




Rules for linguistic-cultural mediation

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Abstract: Within the framework of the changes and challenges our society is facing as a result of progress in areas such as communications and technology, but also as a result of the wars and crises they cause, the role of PSIT has become essential to assist those people who are placed in a vulnerable and defenseless situation as a result of this new reality. In this sense, there is a need to establish measures that favour quality assistance; this leads us, first of all, to study and define the concept of mediation and to frame it within public services, to subsequently focus on the mediation competence and on the components that, according to various authors, comprise it. It is through its understanding and consideration that we consider that the traits, aptitudes and training necessary to provide an optimal service that brings us closer to a more egalitarian society can be better outlined.

Key words: changes; mediation; mediation competence; public services; quality

How to cite this article?

Fernández de Casadevante Mayordomo, M. (2023). Aproximaciones a un decálogo para la mediación lingüístico-cultural. *FITISPos International Journal*, 10(1), 22-34. <https://doi.org/10.37536/FITISPos-IJ.2023.10.1.355>

1. Introduction

Given the fact that today's society is going through a period of significant changes, which affect different areas of our daily lives, it is necessary to take measures to help us face the challenges that arise. Migration is one of the main concerns, not only because of the consequences the decision to migrate has for those involved, but also because of the responsibility we have as a society, and more specifically as translators and interpreters. Our role contributes to the achievement of a certain balance by enabling the migrant population to have more equal access to those services and information that would be beyond their reach without linguistic assistance. This special issue aims to provide a window onto this reality, presenting contributions which, from different points of view, seek to contribute to progress in the field of Translation and Interpreting in Public Services (PSIT).

Within the framework of migrations, we would like to begin by pointing out that Spain has a high rate of migrant population, namely more than 5.5 million in the first half of 2022¹. This country is witness to a multicultural context, in which mediation work is more than necessary if the aim is to achieve a more equal participation of this segment of the population in society. Let us bear in mind that, in the face of different cultures, there will also be a variety of ethnic and socio-cultural groups, whose coexistence in the same social environment will give rise to gaps, barriers and situations of clashes, tension and confusion. Migrants are often victims of prejudice and stereotypes, in addition to the barrier of not speaking the language in question. Apart from the linguistic element, let us not forget that the migrant population arriving in the host country is faced with cultural codes and values whose particularities they do not understand, among other factors, due to socio-economic differences that put them in a disadvantageous position, preventing them from managing and handling certain codes.

Faced with this reality, we believe that the role of the linguistic-cultural mediator is necessary to bridge this gap between the parties. In this paper we will analyse the concept of mediation and the different issues surrounding it; first of all, we will attempt to define the term and focus on mediation in the context of public services. Subsequently, we will analyse the elements that, in general terms and according to different authors, make up the mediation competence, and then we will focus on the field of Translation and Interpreting and present the view of Valero Garcés, who argues the need to acquire the so-called mediation competence in order to provide a quality linguistic service.

2. Mediation: definition

Mediation originated in Spain in the mid-1990s as a result of the pluricultural and transcultural social reality we find ourselves in. Richarte and Díe (2008, p. 143) point out that this type of mediation emerged in a short space of time in response to the cultural and religious diversity associated with immigration, thanks to the initiative of groups in Catalonia, Madrid and Andalusia who helped this new professional figure to be established and developed training experiences, among other initiatives.

The concept of mediation has been defined in a number of ways which, while differing in some features, have some common aspects. El Ghazouani (2008, p. 285) argues that mediation can be defined as the "process of improving communication". In this respect, we consider that this somewhat general definition does not give a clear idea of what mediation

¹[INE Press releases](#)

work entails. Ortiz's (2006, p. 565) definition sheds more light on the meaning and implications of mediation; she defines mediation as the communicative act where no context is specified, but simply the action of facilitating communication personalised in a specific figure for this purpose, and considers that it can be carried out not only in the field of public services, but also simply between people with culturally diverse traits. Valero Garcés and Dergam (2003, p. 258) refer to Ortega's definition of the term "mediation", which consists of a mechanism of third-party intervention to contribute to a satisfactory agreement on basic incompatibilities, which in the case of linguistic mediation focus on linguistic understanding. If we go to the specific, Giménez Romero defines intercultural mediation as the intervention of third parties in multicultural situations in order to achieve a rapprochement between the parties, that they communicate and mutually understand each other, that coexistence is achieved and that conflicts between social or institutional actors who are ethnoculturally differentiated disappear (Valero Garcés, 2006, p. 104).

This would be the basis for intercultural mediation, a form of mediation that encompasses ethnic, racial, linguistic and religious factors which affect interpersonal relationships and which, according to Giménez, seeks the recognition of the Other and the rapprochement of the parties in multicultural situations (Ibidem, 259). Qureshi (2011), focusing on the healthcare field, points out that an important dimension of intercultural mediation is, in addition to bridging the linguistic and cultural gap, to facilitate the therapeutic relationship between the professional and the patient. If the aim of the search for a definition is to know the functions of the intercultural mediator, we may refer to the definition given by Verrept and Coune (2019, p. 6) of Pöchhacker, according to whom the intercultural mediator is a professional with the ability to "accompany in the relations between migrants and the specific social context, favouring the elimination of linguistic and cultural barriers, the understanding and strengthening of the person's own culture and the access to services".

According to authors like Rodríguez and Llevot (2011, p. 1066), the term "intercultural mediation" does not best fit in the strictly etymological sense for a context in which one does not intervene to resolve a situation of conflict or disagreement, but to facilitate accessibility and communication. However, in this regard, Verrept and Coune (id.) argue that intercultural mediation does not always consist of linguistic interpretation but, among other tasks, involves tasks traditionally more associated with social work than with intercultural mediation, with the main aim to smooth out barriers (in this case those that arise during health care), and to enable patients' access to the system by providing them with more knowledge of the system or helping them obtain the documents needed for access.

We would like to conclude this section by stating that, as we mentioned in the case of mediation in general terms, intercultural mediation has a basis on which the different authors agree; however, depending on the context in which it takes place, the tasks to be carried out by the mediator will vary, among other reasons due to the absence of a specific code of ethics and action, which leaves the decision on how to intervene and act in the hands of the mediator.

2.1. Mediation in public services

As mentioned above, linguistic-cultural mediation is a resource for resolving possible misunderstandings, and it is used in numerous fields, although on this occasion we highlight its use in public services to respond to the different needs of the users accessing them. In the field of education, authors such as Fernández Larragueta, Rodrigo and Fernández Sierra (2013, p. 73-74) consider that there are aspects that hinder intercultural mediation

in schools despite all the means made available to immigrants for their integration into the school; they highlight the lack of formal training and legislation clearly defining intercultural mediation in the field of education.

The work of mediators is rather unknown and their participation in it tends to be perceived as a voluntary action rather than as a profession carried out by a teacher-staff member, and even leads to situations of classism between them and the other professionals in the centre, which impedes the existence of a relationship of communication and coordination. Moreover, it often occurs that the intercultural mediator is perceived as an external agent rather than as another colleague, a figure who acts outside the curriculum and in specific moments, which leads to the fact that, as the aforementioned authors point out, “there is a failure to promote intercultural mediation in schools that facilitates communication and enhances the two-way understanding of natives and immigrants, as a community of life integrating students, families and professionals” (Id.).

This leads us to conclude that this figure needs to be recognised in the workplace, as the work they do is of great importance, and we consider that their inclusion as another agent in the school environment would be of great use in normalising the process of adaptation of the student through closer collaboration and communication between all parties. In this regard, but focusing on the healthcare field, Alcaraz (2014, p. 302) reminds us that their incorporation “is a sign of cultural sensitivity of the host country’s healthcare system to provide quality care” and defends the standardisation of their training, functions and tasks, as well as their professionalisation. As Angelelli (2014, p. 578) points out, mediators in the healthcare field have a professional role that is very different from that of translators: among some of the tasks performed by the interpreter or healthcare mediator, we should highlight that they explore answers, develop or summarise statements, facilitate understanding, explain technical terms and build bridges between cultures, in addition to being warm and affectionate. But the problem lies in the fact that, as Del Pozo (2013, p. 117) pointed out a decade ago and is still a reality today, in Spain we do not have a law that explicitly recognises the right to interpretation in health services; this explains the absence of mechanisms referred to by the author as “official” and which would serve to hire interpreters in the health sector, which leads to the search for solutions that are not usually the best, i.e. the use of volunteers, family members or people close to the patient.

With regard to mediation in the legal and police setting, we should devote some space to whether the term “mediation” is the most appropriate one. As Ortega (2010) points out, there are numerous studies that claim that interpreters work in a neutral and invisible way, which would mean that the interpreter acts mechanically, something that does not seem to be compatible with the figure of the mediator. This is the case of Morris (1999, p. 7), who defines the court interpreter as a professional who is trained to listen in one language and interpret in another during court proceedings, and whose job is to minimise the linguistic obstacles between the court and all parties to a court proceeding.

However, authors such as Hewitt (1995) point out that this professional plays the role of a linguistic mediator, insofar as they enable a person who does not speak or understand the language to participate in the process. In relation to mediation, the court interpreter also plays the role of intercultural mediator, as it is sometimes necessary for them to clarify certain concepts that have their origin in the given culture and which may lead to misunderstandings if they are not made clear. In fact, we consider that it could be concluded that TIPS and mediation share common aspects. In this respect, Valero Garcés (2002, p. 15) has already reminded us of the existence of an open debate between what constitutes

mediation and TIPS, which would take up a space outside the scope of this paper; and although we are not going to judge the appropriateness of either term, we prefer to speak of TIPS as a form of mediation.

3. Mediation competence

For the training of future translation and interpreting (T&I) professionals, we consider it interesting to analyse the competences that a person must acquire in order to perform such mediation. In the area of T&I, we find, on the one hand, opinions such as that of Valero Garcés, who focuses her studies on mediation and considers that the intercultural mediator must possess certain skills to achieve the so-called mediation competence (MC). On the other hand, in the area of language learning, De Arriba and Cantero (2004) refer to the concept of MC on the basis of Risager's concept of intercultural competence and argue that the former is basically a sub-competence of communicative competence.

In turn, these authors consider that MC is closely related to TC, which they claim could be a part of MC; in the light of these words, it could be said that these concepts (translation and mediation competence) are interrelated, at least in the field of language teaching. They also refer to Van Ek, who in 1986 includes within foreign language communicative competence a number of sub-competences which are as follows, and which in Oliveras' words (2000, p. 24), are not isolated from each other, but instead overlap with one another: linguistic competence, sociolinguistic/sociocultural and social competence, discursive competence, strategic competence, and mediation competence. They organise them as follows:

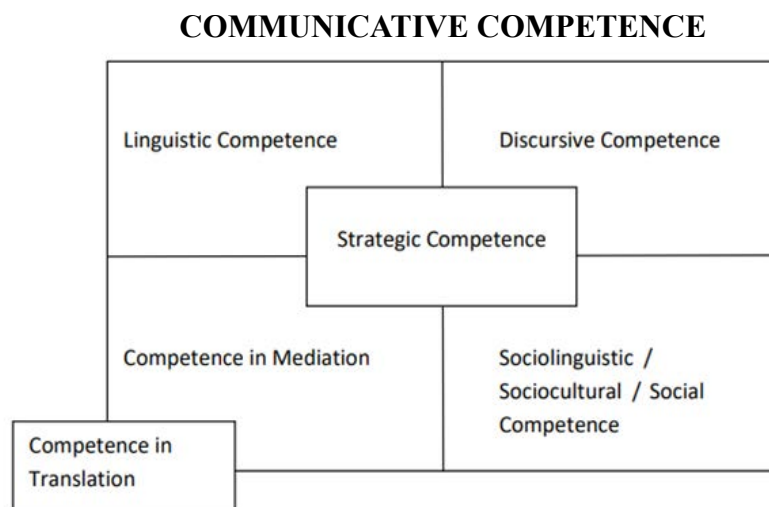


Figure 1. Mediation competence as part of the Communicative Competence
(translated from De Arriba y Cantero, 2004, p. 19)

Based on the above picture on communicative competence, according to De Arriba and Cantero (id.), strategic competence should be placed in the centre because it is what enables a person to use all their abilities, as well as to cope with new communicative situations. Linguistic competence and discursive competence are placed on a par because they are of equal importance, while sociolinguistic competence, which refers to a person's ability to produce and understand linguistic expressions correctly in different contexts, can be understood as equivalent to social and sociocultural competence. As for TC, they consider it to be part of MC, of which they say it is as important as the others because while the former focus on production and perception by the individual, mediation deals precisely with

contact between people. However, they make it clear that, despite the link, both activities are different.

Sánchez Castro (2013, p. 795-796), who refers to Hallet, presents the differences between TC and MC in relation to accuracy, terminological consistency, readability, professionalism, school and everyday relevance and resources:

- Accuracy

While a translation should fully correspond to the source text, which requires discipline and mastery of the language, as well as high linguistic competence and research skills on the part of the translator, in a mediation exercise the content of one language should be adequately translated into another, ensuring communicative equivalence, but giving less importance to formal precision.

- Terminological consistency

Within TC, terminological consistency consists of a clear definition of terms, so that the quality and usefulness of the translation is guaranteed. MC, on the other hand, requires the content to be conveyed "in a form that is relevant to the recipient", whereby parts of the message may be added, paraphrased or deleted. We disagree with this statement, as we consider that the mediator should also convey all parts of the message, in order to avoid situations where potentially relevant information is left out.

- Legibility

In translation, sentences with complex structures and inadequate vocabulary can have a negative impact; it is therefore necessary that both the grammar and the style of the target language are appropriate to the type of text. This is not stated in the mediation.

- Professionalism

According to Hallet (2008, p. 5), only a translator or interpreter who is a native speaker of the target language can achieve this professionalism, as it requires excellent knowledge of both languages - a mastery of the language in order to carry out an interpretation.

It is remarkable that professionalism is only mentioned within the field of translation and interpreting, which shows the lack of professionalism in mediation, and the need for the figure of the mediator to be recognised. Thus, the author speaks of mediation as "the communicative task in everyday situations, in which someone clarifies something to another person, draws attention to something, offers help, warns against something, etc."

- School and everyday relevance

While for Hallet (id.) translation represents a very demanding activity with little presence in everyday life, mediation is more oriented towards everyday communicative situations and present in all areas of life.

- Resources

As far as resources are concerned, the author considers that the resources available to a translator and/or interpreter are much greater than those available to a mediator, who resorts to questions, clarifications or negotiations of meaning with the the interlocutor. De Arriba (2003, p. 168) is also conclusive in the distinction between mediation and translation, stating that in order to speak of MC it is necessary to begin with

“TC, but devoid of the professional profile while adding to it the skills needed to find equivalences between different registers of the same language and, above all, to paraphrase, summarise, adapt, and so forth; in other words, all the activities that are mediation and are not translation”.

Returning to mediation competence, but focusing on the field of T&I, Valero Garcés (2006, p. 60) focuses most of her studies on mediation and the necessary skills that translators and interpreters should possess as intercultural mediators. Thus, with regard to the role of this professional, she highlights the variety of existing points of view. Valero Garcés refers on the one hand to the words of Corsellis, who lists a series of characteristics that the mediator in the Public Services should have: these professionals should not only know the language but also the culture in order to decode the messages and know what information needs to be added beyond the words; it is also necessary to know how to correctly decode in each situation, as well as to check that the parties understand each other, dealing with all those variables such as power, gender, urgency of work, which affect these exchanges.

The author (2003b, p. 7) draws on various publications and empirical studies that show that the translator-interpreter in the Public Services does not merely carry out a simple linguistic transfer, but also coordinates, mediates, or negotiates cultural or social meanings. She adds that a limit must be found to this intervention, which has led some to defend strict linguistic transfer while others choose mediation or advocacy and even defend the member of the minority actively, extremes that are detrimental to the interlocutors.

In this regard, it is worth clarifying what ‘advocacy’ means, referring to the healthcare setting as an example. Cambridge (2003, pp. 57-58) explains that in this model the interpreter literally advocates on behalf of the patient, asking questions of their own, advising the patient and offering their personal view on the issue at hand. Those who advocate this position believe that a patient who does not know the dominant language needs to be protected as a person who is not mentally capable of making own decisions. The ‘advocacy’ model also implies that doctors are professionals from whom the patients must defend themselves. However, this model has its risks, as switching from one role to another can lead to confusion and misunderstanding for the healthcare professional; furthermore, the interpreter should not have a say. The National Council on Interpreting in Health Care (2021) describes advocacy as an action taken on behalf of an individual that goes beyond facilitating communication with the intention of supporting good health outcomes, which theoretically means that a third party, in this case the intercultural mediator, will advocate for the patient, and abandon their impartial position.

Verrept and Coune (2019, 9) refer to advocacy by including it as an element of the so-called ‘ladder model’, which describes the tasks performed by the intercultural mediator in the health care setting and which, according to the authors, resembles the ‘incremental intervention model for interpretation’ that the Cross-Cultural Healthcare Program launched in Seattle in 1992. Particularly interesting about the ladder model is the reason for choosing this design, which is a reflection of the analysis of the benefits and risks associated with its implementation. Verrept and Coune point out that the higher up the ladder a task is placed, the more complex it is. By performing tasks placed higher up the scale, the “visibility” and influence of the mediator in the health care delivery process increases. Placing advocacy at the top of the ladder means that this activity is, of all the activities on the ladder, the one that exposes the intercultural mediator the most. On the other hand, in the impartial model, which is the most commonly used, the interpreter repeats everything they hear, and the parties involved in the conversation speak in their own voice and as if there were no interpreter, and are understood by the others. For this purpose, the interpreter must keep track of the words of the patient or client. The interpreter will only speak on their side if their

interlocutor is not heard properly, does not understand something, or believes that there is a misunderstanding (id.).

As an interlingual mediator or translator-interpreter in the public services, and as a catalyst who has to communicate not only languages but also cultures, one must be familiar with the social, cultural and religious context of both countries. Basic elements of everyday life such as the concept of disgrace, honour, religion and faith can vary greatly from one culture to another. Faced with a reality where there are immigrants who have gone through difficult situations, have suffered torture or violence, and if we take into account their emotional state or the fact of not being able to help them directly, the interpreter must be emotionally prepared and even specifically prepared to face this task. They must also be empathetic and convey trust. As Valero Garcés (2003, pp. 263-265) points out, it should be borne in mind that this figure is usually the only one who understands the immigrant, which may lead to an emotionally intense relationship with the interpreter, which in turn may make it difficult to maintain professional codes of neutrality. However, the author refers to Mirdal, who considers that the professional should be the one to help the interpreter set professional boundaries, because the interlinguistic mediator serves both parties and will have feelings for both, which may prevent them from remaining neutral.

Valero Garcés also refers to Taft (1981), who refers to this professional as a cultural mediator, and considers that as a bicultural professional, they must possess historical, social and cultural knowledge, which implies knowledge of history, folklore, traditions, customs, values and taboos, their people and the way they relate to each other. Furthermore, they must have certain communicative skills, which implies not only mastering written and oral language, but also body language, gestures, signs, symbols of each culture. In addition, they must have technical skills adapted to each situation: they must be able to use a computer, communicate correctly on the telephone, dress according to the situation, be familiar with the setting and know how to get around. Finally, Valero Garcés (2006: 93-94) believes that they must have certain social skills, i.e. be aware of the rules governing social relations and emotional reactions, and be able to control themselves depending on the situation and culture. This implies a high degree of intercultural sensitivity with which to negotiate meaning between the two cultures and to transmit it, in another language, to the other community.

She also refers to Orellana, according to whom the public service translator should have a broad general culture, a perfect command of the language into which they translate, as well as good writing skills and the ability to express themselves in a variety of styles. Another important aspect is the intellectual interest in any subject, which implies a reading habit, and a varied vocabulary. A critical sense and an analytical mind are also necessary in order to identify contradictions or errors, and the ability to synthesise in order to avoid redundancy. Finally, they must respect the original text and have a quick memory.

Santana (2012, p. 40) refers to Corsellis' listing of a certain number of characteristics mediators should have or develop:

- a) Confidentiality: respecting the right to privacy of others;
- b) Impartiality: not to take sides with any of the parties;
- c) Accuracy/Fidelity: ensuring that the message is faithful to the original and appropriate in the new cultural context;
- d) Integrity: being honest with oneself and one's capacity or ability when accepting I/T work.

In the words of Antonín (2013, pp. 61-62), the characteristics of those who carry out the work of intercultural mediation require that the user and mediator have the same origin and thus come from the same culture, and refers to Cohen-Emerique, who in 1997 stated that it is positive for the mediator to have experienced interculturality and cultural processes first-hand, something that goes “beyond theoretical knowledge about cultures and migrations”. The mediator must be a professional with the ability to manage cultural diversity and facilitate communication, thus giving rise to social cohesion and promoting both the autonomy and social integration of minorities.

Prats and Uribe (2009, p. 12) also give their opinion on the qualities that intercultural mediators should have; in their opinion, they must be responsible, maintain confidentiality, be impartial, cooperate, be socially committed and be clear about their role. Let us look at each of these qualities:

- a. Responsibility: the responsibility of the mediator lies in the mediation process itself, as they do not replace at any time the professional with whom the user is trying to communicate and between whom they merely facilitate communication.
- b. Confidentiality: the mediator is called to a double fidelity, on the one hand, as a professional at the service of an entity and, on the other hand, as a member of a group to which they must also be accountable. Thus, the mediator will not expose their information outside the context of the mediation, or, in other words, they must keep secret everything that is dealt with in it.
- c. Impartiality: the mediator must abstain from taking a position in favour of one party or the other, ensuring that the parties themselves take the decision they consider most convenient.
- d. Cooperation: on many occasions the mediator is faced with the commitment, at the request of the professional for whom they mediate, to carry out actions that are outside their usual sphere of action and must therefore be able to reformulate their approach and propose, for example, actions that favour collaboration between professional services and immigrants.
- e. Social commitment: mediators should limit themselves to trying to bring positions closer together, without defending or attempting, at any time, to claim rights that in their opinion are being violated. They will be neutral, and if they see that someone is being harmed, they can refer them to existing support networks.
- f. Clarity of the role: they should make it clear to the parties what their function is and what limits they have, to avoid the parties thinking that they are the solution to the problem.

Regarding the role of the translator-interpreter as a cultural mediator, there are two points of view. On the one hand, Valero Garcés refers to authors such as Kondo or Roy, who try to limit the intervention of the translator-interpreter and who believe it is impossible to speak of translation if conveying meaning involves working with ideas and not with words. On the other side we find authors such as Brislin or Knapp-Potthof and Knapp, who defend the visibility of the interpreter as the third element present, and even point out that, always within certain limits, intercultural mediators can promote their own initiatives, introduce new topics, comment, explain and present arguments, among other actions.

Through a series of surveys carried out in health centres with medical staff, people from other cultures and languages who work as volunteers in NGOs and through conversation with immigrants who come to these health centres, Valero Garcés compiles the main characteristics of interlinguistic mediators. Although the following data may give us an idea of who the people who normally carry out this work are, and given the scarcity of research on the subject, it is necessary to point out that the following data refer to a study published in 2001, which obliges us to be cautious in their interpretation given the time that has elapsed since then.

The people who carry out intercultural mediation tasks tend to be mainly women, between 25 and 40 years old and come from different places due to war, economic problems or political persecution, although, in our country, they are mostly from Morocco, Algeria, Senegal, Gambia, Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Mozambique and Eastern Europe (Poland, Romania, Bosnia, Ukraine), who after several years living in our country have an acceptable general knowledge of the language, although they are not specialised in any area. About half of these people have lived in other countries and know languages and cultures other than Spanish and their mother tongue. Unfortunately, they have unequal levels of education, with some having one or more university degrees; in this regard, institutions such as *Desenvolupament Comunitari* and *Andalucía Acoge* refer to people with a medium-high academic education in their country of origin, with different types of training courses in the society receiving them (Antonín, 2013, p. 61). However, it is also made up of people who cannot read or write in their native language. In the words of Garcés (2001: 824-825), very rarely have they been trained as translators or interpreters; the only experience the vast majority have is with people of their own ethnicity or in volunteering for NGOs and other humanitarian aid organisations.

4. Conclusions

Intercultural mediation requires the presence of properly trained professionals; it is well known that in an attempt to overcome not only the linguistic but also the cultural barrier that hinders communication between the foreign user who is unfamiliar with the language and those who work in public services, ad hoc solutions are often resorted - at least in the public services of our country - such as the use of friends, acquaintances and relatives, even minors, and workers who claim to master the language in question, which has negative and, at times, dangerous consequences. It is therefore essential that future translators and interpreters who wish to work in this field acquire those sub-skills or qualities, depending on the author, which make mediation a service that contributes to the elimination of barriers and the disappearance of misunderstandings in communication between people from different backgrounds, cultures and even social strata.

In an effort to contribute new knowledge and experiences in the field of TIPS for a more inclusive society in terms of language and access to information, several research studies are presented below which, from different perspectives, address translation and interpreting and propose alternatives to make progress in this field and achieve a more equal society.

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