





# The Quandary of Church Interpreters in Ghana: Conduit or Interventionist?

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the varied roles of church interpreters in Ghanaian multilingual congregations, focusing on how they balance their primary function as conduits with necessary interventionist approaches. This study relied on Hanna Niska's role pyramid as an appropriate theoretical model to unravel the complex role of the church interpreter. Through qualitative research involving 12 interpreters from six churches in the La Nkwantanang Madina Municipal Assembly area, transcripts of recorded sermons, interpreted texts from these churches, and participants' observations at church services, the study revealed that while interpreters view their role as divinely mandated, they often must adapt beyond mere translation to serve their congregations effectively. Interpreters often take on additional roles as conduits, interventionists, and culture brokers. They help listeners better understand or explain how an idea in the sermon applies to Ghanaian life. Sometimes they even become advocates. This differs from court or hospital interpreters, who typically have separate roles for each assignment. Because interpreters feel called by God and valued by their community, they move between tasks fluidly. However, the study also pointed out that some of these interpreters are not well-educated, sometimes leading to misinformation and misinterpretations. The study recommends developing specialised training programmes for church interpreters and establishing guidelines for appropriate interventionist practices. Fora for interpreter-preacher collaboration should be created, and finally, it is crucial for further research to be conducted in different denominational settings. This paper serves as relevant literature for translation and interpretation studies, communication studies, mother-tongue translations, religious and theological studies, and African cultural studies.

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## INTRODUCTION

Effective communication often requires intermediaries who can bridge language barriers in multilingual environments. This demand becomes particularly important in religious settings, where accurate message transmission is crucial to spiritual understanding. This study focuses on interpretation in the church. According to Mullamaa, several researchers have carried out studies on interpretation, generally making it clear that the context in which interpretation takes place has a direct bearing on how interpreters perceive their roles and how their roles are carried out.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, studies on interpretation have been

<sup>1</sup> Kristina. Mullamaa, "Towards a Dynamic Role Conception of Liaison Interpreters: An Ethnographic Study of Self-Descriptions of Practicing Liaison Interpreters in Estonia." (University of Tartu, 2006); Claudia Angelelli, "Interpretation as a Communicative Event: A

carried out in health and legal settings. Similarly, the interpreter's role at conferences has received considerable attention. Many researchers have conducted studies in this area.<sup>2</sup> Most of these studies have been carried out in the US, Canada, and Mexico, where Spanish-speaking Latinos often require the services of interpreters, especially in health facilities in the US.<sup>3</sup>

Although interpretation studies cover extensively health care, legal, and conference settings, research into church interpretation, especially in Ghana, remains limited. Therefore, this study investigates the complex role of church interpreters and how they balance between conduit and interventionist in Ghanaian multilingual congregations. The study specifically looks at the role of the pastoral interpreter as against interpreters who practice in other fields, such as the hospital and the law court. It also investigates whether the church interpreter is only a conduit, or sometimes, circumstances permit or obligate them to go beyond the established or known mandate. This research fills a notable gap in interpretation studies, particularly in the Ghanaian context. It contributes to understanding how religious interpretation differs from other forms and helps establish guidelines for church interpretation practices.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Interpreter Roles in Various Settings

Research into interpretation studies has extensively documented the different practices and roles of interpreters in different professional contexts. Studies by Angelelli formed the basis for insight into how institutions shape interpreter behaviour and role perception.<sup>4</sup> The findings of Alvery reveal that the work of Angelelli was further developed by Pullman and Stem, who have shown that interpreter roles are not static, but rather dynamically influenced by the specific requirements and expectations of their working environment.<sup>5</sup> In healthcare, interpreters navigate particularly complex role boundaries. Hsieh's comprehensive research revealed different interpretation functions in medical institutions. He posits that interpreters were assuming the provider's communicative goals; editorialising information for medical emphasis; initiating information-seeking behaviours; participating in diagnostic tasks; and volunteering medical information to the patients.<sup>6</sup> These roles often overlap and change based on the immediate needs of patient care and institutional requirements. The findings show that successful medical interpreters must develop advanced strategies to change roles while maintaining professional ethics and standards.

Legal interpretation has its unique challenges and expectations for its role. Studies by Berk show how legal interpreters should carefully adapt the requirements of linguistic accuracy to strict procedural requirements.<sup>7</sup> The formal nature of judicial proceedings often requires a stricter interpretation, although there are frequently situations where cultural mediation becomes necessary for effective communication and fairness of the court's conference interpretation.<sup>8</sup> As Jones analysed, court interpretations generally maintain clearer role limits compared to community interpretations. This is largely due to the presence of standardised protocols and professional guidelines that have developed over decades of practice.<sup>9</sup>

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Look through Hymes' Lenses," *Meta* 45, no. 4 (2000): 580–92; Herculene Kotzé, "Educational Interpreting: A Dynamic Role Model," *Stellenbosch Papers in Linguistics Plus* 43 (2014): 127–45.

<sup>2</sup> R. B. W. Anderson, "Interpreter Roles and Interpretation Situations: Cross-Cutting Typologies," *Language Interpretation and Communication*, 1978, 217–230.; Angelelli, "Interpretation as a Communicative Event: A Look through Hymes' Lenses"; Sandra Hale, "Excuse Me, the Interpreter Wants to Speak," *Interpreter Interruption in the Courtroom: Why Do Interpreters Interrupt and What Are the Consequences*, 2001; María Aguilar-Solano, "Non-Professional Volunteer Interpreting as an Institutionalized Practice in Healthcare: A Study on Interpreters' Personal Narratives," *Translation & Interpreting: The International Journal of Translation and Interpreting Research* 7, no. 3 (2015): 132–48; Annette Hild, "Maintaining and Monitoring Interpreting Quality in Church Settings," *Interpreting* 18, no. 2 (2016): 198–222.

<sup>3</sup> Aguilar-Solano, "Non-Professional Volunteer Interpreting as an Institutionalized Practice in Healthcare: A Study on Interpreters' Personal Narratives."

<sup>4</sup> Angelelli, "Interpretation as a Communicative Event: A Look through Hymes' Lenses."

<sup>5</sup> Mary Patricia Beltran Avery, "'Healthcare Interpreting: A Profession in Search of Standards,'" *The ATA Chronicle* 31, no. 7 (2002): 28–31.

<sup>6</sup> Elaine Hsieh, "'I Am Not a Robot!' Interpreters' Views of Their Roles in Health Care Settings," *Qualitative Health Research* 18, no. 10 (2008): 1367–83.

<sup>7</sup> Susan Berk-Seligson, *The Bilingual Courtroom: Court Interpreters in the Judicial Process* (University of Chicago Press, 2017).

<sup>8</sup> Berk-Seligson, *The Bilingual Courtroom: Court Interpreters in the Judicial Process*.

<sup>9</sup> Roderick Jones, *Conference Interpreting Explained* (Routledge, 2014).

## Church Interpretation Research

In recent years, church interpretation research has been of great importance among scholars who are beginning to understand and appreciate its complexity. Hokkanen has contributed immensely to this by outlining three core differences that characterise religious interpreting, which are different forms of interpreting: first being spiritual or emotionally based whereby one feels in unity with God or someone deceased, second is related to people who pray together and third concerns particular signs followed during sacramental services like breaking bread.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, Downie's inclusive examination of literature on church interpretation offers an important insight into how the field has progressed over time. The study terrain is divided into three main categories, namely works meant for professionals, those that tell what should be done, and finally, those that describe what is done.<sup>11</sup> Works meant for professionals mostly contain some rules that are expected to be followed, as well as some practical experience and knowledge from these kinds of settings, particularly where one may be involved in the practice itself. Although such resources offer valuable tips for overcoming daily hurdles encountered in church interpretations, they may not always be theoretically sound. The second kind of church interpretation literature advises on the best approaches and frameworks concerning any theological issues while also considering educational matters. This has helped formulate training courses and set up standards for interpreters in places of worship. Those within this school of thought often discuss how difficult it can be to maintain a balance between words that are said accurately but without considering their real meaning. There is also descriptive research, which relies on observation and analysis, such as ethnography, that plays a vital role in determining what church interpreters do. Karlik also posits that church interpretation comprises spiritual preparation and involvement, social integration, doctrinal correctness, as well as cross-cultural mediation.<sup>12</sup> These findings indicate that church interpreters need more than just traditional language skills to communicate effectively.

## Cultural and Communication Aspects

Ra's work on intercultural communication challenges is important in understanding culture within the church. According to the study, being able to understand a culture in matters concerning religion requires more than just knowledge of language and culture; one should also be aware of related issues, such as spiritual dimensions and religious customs.<sup>13</sup> Interpreters need advanced techniques to move through cultural and spiritual territories due to the complicated nature that goes beyond the five senses. Also, in their work, Tipton and Furmanek put forward an all-around model that can help students comprehend what cultural-spiritual competencies are needed from religious interpreters. The four key elements outlined in this model are knowledge of theology matters, understanding of rituals performed by given communities, a sense of belonging within certain groups, and lastly non-translatable part related to spirits or God, known as spiritual sensitivity.<sup>14</sup> From this perspective, it can be concluded that effective language professionals working in the church are those who have gone a step further than just learning how to carry out standard translations by acquiring profound knowledge and understanding of the given religious customs.

In addition, Liu's research into verbal interaction among Christians has revealed some very interesting data. The study found that church translators must deal with switching between formality and informality levels when using typical jargon for a given religion, which could be translated literally.<sup>15</sup> Some would approximate the meaning of the original text at most since there might not always be the exact equivalent words available, and therefore, something else has to take their place. This consequently creates a loss in translation, among other things. The study highlights that while trying to preserve linguistic rights and religious realities, church interpreters should overcome such difficulties by using

<sup>10</sup> Sakari. Hokkanen, "‘Experiencing the Sacred: Religious Affect in Church Interpreting.’," *Translation Spaces* 8, no. 1 (2019): 58–75.

<sup>11</sup> James. Downie, "‘Church Interpreting: A Critical Survey of the Literature,’” *Translation and Interpreting Studies* 19, no.1(2024):1–25.

<sup>12</sup> Jürgen. Karlik, "Church Interpreting in Global Perspective." (New York: Routledge, 2020).

<sup>13</sup> Yifan He et al., "Adult-Onset Familial Hemophagocytic Lymphohistiocytosis Presenting with Annular Erythema Following COVID-19 Vaccination," *Vaccines* 10, no. 9 (August 31, 2022): 1436, <https://doi.org/10.3390/vaccines10091436>.

<sup>14</sup> Laura Gavioli and Cecilia Wadensjö, *The Routledge Handbook of Public Service Interpreting* (London: Routledge, 2023), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429298202>.

<sup>15</sup> Ming. Liu, "‘Investigating the Impact of Religious Background on Conference Interpreter Performance.’," *Interpreting* 21, no. 2 (2019): 220–44.

special techniques that ensure the proper conveyance of messages containing all emotional overtones, either taken from or meant for holy scriptures.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### Niska's Pyramid Model

The foundation of understanding the roles played by church interpreters is drawn from the pyramid model formulated by Niska, as presented below for interpreting within community settings. According to this model, an interpreter can be at the base level – a *mere conduit*, and take up the role of a clarifier, or culture broker or operate at the highest level as an advocate.

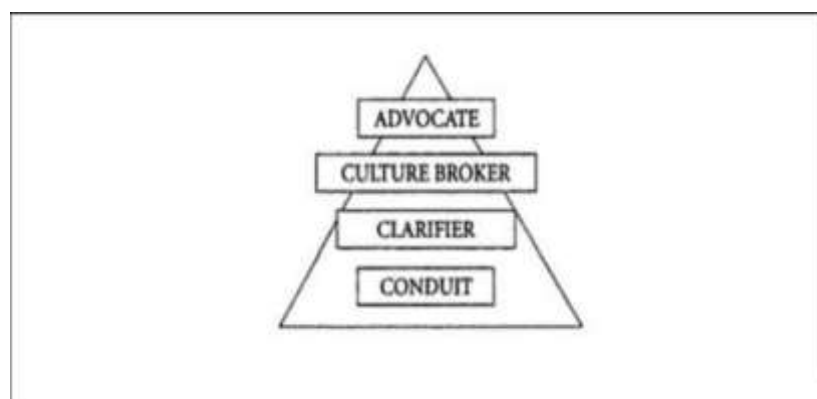


Figure 1: Niska's role model for community interpreting<sup>16</sup>

This structure implies that interpreters remain primarily message carriers but may take up different complex roles depending on the circumstances. Hokkanen built on Niska's model in 2019 to tailor it for use within churches when doing interpretations. She found that some additional important issues must be taken into account within non-secular environments, such as support in religious matters, integration into a religious community, taking part in ceremonies, or any other.<sup>17</sup> The elements mentioned above call for church interpreters to have extra skills beyond conventional ones; they should also consider matters of spirituality and theology when carrying out their duties. Nonetheless, role flexibility within church interpretation has been a subject of recent theoretical discussion. The research by Martinsen and Dubslaff about conflicting roles, among many other sources, gives an insight into how one could handle such complex scenarios. Their study further reveals some strategies employed by translators when dealing with conflicting roles, such as explicit negotiation with stakeholders on what is expected of them, adjusting their boundaries depending on the situation, as well as creating specialised plans for given conditions.<sup>18</sup> From this, we can argue that effective church interpreters need intelligent ways not only for linguistic but also for spiritual needs under their care.

## METHODOLOGY

The study used a qualitative research design and an ethnographic approach to investigate what happens with church interpreters in Ghana. To achieve this, some guidelines were taken into consideration, such as Creswell's principles for qualitative inquiry and Hale and Napier's methodology for interpretation studies.<sup>19</sup> To have reliable data on the research objectives, semi-structured interviews were conducted with twelve (12) respondents, lasting between 60-90 minutes for each interviewee at the initial stage of data collection. These interviews were carried out in either Akan or English language based on the convenience and preference of the respondents. The questions followed an interview guide that was

<sup>16</sup> Helge Niska, "Community Interpreter Training: Past, Present, Future," in *Interpreting in the 21st Century: Challenges and Opportunities* (John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2008), 133–44.

<sup>17</sup> Hokkanen, "Experiencing the Sacred: Religious Affect in Church Interpreting." "

<sup>18</sup> Bodil Martinsen and Friedel Dubslaff, "The Cooperative Courtroom: A Case Study of Interpreting Gone Wrong," *Interpreting* 12, no. 1 (2010): 21–59.

<sup>19</sup> John W Creswell and Cheryl N Poth, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches* (Sage publications, 2016); Sandra Hale and Jemina Napier, *Research Methods in Interpreting: A Practical Resource* (A&C Black, 2013).

piloted by two interpreters. The second part of the research design involved participants' observation, where twenty-four (24) church services were observed from January to June 2024, spanning six (6) months. The study was carried out in six (6) churches, with four (4) of them located in the La Nkwantanang Madina Municipal Assembly area in Accra, and the remaining two (2) were in the Kumasi Metropolis. These churches have different denominational affiliations, including three (3) Pentecostal churches, two (2) Charismatic churches and one (1) Protestant church. Analysis of the language environment within the congregations formed the third part of the study. This was done through interviews on matters like official languages recognised by the church, availability of written materials and their translation(s), and language used or commonly preferred during different church-related activities, among others. Furthermore, the study analysed congregants' views toward such languages. Such data notes were retrieved and taken from digital templates loaded onto tablets. Additional data were obtained from thirty-six speeches recorded in the original preferred mother tongues of the participants. For uniformity and clarity in meaning, translation and linguistic professionals in mother-tongue translation and interpretations were engaged to transcribe the data for analysis. These were aligned appropriately so that there was clarity in viewing how each interpreter worked during this stage, too. Forty-eight church services were streamed live and later viewed on Facebook Live, as well as YouTube, focusing on virtual interpretation and other related technological issues.

Serving as archival sources, documents such as programme outlines, interpreter training materials and church bulletins, among others, were used as additional secondary data. Meanwhile, information on the demographics of the church, language use in neighbouring societies and history of language use within the church provided insight into the context.

The analytical framework comprised a hybrid of thematic analysis, discourse analysis on sermon transcriptions and multimodal analysis on video content. The coding process progressed through initial open coding, axial coding aimed at developing themes, selective coding targeting core categories, and cross-case analysis. To ensure quality, several measures like member checking with participants, peer review of coding, expert consultation on cultural aspects and triangulation of multiple sources of data were employed.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical factors were considered highly in the research process. Participants' confidentiality, anonymity and voluntary participation were pledged and ensured. Before participation and data collection, all respondents and church leaders received written consent, while congregants were informed that ongoing research to ensure that no one was coerced into participating or providing any information against their will and discretion. To protect their credible identities, anonymous names were assigned to respondents. Data records were protected and kept safely. Other established church rules and local laws were obeyed. This was done through acknowledging their cultural beliefs, and showing honour to their church order while at the same time maintaining good dress codes with general good conduct. Finally, participants were assured that, except for academic purposes in the case of this study and its related pieces of literature, their information would not be used for any personal or fraudulent purpose.

### **Limitations**

The study recognised some shortcomings that should be noted. It sampled only two out of many towns in one region. Furthermore, it focused primarily on Akan-English languages, combined with a limited time of six months of observations, which posed some potential bias towards the behaviour of interpreters. However, these were taken into account when analyzing and interpreting the research results.

## **PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Participant Demographics**

The study included twelve (12) interpreters, comprising nine males (75%) and three females (25%), with ages ranging from 33 to 55 years. Quantitatively, the mean age was 42.3 years, and the median age was 41 years. These statistics mean that on average, all participants could be between 42 and 43 years old, while most of the participants were aged 41 years. These age indicators support their maturity and knowledge of the exercise, and that their participation was their sole decision. The educational

background of the participants was notably high, with ten (83.3%) having bachelor's degrees or higher. Four participants (33.3%) had professional interpreter certification, and six (50%) had formal theological training. All participants were bilingual in Akan and English, and many had additional language proficiency: five spoke Ga, three spoke Ewe, and two spoke French. Interpreter experience levels ranged from 3 to 20 years, with a mean of 8.7 years, and were generally interpreted 2–4 times per month.

The study included six churches, with four located in the La Nkwantanang Madina Municipal Assembly area and two in the Kumasi Metropolis. These churches represented various denominational affiliations (three Pentecostal, two Charismatic, and one Methodist). They interpreted from/English to Akan. However, English to Akan interpretation was more common to all of them. Concerning remuneration, many of them indicated that they received no remuneration for their work as interpreters; they were, however, fulfilled and were motivated to continue because they believed that they had been called by God to do such work. One of them remarked,

“Even though we do not have any formal training as interpreters, we are good at it since our skills get improved all the time. As the saying goes, practice makes one perfect. We are happy and satisfied with what we do because we are appreciated by the church.”

The above-extracted quotation from the respondent agrees with what Anders Tveit calls “Practice makes perfect.” In his study, Tveit explains the concept of *practice makes perfect* by emphasising that “this is learning by doing instead of theory before practice.” He therefore describes this as “a way to achieving deeper learning since the participants are brought into a state of mind which makes them susceptible to learning.”<sup>20</sup> Resultantly, one would agree with the interpreters that indeed, their consistent practice of the art has improved their interpretation skills despite having no formal or theoretical training. Many of these interpreters had not received formal training in interpretation. They strongly indicated that their skill had improved over the years. The youngest person was a 33-year-old woman who had only interpreted for about eight (8) months. The oldest was about 55 years old and had more than 10 years of experience as an interpreter. Table 1 below presents the descriptive distribution of interpreters' years of experience. The findings indicate that 25% of them had acquired more than 10 years of experience as interpreters. Meanwhile, the majority of about 66.67% have a minimum of 2 years and a maximum of 10 years of experience in interpretation skills. These results agree with the findings of Degraft-Otoo, who explored the length of service of personnel with Accra Polytechnic, currently renamed as Accra Technical University. His results revealed that the majority of 28 respondents, constituting 56%, indicated that they had between 1-5 years of experience.<sup>21</sup> Juxtaposing this, one could indicate that the interpreters' years of experience were significant. Although they have no formal interactions in terms of training, their years of experience are a significant guarantee of their expertise in the art.

**Table 1: Interpreters' Years of Experience**

Years of Experience	Number of interpreters	Percentage (%)
<b>Under 1 year</b>	1	8.3
<b>2-4</b>	3	25
<b>5-7</b>	2	16.67
<b>8-10</b>	3	25
<b>More than 10 years</b>	3	25
<b>Total</b>	12	100

Source: Field Findings, 2024.

### The Mandate of the Church Interpreter

In their interaction with each of the 12 interpreters, the researchers wanted to find out if the respondents were aware of their primary duty. The respondents stated that they were aware of the multilingual nature of their congregations, hence the need to communicate the exact content to benefit members who had

<sup>20</sup> Anders Tveit, “Practice Makes Perfect: Role-Play–Because Our Students Deserve It!,” in *IFIP World Computer Congress, TC 3* (Springer, 2008), 127–34.

<sup>21</sup> Munyaradzi Chikove, “The Effect of Training and Development on Employee Attraction and Retention in the Gold Mining Sector in Zimbabwe,” *International Journal of Scientific and Management Research* 6, no. 03 (2023): 41–59.

difficulty understanding English. In the first place, they were unanimous in saying that since their assignment was from God, they were expected to fulfil the mandate without failure. They were quick to say further that they were expected not to add, and also not to subtract, since the message was from God Himself. One of them expressed his role in the following words:

“I believe that I am the mouthpiece and the servant of God, to help those who do not speak English to hear from God. My assignment is from God; I dare not add or take away.”

All 12 interpreters believe that their role is divine. They believe that they have been called by God to deliver God’s word to non-English speakers in their church’s congregations.

### **Church Interpreter as a Conduit**

The term “conduit” is about judicial interpretations defined in the work of S. Hale.<sup>22</sup> Amplified by T. Tamura, an interpreter is a conduit when he or she is a verbatim translator, an accurate translator, or one who translates only.<sup>23</sup> In many cases, the interpreter is expected to be a conduit. In this study, one of the respondents stated that the pastor she interpreted for paid close attention to her rendering and ensured that she did not add or take away from the sermon. The rest admitted that although they were aware of their primary duty. However, another respondent said:

“My pastor is very strict. He pays attention to every utterance I make, and when I fail to interpret his exact words, he reprimands me. He would ask me: ‘Is that what I said?’ or would say ‘I did not say that’ or he would repeat the statement and ask me to interpret it again and correctly. ’ Well, he believes that he makes no mistakes in his delivery for an interpreter to correct him.”

Of the 12 interpreters, only 1 participant stated that she was solely a conduit. Although that is the original mandate of the church interpreter, the rest of them were of a different view, stressing that peculiar circumstances may necessitate the assumption of other roles, e.g. clarifier, cultural broker, or advocate in the course of a preaching session.

### **Church Interpreter as an Interventionist**

Berk-Seligson explains that, as an interventionist, an interpreter becomes a more active role player than a mere mouthpiece of the main speaker.<sup>24</sup> His voice is much heard above that of the speaker.<sup>25</sup> This occurs as such an intervention seeking to clarify and explain further, and may interrupt and add to or subtract from the main speaker’s voice. According to the respondents, there are instances where they had to add, replace, or present the message in other ways while still maintaining the core truth in the preacher’s statement. These circumstances align with Niska’s role pyramid, which indicates that, similar to how the pastoral interpreter primarily serves as a conduit, their role varies depending on specific circumstances.<sup>26</sup> The interpreter plays other roles as a clarifier, a culture broker, and sometimes an advocate. In their bid to clarify, protect the culture, and advocate, they correct the utterances, mitigate, explain, encourage, warn, and add to the source utterances. The interpreter becomes an interventionist when he acts as a clarifier, cultural broker, and advocate.

### **The Interpreter as a Clarifier**

One of the roles of an interpreter interventionist is clarification. Berk-Seligson cites a situation in a courtroom where an interpreter actively seeks to interrupt attorneys to clarify the meanings of their utterances for their clients.<sup>27</sup> In some instances, the pastoral interpreters find themselves making clarifications for the benefit of the listener. The clarification is done by issuing a proverb or an analogy.

<sup>22</sup> Sandra Hale, “Controversies over the Role of the Court Interpreter,” in *Crossing Borders in Community Interpreting: Definitions and Dilemmas* (John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2008), 99–121.

<sup>23</sup> Tomoko TAMURA, “Judicial Interpreter’s Role Issues: Conduit and Agent in Relation to Accountability,” *Interpreting and Translation Studies: The Journal of the Japan Association for Interpreting and Translation Studies* 21 (2021): 41–60.

<sup>24</sup> Berk-Seligson, *The Bilingual Courtroom: Court Interpreters in the Judicial Process*.

<sup>25</sup> Eva Ng, “Interpreter Intervention and Participant Roles in Witness Examination,” *International Journal of Interpreter Education* 8, no. 1 (2016): 4.

<sup>26</sup> Niska, “Community Interpreter Training: Past, Present, Future.”

<sup>27</sup> Berk-Seligson, *The Bilingual Courtroom: Court Interpreters in the Judicial Process*.

In both instances, the preacher did not object to them, and in other cases, the preachers commended the interpreter for the illustration. Below are some extracts in English and Twi interpretations of the situations of pastors and their interpreters:

### Extract 1

**Pastor:** *If you cannot travel to do missions, you can contribute in many ways.*

**Interpreter 1:** *Se wo ntumi nkɔ Nyamedwuma a, kae se, ɔtwe antumi ankɔ gua a, ne nwoma kɔ.*

In the above extract, the interpreter used a proverb to drive home the message of the pastor. The meaning of the above Twi proverb is that if the antelope is unable to go to the market, its skin can go. The skin of the antelope is regarded as valuable. This means that one could support the missionary work by contributing something valuable.

### Extract 2

**Pastor:** *We need to be vigilant so that we are not deceived by these false prophets.*

**Interpreter:** *Yenhwe yen ho yiye na atoro adiyifo yi annadaa yen. Senea won mu bi de 'sobolo' ahye toa mu se Yesu mogya.*

In the above-quoted extract, the interpreter interrupted with a clarification by adding an illustration as follows: 'Like how some of them have bottled hibiscus flower drink 'sobolo' <sup>28</sup> And say that it is the blood of Jesus.

**Pastor:** Thank you for that illustration. *Woaka no yie paa.*

The response from the Pastor indicates his endorsement of the interpreter's smart use of such illustration to make the translation much clearer to the listeners. In the Asante-Twi language, he applauds his interpreter: *Woaka no yie paa*, which means, "You have said it so well."

In an interview with one of the interpreters, he explained that he needed to clarify using current familiar practices, to make the message/warning very graphic. In church, the interpreter corrected tenses to make the message clearer. The preacher was narrating the story of the temptation of Jesus found in Luke 4 1 13, and he kept using the present tense. It was observed that the interpreter corrected the present tense to the past tense during the narration and interpretation. In this type of interpreting role, the clarifier ensures that the accurate communication of meaning by the speaker and complete comprehension by the listeners is achieved, hence interrupting and clarifying where necessary. It is therefore never the motive of the clarifier to compete for any sort of pride over his or her speaker but rather to serve as both a medium and a checker of the speech for effective communication between the speaker and the listeners. Some interpreters sometimes help their speakers by clarifying some statements to cover some grammatical errors by their speakers. A study by Zhao *et al* shows that this intelligence on the part of interpreters helps to reduce speech errors as they display a great deal of proficiency in the source language in which the speaker communicates and the receptors' language.<sup>29</sup> A clear instance is when the interpreter cleverly corrected and replaced the preacher's wrong usage of present tense with past tense during the biblical Lukan narrative stated above.

### The Interpreter as Culture Broker

One interpreter explained that one mark of a good interpreter is to be familiar with the sensitivities of your listeners and not offend them. One must therefore be familiar with the culture to understand and interpret cultural nuances and to bridge cultural gaps. He further stated that:

"... people have come to church to be encouraged, and not to go back home, discouraged."

For that reason, he sometimes used euphemisms to mitigate the otherwise harshness of some of the statements uttered by preachers who may have different cultural backgrounds. In the English language, the word 'foolish' may not carry so much weight, but among the Akan of Ghana, it could be

<sup>28</sup> This is a popular herbal drink in Ghana, with its dark red colour, similar to blood colour. See Edinam, "Sobolo – Hibiscus Flower Drink," (July 10, 2021), Available at: <https://gingerandseasalt.com/sobolo-hibiscus-flower-drink/> Accessed on 16th December 2024.

<sup>29</sup> Nan Zhao, Zhenguang G. Cai, and Yanping Dong, "Speech Errors in Consecutive Interpreting: Effects of Language Proficiency, Working Memory, and Anxiety," *PLOS ONE* 18, no. 10 (October 18, 2023): e0292718, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0292718>.



offensive. It is therefore expected that the speaker prefixed such an expression with another one, *sebe*, which means ‘excuse me,’ to mitigate its harsh effect on the listener. Similarly, in another instance, the preacher mentioned a name in his illustration, and so that the woman does not get embarrassed, the interpreter explains that it is only an illustration. The interpreter explained to save the face of the woman who was part of the congregation.

### Extract 3

**Pastor:** *Do you think Jesus was foolish in giving that instruction?*

**Interpreter:** *Wogyedi se Yesu sebe, w’agymimi anaa?*

In the discourse above, as an Akan, the interpreter respectfully chose a cultural parlance: *sebe*, to express a triple respect: first to the speaker by covering his direct emotions, second to the listeners by sounding a cultural imagery of pleading to use such a word, and thirdly to himself by saving himself or herself from committing a cultural error if he had translated word-for-word as spoken by the preacher.

### Extract 4

**Pastor:** *Maybe because Cynthia wants to be famous, she sings very loudly for everyone to hear her voice...*

**Interpreter:** *... eyi ye mfatoho keke o*

In the discourse above, the interpreter again chose a cultural parlance: *eyi ye mfatoho keke o*, which means “This is just an illustration.” Here, the interpreter saved the situation by saying that it was only an illustration.

### The Interpreter as an Advocate

According to the World Health Organisation due to people’s right to information and effective communication, “successful advocacy depends on important messages being communicated and heard.”<sup>30</sup> Deductively, the role of an interpreter as an advocate marks his or her dual role of helping speakers communicate well and ensuring that the listeners hear well. In the interview with one of the male interpreters, he mentioned that on some occasions, they intervene whilst they are performing their role. In one instance, the preacher spoke softly and did not speak into the microphone, so the interpreter whispered to him to speak up. He also had to plead with another preacher to break at shorter intervals to allow him to do a better interpretation. He, however, admitted that he could do that during the preaching because the preacher was a close friend, and their relationship was informal.

In the interventionist moves, the role of an advocate was the least practised. In line with the church interpreter’s conviction that their work was divine, they try their best to communicate the message exactly as the preacher delivers it. However, for the sake of his listeners, he assumes the role of a clarifier and corrects wrong tenses among others. Furthermore, in the Ghanaian culture where honorifics and politeness play crucial roles in oral communications, the interpreter precedes his rendering with *sebe*, meaning ‘excuse me’; he does that to respect the sensibility of his listeners, not forgetting their cultural values. Although advocacy was sometimes done outside church settings, in a few instances, the interpreter whispered to the preacher to pause at shorter intervals to prevent him from forgetting some of the preacher’s utterances. In interaction with the interpreters, some of them recommended regular review meetings of preachers and interpreters where the two parties will review their performance and plan how the interpretation exercise could be improved. This kind of advocacy is expected to be championed outside the church setting.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the discussion, it is recommended that specialised training programmes should be developed for church interpreters and also guidelines for appropriate interventionist practices should be established. A forum for collaboration between interpreter and teachers should also be created. Finally, further

<sup>30</sup> World Health Organization., “Advocacy and Communication.” Community-Based Rehabilitation: CBR Guidelines. National Library of Medicine, National Center for Biotechnology Information, ,” 2010.

research should be conducted in different denominational settings to provide different perspectives that will better guide the duties of interpreters in the Church.

## CONCLUSION

The study sheds light on the intricate and multi-dimensional responsibilities of church interpreters in Ghana. It uncovers a lively interaction between interpreters' perceived task as divine messengers, which they believe must be carried out faithfully, without change, and the pragmatic need to be adaptable mediators when communicating between cultures or meeting other specific requirements of religious discourse. By using Niska's idea of an 'interpreter role pyramid', the study shows how these interpreters move between different roles fluidly. As well as being conduits, they can also be clarifiers, cultural brokers, or even advocates for one side or another; sometimes all at once. They do this in response to both what members want right now and subtle aspects of spiritual communication. The findings suggest that it is not enough to see interpreters as people who simply convey meaning from one language into another. This is especially clear in contexts where getting it wrong has big spiritual effects: here, everyone involved believes there could be serious problems with messages if additional elements are not included along with the main points. One might say that an interpreter's job involves balancing two things carefully, which are making sure listeners understand correctly while also keeping broader cultural and spiritual aspects intact. More broadly, the work contributes towards understanding better what interpreters do when working in places of worship; something about which many Ghanaians know comparatively little. This raises important questions, such as whether training courses specifically designed for their needs should be set up. Future studies could explore the potential for specialised training programmes that address the unique challenges church interpreters face and investigate how different denominational settings could influence interpreter practices and perceptions of their role.

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