilities, services, programmes, procedures, and so on, and hinders the core goal of rehabilitation. These interpreting exchanges are of a sensitive nature and involve bridging communication gaps between a prisoner and another party with whom they do not share a common language. In order for these exchanges to be mediated, a person with competence in both languages is requested to interpret (Martínez-Gómez 2015a, p. 320), which poses a need for prisoner interpreting.

Interpreting studies has not seen a lot of work focusing on prison(er) interpreting,[1] thus, labelling it a virtually unexplored territory that deserves greater research attention (Baixauli-Olmos 2013, p. 45; Martínez-Gómez 2014a, p. 235). The nature of prisoner interpreting is inherently diverse concerning the variety of communicative events that take place (Martínez-Gómez 2015a, p. 320), including informal conversations, medical or legal consultations, admission procedures, security processes, and criminal proceedings. The diversity of contexts for informal interpreting in prisons indicates a need for specialisation by prisoner interpreters (De Boe, Balogh & Salaets 2021, p. 19), which I believe applies to African countries such

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1 I will henceforth use the term *prisoner* in all cases where *prison* is used in the literature, excluding reference to *prison* as a setting.

as Nigeria and South Africa, which have a diversity of cultures and a plethora of languages and dialects. According to Adetunji (2015, p. 654), English is the official language and lingua franca of Nigeria, Africa's most populous country. Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo are the three most spoken languages in their respective regions in Nigeria and the other 400–500 spoken languages throughout Nigeria are labelled "minority" languages (Ayenbi, 2014, p. 53). Amongst its 25–30 spoken languages, South Africa's Constitution declares 11 official languages, namely Afrikaans, English, isiXhosa, isiZulu, seSotho, Sotho sa Leboa, Setswana, Tsonga, Tshivenda, siSwati and isiNdebele (Kretzer & Kaschula 2021, p. 105). In July of 2023, South African Sign Language became the 12th official language. There is a notable lack of studies on prisoner interpreting in these two countries, and I could, therefore, make no predictions of what it could entail. The aim of this study was to describe what community interpreting in the context of prisoner interpreting in Nigeria and South Africa may entail. This was done by examining general literature in the field and providing insights on how it may apply to these two countries.

First, an international overview will be provided of studies done on prisoner interpreting, and their findings. Second, the current context will be examined by providing background on community interpreting for prisoners and the substandard African prison environment. The next section will focus on the necessary communicative competence that should be demonstrated by prisoner interpreters in Nigeria and South Africa, which sheds lights on cultural considerations and dialectal differences. Thereafter, power dynamics will be examined regarding language status and power gaps in these two countries. Finally, responsibility and role will be considered, both of which emphasise conflicting goals and challenging norms. The insights gained from the discussion will determine what sets the standard for prisoner interpreters mediating in prison environments in Nigeria and South Africa.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The pioneer in the field of prisoner interpreting is undoubtedly Martínez-Gómez (2014b; 2015b; 2016; 2018), as her research has not only greatly contributed to, but has also shaped the field in several ways.

In her first paper, Martínez-Gómez (2014b) studied a corpus of 19 interpreted interviews between prison officers and foreign prisoners in a prison setting, which included users' and experts' reactions. The goal of the study was to determine whether a disconnect existed between the community interpreter's established code of ethics, and norms expected to be adhered to in prison settings. The requirement to act faithfully, independently, and impartially in commitment to confidentiality constitutes the interpreter's professional code of ethics (Martínez-Gómez 2014b, p. 179). According to Martínez-Gómez (2014b, p. 174), a prison is one of the settings that relies more heavily on the services of non-professional interpreters, or ad hoc interpreters, who have no professional interpreting experience. A person with proficiency in both languages, thus, frequently steps in to mediate in a very informal fashion; they could be fellow prisoners, prison guards, cleaners, and so on. The results indicated that prisoners acting as ad hoc prisoner interpreters often, either consciously or subconsciously, challenge certain norms, such as accuracy, impartiality, role, confidentiality, and respect, when performing prisoner interpreting (Martínez-Gómez 2014b, p. 185). Ad hoc prisoner interpreters made significant additions to interpretations, guided answers, answered on behalf of prisoners, introduced their own opinions and beliefs, shared confidential and outside information, and challenged the primary participant's agency. Additionally, Martínez-Gómez

(2014b, p. 184) identified a few cases where the prisoner interpreter attempted to improve their fellow inmate's social image or helped them to "save face". Participants' behaviour showed face-threatening, face-saving, and face-enhancing techniques. A clear example from the study is an ad hoc prisoner interpreter who praised their fellow inmate, in addition to minimising their involvement in the crime being discussed (Martínez-Gómez 2014b, p. 184). This was done in an effort to place the inmate in a positive light by enhancing their "face" or reputation. Martínez-Gómez (2014b, p. 184) highlights the complication arising from the requirement that prisoner interpreters must distance themselves from taking sides; however, the message is influenced by interpreters' perceptions and ideologies when they are fellow prisoners. Evidently, challenging norms and saving face hinder the communication process.

In the same corpus of 19 interpreted interviews, Martínez-Gómez (2015b) studied several examples of invisibility and power gaps in interpreted encounters in prisons. The scale, ranging from invisibility to visibility, portrays the amount of agency that interpreters exercise in the interaction. Invisibility allows interpreters to remain disassociated from the interaction and the decision-making involved, whereby they are not responsible for the outcome, while visibility gives them greater power to control the interaction. It was found that prisoner interpreters generally view themselves as visible in the interaction, with most respondents opting for "opaque visibility" (Martínez-Gómez 2015b, p. 186). Opaque-visibility interventions are characterised as less obvious, expanded, or substituted, because the length of interpreters' renditions is not notably different from the original speaker's utterance; this is probably due to reactions that could be triggered in participants if deviations and agency are obvious. Furthermore, a problematic finding is that several prison guards still support the notion of the invisible interpreter, possibly due to power imbalances. In prisoner interpreting, according to Martínez-Gómez (2015b, p. 190), information is fundamentally a source of power, and the sharing of information is a collaborative move on the part of the participant. These power moves can certainly filter the interaction and guide the interlocuters to perform in a specific way. Police officers may be motivated to manipulate suspects into confessing and prison guards might fish for specific information or certain behaviours instead of facts, to use as leverage against the prisoner. Prisoners, on the other hand, can form allegiances and deliberately withhold information to manipulate the outcome of the interaction, or can have the ulterior motive to be seen as favourable and cooperative in order to enjoy certain privileges in the prison facility. These examples are all problematic since the interpreter should attempt to remain impartial and focus on the provision of clear and accurate interpretations.

Martínez-Gómez (2016) did a single case study of an in-person interview between a psychologist and a prisoner, with their cellmate – a fellow prisoner – acting as ad hoc interpreter. Prisoner interpreting is conditioned by the punishment goals of deterrence, incapacitation, and retribution, and, as a result, interactions of this nature are often characterised by suspicion and wariness (Martínez-Gómez 2016, 94). Martínez-Gómez (2016, p. 112) found that the parties engaged in numerous face-threatening and face-enhancing acts, thus confirming Martínez-Gómez's earlier findings (2014b) regarding face saving. Due to their allegiance, the ad hoc interpreter actively attempted to protect and improve the fellow prisoner's face, but also prioritised their own social image to appear cooperative and trustworthy to the psychologist (Martínez-Gómez 2016, p. 109). It became evident that underlying social, power and trust issues influence conversational behaviour in the prisoner-interpreting exchange. The power structure shapes the participation of all interlocuters in the interaction and may render them prone to adversarial dispositions. In this case, the ad hoc interpreter allied themselves with the

prisoner, since they both belonged to the powerless group in the prison facility. In this way, the interpreter used various strategies to diminish the impact of criminal warrants against their cellmate, while boosting their own positive face in front of the psychologist.

Martínez-Gómez (2014b; 2015b; 2016) has, therefore, reported valuable findings on prisoner interpreting with regard to challenging norms, saving face, exerting agency by ways of opaque invisibility, and power imbalances.

Baixauli-Olmos (2013) offers an overview of prisoner interpreting in a prison setting by way of observation, interviews and questionnaires obtained from public service interpreters, prison managers, prisoners and prison staff. It was found that, since interpreting services are used to enable communication for prisoners, an interpreting process involving three participants is impeded when it takes place through a glass pane or via the telephone (Baixauli-Olmos 2013, p. 53). As can be deduced by the mode of consecutive interpreting, the interpreting task itself is also a time-consuming process. Respondents in the study pointed out that it took a lot of time to go through security procedures, which was detrimental to the process, since interpreting consecutively already slows down communication (Baixauli-Olmos 2013, p. 59). In addition to time allocated for meetings generally being short, visiting hours can change abruptly and can be delayed or even cancelled without notice. Furthermore, poor acoustics and the loud background noise of simultaneous conversations hinder the interpreting process in prisons. Evidently, interpreting in prison settings often results in an unsuitable manner of interpreting, as well as a loss of time. In a later study, Baixauli-Olmos (2017, p. 80) emphasises that the emotional environment can be extremely draining in the case of community interpreting, since it is usually quite a personal interaction, which is undoubtedly the case for prisoner interpreting. The respondents in this study described the physical and emotional environment as "difficult", "vile" and "overwhelming".

Baixauli-Olmos (2017) studied the responsibilities and roles of prisoner interpreters through the lens of a professional role, which was perceived to be socially, institutionally, culturally, and ethically constructed. Power gaps and conflicting goals persist, since the situations are most frequently constrained by unbalanced power relations and high levels of emotional tension, where impartiality can be very difficult. Professional interpreters generally align with their service providers and, in this way, are considered to have more power than the prisoners (Baixauli-Olmos 2017, p. 71). For example, when the interpreter enters the room alongside the primary participant who arranged and initiated the interaction, it may instil in the prisoner the idea that the interpreter is not on their side. Regardless, professional interpreters are often exploited, as it is often expected of them to comfort the prisoners or to informally converse with them, which does not form part of their job description. They may then be perceived as an ally or confidant of the prisoner, which pressures them into performing a role outside of the interpreter's professional code of ethics. A prisoner can also, for instance, ask the interpreter for a message to be passed on or for a letter to be delivered to a family member. Additionally, prison guards can ask interpreters to give their own opinions about the prisoner's characteristics, including reliability and intelligence (Baixauli-Olmos 2017, p. 78). Primary participants can, thus, unfairly use interpreters as a bridge to fulfil their own communicative goals, which places pressure and unrealistic expectations upon the interpreter. Evidently, participants' goals can be extremely conflicting and power gaps shape the prisoner-interpreting interaction.

When considering the international literature on prisoner interpreting thus far, it is evident that interpreting for prisoners is indeed a unique and daunting task.

3. CONTEXT

Community interpreting entails a type of interpreting that caters for the social needs of members of a community (Tiayon 2005, p. 2). It is performed in an informal, conversational tone, normally in short, consecutive mode. The practice of community interpreting is generally associated with interactions involving less privileged groups and less cosy settings (Tiayon 2005, p. 10) – prisons being among them – which, in a sense, makes the process even more demanding on the interpreter than conference interpreting. In order to contextualise prisoner interpreting, the act of community interpreting for prisoners, as well as the prison environment, will be discussed next.

3.1 Community interpreting for prisoners

Community interpreters deliver target-language speech when a speaker pauses their speech or conversation, usually after a few words or sentences (Russel & Takeda 2011, p. 96). Community interpreters mainly work in both language directions, requiring so-called A-to-B language interpreting, and vice versa. This bilateral mode of interpreting is very common in Africa, where it is expected of interpreters to be fluent in both working languages, in spite of the dynamics between the two languages varying between native versus foreign language, official versus non-official language, or major versus minority language (Tiayon 2005, p. 6). Despite community interpreting being the most common form of interpreting, it is still an emerging profession that has not been extensively studied.

Community interpreting is unavoidably associated with human rights, because prisoners have the right to receive information in a language they understand (Tiayon 2005, p. 3). Despite this legal requirement, policies for language brokering in facilities such as prisons generally feature provisions with vague, broad, and imprecise remarks, for example, "understandable language", "assistance", "someone who can assist", as well as opt-out clauses, for example, "where possible" and "where reasonable" (Martínez-Gómez 2018, p. 7). The term *interpreter* is rarely explicitly mentioned, and when it does appear, it is left undefined or combines professional and ad hoc interpreting, with a general preference for the latter, since professional interpreting services are not always feasible or available (Martínez-Gómez 2014b, p. 174). According to Martínez-Gómez (2015a, p. 320), the reality of prisoner interpreting reveals that non-professional or ad hoc interpreting is generally utilised for language brokering, instead of professional interpreting services.

Martínez-Gómez (2018, p. 155) specifically mentions the failed implementation of language policies encompassing several official languages in South Africa, which points to a lack of awareness of language diversity in dynamic multicultural societies. According to Muntingh (2006, p. 108), prisoners in South Africa have the right to receive information in a language they understand, and they may use interpreting services for defence purposes "where necessary and practicable". This statement is limited to prisoners' defence and does not properly address the vital need for language brokering in other situations, nor does it offer any proper procedures to follow. Language brokering in prisons mainly requires the use of professional interpreting services, which most frequently occurs when lawyers bring an interpreter along to interview the client (Martínez-Gómez 2014a, p. 235). In such cases, however, the costs are covered by the prisoners themselves, which makes the service in this context an unfeasible solution. Martínez-Gómez (2014a, p. 246) confirms that these issues of costs and constraints related to availability or unawareness of interpreters limit the use of professional interpreting services in prison facilities.

The most frequent text type related to prisoner interpreting is interviews: It can be a consensual social visit, during which the prisoner is asked about life and well-being, or a conflictual visit when it concerns a criminal case (Baixauli-Olmos 2017, p. 71). Social visits are usually interpreted by fellow prisoners, while legal visits tend to be, as they rightfully should be, interpreted by professional language practitioners. It is stated by Muntingh (2006, p. 63) that prisoners may not be employed as interpreters during trials in South Africa, which rings true for Nigeria as well. Michael (2016, p. 213) explains that English is the official language in Nigerian courts and if the accused person standing trial does not understand English, an interpreter should be provided at no cost to protect the accused's right to a fair trial:

> An accused person is entitled to have without payment, the assistance of an interpreter; if he cannot understand the language and terms used at the trial of the offence. Criminal trials in Nigeria are conducted in English terms but because there exists a large illiterate population, the services of an interpreter are frequently required or sought for to explain the language in a lucid manner to an accused person (Michael 2016, p. 216).

Interpreting is the only way of ensuring that the accused persons understand and participate properly in the trial proceedings when the proceedings are conducted in a language they are not familiar with. However, failure to provide an interpreter is not always treated as leading to a miscarriage of justice. Although there are laws in place to follow when requiring the services of a professional interpreter, it is evident that ad hoc interpreting, or even no interpreting at all, ultimately prevails in South Africa and Nigeria.

3.2 The prison environment

Interpreter-mediated encounters are multilayered events when they occur in specific settings. This is even more the case for interpreting in prisons – where, naturally, prisoner interpreting mainly occurs – since prisons can be defined as a community in their own right (Howe 2021, in De Boe et al. 2021, p. 13), and with the prison environment strongly affecting the atmosphere and the interpreting task itself (Baixauli-Olmos 2017, p. 80).

The conditions in South African prisons are described by Gordin and Cloete (2013, p. 1169) as "horrifying". They describe the lack of hygiene, which is due to an insufficient number of bathrooms and toiletries. Following a visit to Pollsmoor, Justice Edwin Cameron released a report describing the prison conditions as "deplorable" and "profoundly disturbing" (Stephens 2018, p. 141). Odeh (2015, p. 8) argues that Nigerian prisons are in a horrible state, which negatively affects prisoners' dignity and could be perceived as inhumane. Muhammad, Gwangndi and Hassan (2017, p. 75) describe prison conditions in Nigeria as "harsh" and "life-threatening" and in violation of prisoners' rights. Conditions in these two African prisons are, thus, suboptimal for prisoner interpreting.

The act of community interpreting for prisoners is generally characterised by three participants sitting in a closed room, with two of them taking turns to speak and allowing the third – the interpreter – to mediate before speaking again (Baixauli-Olmos 2013, p. 56); however, in prisoner interpreting in Nigeria and South Africa, this is hardly adhered to. There are not sufficient opportunities to meet in a private room due to the space, quantity and quality of rooms being inadequate. Meetings, thus, often have to take place in common areas, resulting in low levels of privacy and intimacy. Poor acoustics and the loud background noise of simultaneous conversations also hinder the interpreting process. These issues relate directly or indirectly to prison overcrowding, which is a concerning issue in South Africa and Nigeria, according to Stephens (2018, p. 64) and Joseph et al. (2021, p. 1).

4. COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

Communicative competence is considered a prerequisite for success in community interpreting (Smirnov 1997, p. 218), and touches on the interpreters' ability to perform dialogically in a given language. The most important element to consider is complete situational adequacy, since community interpreting generally takes place in informal settings with a diverse array of people. Community interpreters should, therefore, produce culturally and situationally adequate renditions in understandable language that is representative of the social group being addressed. Interpreting in any setting goes far beyond concentrating on the mere linguistic aspects of the message, and this is no less the case for prisoner interpreting, since cultural and dialectal differences are sure to arise.

4.1 Cultural differences

Knowledge of cultural differences assists interpreters in community settings, especially in Africa, where different cultures govern the way we behave or how we speak in a specific community (Lebese 2018, p. 54). Cultural differences commonly occur when interpreting for prisoners in African countries such as Nigeria and South Africa.

In a study of pretrial male inmates' wellbeing and experiences of imprisonment in a medium security prison in South-Eastern Nigeria, it was found that prisoners commonly use a mixture of English and their local language Igbo when sharing their experiences, which constituted a need for interpretation (Orjiakor et al. 2017, p. 4). The results of the study reveal that the prisoners experienced disbelief and denial, but the authors also noted that there was a much richer meaning in the prisoners' native tongue Igbo than in English, which was lost due to cultural differences. The participants all identified as Christians and often cited biblical anecdotes, and elaborated on their religious beliefs. In this context, knowledge of religion as a part of culture is important for accurate interpretation.

In a study on practicing court interpreters interpreting for pretrial detainees in South Africa, many respondents emphasised that knowledge of culture is vital for interpreting accurately for another culture (Lebese 2018, p. 188). In the Western culture, for example, avoiding eye contact is considered rude or dishonest behaviour, as opposed to the same gesture indicating respectful behaviour towards elders in the African culture. One participant in the study stated that, when interpreting for an adult Zulu prisoner, it is necessary to use *hlonipha* (respectful) language (Lebese 2018, p. 190). In these cases, the interpreter must have intimate knowledge of signs of respect in a different culture.

4.2 Dialectal differences

When interpreting for prisoners, "the languages represented might fail to match the actual linguistic needs of the prison population" (Martínez-Gómez, 2014a, p. 250). This statement applies well to the South African prison context, where participants in the same study on practicing court interpreters interpreting for prisoners in South Africa noted that language use in rural areas is different from the standardised form (Lebese 2018, p. 289). This is the case for prisoners' use of Afrikaans, which does not match standardised Afrikaans (Lebese 2018, p. 318); furthermore, language mixing with English is very prevalent (Lebese 2018, p. 317). Barkhuizen and De Klerk (2002, p. 170) report code-switching and language mixing in Grahamstown Prison, where one participant spoke of Shalambom, a secret prison language originating from isiZulu and Tsotsitaal (Tsotsi language), both generally associated with male,

urban youths. The participants in Lebese's (2018, p. 289) study pointed to different uses of language in different South African provinces - in Gauteng, for example, the accused person on trial is known to play with the interpreter's mind. Being on trial for selling unlawful products, they use code words, such as *cellulars*, *hot stuff* and *brandies* when talking to the interpreter, so the police officer cannot understand them. Dialectal differences, including language mixing and the use of prison lingo, make the interpreter's task of getting the message across very difficult.

In Nigeria, the first type of English that solely served as a contact communication was a pidgin English (Danladi 2013, p. 6). This continued to the rise of Nigerian Pidgin English (NPE): a combination of indigenous languages and English. NPE has grown to be a common language throughout western and southern Nigeria, and fundamentally mixes English words with the grammar structures of indigenous languages. There was a need to capture the culture of the speakers in a new idiom: "I think that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. However, it will have to be a new English, still in full harmony with its ancestral home but altered to fit its new African surroundings" (Danladi 2013, p. 7). Examples of the translation of expressions as recognised in the indigenous languages are: *One day go?* for *Are you people going?*, and *not on the seat* for *not currently in the office*. In a survey done in 20 Nigerian states, it was evident that 72% of respondents mixed their native language with English (Danladi 2013, p. 14). Tenibiaje (2012, p. 121) studied 664 prisoners in 21 Nigerian prisons in 12 Nigerian states, and found that only 58% of them could communicate effectively in either English or NPE. What this means for an interpreter is that there is an entirely different dialect of language to attend to when interpreting between English and an indigenous Nigerian language.

The necessity of communicative competence to navigate cultural and dialectal differences between parties in the prisoner-interpreting exchange should, therefore, not be underestimated.

5. POWER DYNAMICS

Social differences and power relations play a vital role in interpreted encounters (Tiayon 2005, p. 4). Whether the language is "foreign" or not, the clients in need of community-interpreting services are essentially minority-language speakers. The interpreter should attempt to balance power gaps and establish trust between parties – especially in prisoner-interpreting exchanges, since unbalanced power relations, mistrust and high levels of emotional tension are inherent to prisons and courts. Language status and power gaps are, thus, in question when power dynamics are considered.

5.1 Language status

In a study done at Grahamstown Prison in South Africa, it was found that an unofficial language policy that made English the common language to be used for official purposes evolved naturally (De Klerk & Barkhuizen 2001, p. 6). It was determined that the home-language distribution among staff was approximately 50% isiXhosa, 45% Afrikaans and 5% English, and it was apparent that isiXhosa and Afrikaans were the languages heard in passing in informal conversations. The need for interpreters was commonplace due to the superficial command of English of a high number of prisoners. Yet, despite these obvious language barriers, no official provision was made for professional interpreting services. Ad hoc interpreters – usually prison guards, supervisors, cleaners, and fellow prisoners with bilingual competence – stepped in

to bridge the communication gaps. De Klerk and Barkhuizen (2001, p. 8) point to instances where English was utilised as a form of one-upmanship in tense interactions, altering the linguistic power balance. The use of English as a powerful, major language thus resulted in skewed power dynamics in prison exchanges.

Barkhuizen and De Klerk (2002) did another study one year later about the use of indigenous African language isiXhosa at Grahamstown Prison in South Africa. Even though isiXhosa is the most widely spoken language in the prison, English is employed as a lingua franca and functions as the "thread language" in formal contexts. Interviews, all in English, were conducted with the prison guards, prisoners, and the administrative staff. The receptionists shared that they were generally satisfied with using people who work as cleaners for ad hoc interpreting purposes, but the prisoners claimed that a sense of distrust existed about the authenticity of the interpretations provided by the cleaners: "Sometimes it feels that they are not telling us, it's not the real meaning of the words" (Barkhuizen & De Klerk 2002, p. 167). The authors noted that interpreting services are frequently required when prisoners do not speak or understand English, but still, no official provision was made for language brokering. Ad hoc interpreting by anyone who happens to be close by is the norm, except for legal visits, to which lawyers bring professional interpreters. With regard to the sensitivity of the subject and the risks associated with inaccurate interpretations, it is against prison policy to assist lawyers with informal ad hoc interpreters. Barkhuizen and De Klerk (2002, p. 172) emphasise that the addition of qualified interpreters would greatly benefit the prison community by forging links between the large number of functionally illiterate Xhosa prisoners and the prison staff, but this ideal is "overshadowed by the institutionally supported power of English".

As is the case in South Africa, English has also become a dominant yet imposed language in Nigeria, and is expanding and growing at the expense of indigenous languages. Despite English not being constitutionally declared an official language in Nigeria, it is the "unofficial official language" of the country (Ayenbi 2014, p. 53). Nigerians often prefer using English to their home languages, due to their belief that the latter are limited in scope. As pointed out in Tenibiaje's (2012, p. 121) study, more than 40% of prisoners cannot communicate effectively with prison guards in English. A large proportion of prisoners' principal language is not English, or they speak such unusual dialects of English that understanding and communication are clouded. Officials have determined that 30–40% of criminal defendants require an interpreter to aid them in fully understanding the proceedings against them (Michael 2016, 215). It is stated that "the non-English-speaking defendant is increasingly causing problems for the administration of criminal justice in Nigeria" (Michael 2016, p. 215). It is certainly problematic that non-English-speaking prisoners are viewed as a burden and that no provisions are made to cater for them in their preferred language.

The need for interpreting becomes commonplace when the use of English as lingua franca proves unsuccessful, or when the subject is sensitive and demands the use of the first language with more detailed interpretation (Martínez-Gómez 2015a, p. 320). In these two African countries, there are unrealistic expectations for all citizens to be competent in English, which leads to professional interpreting services not being provided as it is deemed unnecessary. Ad hoc interpreters can fill this role to a certain extent, but this solution is not sufficient or sustainable for the prisoner-interpreting context. In this way, prisoners are denied the right to receive and share their experiences in a language of which they enjoy full command.

5.2 Power gaps

The position of every participant in the interpreting interaction, and the nature of the relationships between them, entail implications for the power dynamics, thereby creating large power gaps. Martínez-Gómez (2014a, p. 246) states that the interpreter automatically falls into a position of power, especially when a prisoner-interpreting exchange calls upon the services of an ad hoc interpreter, and an outside party, such as a cleaner, is not available. In these cases, the interpreter is commonly a prison guard or a fellow prisoner in the facility.

Prisons are dynamic environments where events – tension between prisoners and prison guards, management changes, disagreements, and so on – constantly take place (Fourie 2015, p. 79). These events can form or sever bonds, create new alliances, and alter the relationships between prison guards and prisoners. The relationships between prison guards and prisoners are based on power and issues of control, which lead to a tense or antagonistic environment. Due to their affiliation with the institution, prison guards, as primary participants in the prison setting have much more power. They exercise power by searching prisoners, censoring letters, searching cells, and so on (Fourie 2015, p. 79). In South African prisons, prison guards are considered to be best positioned to persuade prisoners negatively or positively, and they occupy changing identities and often powerful positions. Likewise, in Nigerian prisons, it is reported that prison guards often abuse their powerful positions and make prisoners feel powerless and oppressed (Orjiakor et al. 2017, p. 5). Hence, one could safely predict that placing a prison guard in the powerful position of interpreter would not play out successfully in these two countries.

If the interpreter is a fellow prisoner, however, the power gap tilts the other way, creating a two-against-one situation. This can be attributed to close relationships existing between prisoners, and their mutual agenda against the prison system. A regular occurrence is that the interpreter can reply directly to the primary participant's (the person who arranged and initiated the interview) questions, due to having prior knowledge of the person on whose behalf they are interpreting (Merlini 2015, p. 105). Similarly, the primary participant can address the interpreter directly and, thus, intend the utterance to be for their use only, thereby excluding the prisoner who is supposed to be the subject of the interaction. This is a way of interfering and filtering the information in such a way that the message does not reach the participants properly. Furthermore, instead of boosting a fellow inmate's reputation, prisoners acting as interpreters can hold grudges against other prisoners, which can seep into the interaction. In Nigeria, there have been reported cases of petty corruption and prisoners bullying other prisoners in prisons (Muhammad et al. 2017, p. 76). Dishonesty and feelings of hate can impact the interaction negatively when the interpreter is a fellow prisoner. In this way, the message is influenced by the interpreter's perceptions and ideologies of the subject of the interaction, which is problematic. Therefore, the dynamic and validity of the interaction is largely dependent on whether the interpreter is a fellow prisoner, or not.

6. RESPONSIBILITY AND ROLE

Community interpreters have to distance themselves from taking sides and act ethically. However, the participants' goals are often conflicting when they interpret for prisoners, which has implications for the role they fulfil (Baixauli-Olmos 2017, p. 71). Community interpreters often – either consciously or subconsciously – challenge certain norms, such as accuracy,

impartiality and confidentiality, even though they should attempt to remain relatively impartial (Martínez-Gómez 2014a, p. 188). If this happens, conflicting goals and challenging norms are in question.

6.1 Conflicting goals

The power dynamics and sensitive nature of the prisoner-interpreting exchange have implications for conflicting goals. As determined by Martínez-Gómez (2015b, p. 187), the ad hoc interpreter could have an underlying agenda to be seen as favourable and cooperative by the prison guard in order to enjoy certain privileges in the prison facility. In a Nigerian prison, it was, indeed, found that the presence of a prison guard can inhibit prisoners' openness to sharing their experiences and answering questions (Orjiakor et al. 2017, p. 13). In this scenario, prisoners might refrain from sharing information that places them in a bad light. On the other hand, a lawyer could be fishing for information or certain behaviours instead of factual information to use in a criminal case (Martínez-Gómez 2015b, p. 187). Referring to Nigeria, Michael (2016, p. 217) found that the presence of an interpreter affects the dynamics in the prison setting in such a way that interpreters are frequently – inadvertently or deliberately – co-opted by lawyers and other parties into furthering their own objectives. A lawyer could, therefore, impose their own agenda on the interpreter, thereby influencing the validity of the exchange. The interpreter is tasked with being objective and should not give in to either side, which is ultimately a difficult task when the parties in the interaction have different agendas.

6.2 Challenging norms

In line with the interpreter's professional code of ethics, community interpreters are expected to keep information confidential and to avoid bringing up new information obtained outside the interaction (Martínez-Gómez 2014b, p. 179). In general, interpreters should protect themselves by being cautious about the information they share, especially in prison facilities (Baixauli-Olmos 2013, p. 56). One source of stress on the part of the community interpreter identified by Baixauli-Olmos (2013, p. 57) is endogenous pressure. Endogenous pressure stems from being uncertain about what actions to take, that is, when the professional role, ethical principles and personal values collide. An example in the prisoner-interpreting exchange would be when a prisoner confides in the interpreter that they want to commit suicide. In this case, the interpreter must choose between the ethical duty of confidentiality, and assisting the prisoner with their mental health, thereby possibly saving a life. In Nigeria and South Africa, there is a state obligation to protect prisoners' lives by preventing them from committing suicide. Yet, Stephens (2018, p. 223) highlights that prison staff members in African countries are not trained to help prisoners with mental health problems, nor do they have the necessary facilities to treat them. The interpreter is, thus, tasked with a difficult decision to make – whether to comply with norms, or not.

7. CONCLUSION

It is evident that prisoner interpreting is a broad term that refers to several types of interactions with prisoners, and which requires a high degree of specialisation among professional and non-professional or ad hoc prisoner interpreters. The aim of this study was to describe what prisoner interpreting in Nigeria and South Africa may entail. Up to the present time, there is a scarcity of studies on prisoner interpreting in these two countries. This study attempted to address this gap by offering a broad, theoretical perspective on what prisoner interpreting could constitute in Africa, with four conclusions being drawn:

1. The context of community interpreting – involving less privileged groups and uncomfortable settings – makes the process of interpreting more demanding. Community interpreting for prisoners is generally performed on an ad hoc basis by a person with competence in both languages who happens to be available to mediate. Considering their poor conditions and lack of privacy, silence, and space, due to severe overcrowding, the Nigerian and South African prison environments constitute a negative environment for interpreting.

2. Prisoner interpreters should produce culturally and situationally adequate renditions in understandable language that are representative of the social group being addressed – a demand requiring communicative competence. Cultural differences between African languages, such religion as part of culture and signs of respect, should be highly regarded in prisoner-interpreting exchanges to avoid distorting or losing meaning. Likewise, dialectal differences, language mixing and prison lingo using English and indigenous Nigerian and South African languages should be borne in mind.

3. The prisoner interpreter is tasked with attempting to balance power dynamics and establishing trust between parties. It was found that language status is problematic if a major language, in this case English, is placed on a pedestal; doing so may result in mistrust and inadequate or no interpreting services being offered. Additionally, the position of every participant in Nigerian and South African prisoner-interpreting exchanges results in power gaps, especially when ad hoc interpreting is at play and a prison guard or a fellow prisoner fulfils the role of interpreter.

4. Prisoner interpreters are expected to act faithfully, independently and impartially in commitment to confidentiality, which blurs their responsibility and role when difficult situations arise. Participants often have conflicting goals and underlying agendas in the prisoner-interpreting exchange, during which the prisoner interpreter in Nigerian and South African prisons is expected to remain objective and refrain from taking sides. Endogenous pressure places the prisoner interpreter in a difficult position regarding whether to challenge or comply with norms, for instance when a Nigerian or South African prisoner confides in the interpreter about their intention to commit suicide.

In conclusion, prisoner interpreting in both Nigeria and South Africa constitutes a unique challenge and requires a significantly high standard of expectations that the community interpreter has to meet.

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