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The impact of emotionally evocative information on interpreting accuracy in a mock asylum interview

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Abstract

In asylum interviews, interpreters often relay emotionally evocative information. This study compared interpreting accuracy of emotionally evocative and neutral information. Twenty-eight Arabic-English interpreters participated in a mock asylum interview held via videoconferencing. They interpreted between an English interviewer and a Sudanese-Arabic applicant who performed a scripted interview including neutral and emotionally evocative responses. Pre-interview, interpreters completed a secondary traumatic stress measure. English interpretations of the Arabic neutral and emotionally evocative responses were recorded, transcribed and coded for interpreting errors. Emotionally evocative responses were interpreted 4%–8% less accurately than neutral responses, which was a significant medium to large effect. Secondary traumatic stress did not moderate differences in interpreting accuracy between conditions.

KEYWORDS

asylum interview, cognitive task, emotion, interpreter, interpreting accuracy

1 | INTRODUCTION

The high-stakes nature of asylum interviews poses a particular set of demands on the interpreter (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR] Austria, 2017). In asylum interviews, interpreters play a crucial role in facilitating communication between the applicant and interviewer. Accurate interpretation is paramount, as decisions about asylum applications often rely on the perceived credibility of information gathered during interviews (Cameron, 2018; Home Office, 2021; Pöllabauer, 2015). The United Kingdom (UK) Home Office, responsible for processing asylum claims, requests verbatim interpretations (Home Office, 2021). Interpreters are often required to relay sensitive and emotionally evocative information (Bergunde & Pöllabauer, 2019) whilst remaining impartial and not showing their emotions (Dean & Pollard, 2001; Home Office, 2021).

Survey studies and qualitative interviews reveal that interpreters in healthcare and investigative interview contexts can experience an

immediate affective response when interpreting emotionally evocative content, such as upset, anger or anxiety (Loutan et al., 1999; Splevins et al., 2010; Wilson & Walsh, 2019). One in five interpreters self-report that their interpreting performance is negatively impacted by interpreting emotionally evocative information and their affective response evoked by such content (Lai et al., 2015; Walsh et al., 2020).

Interpreting is an already complex cognitive task, which employs working memory, executive function, attention, and short- and long-term memory (Dong & Li, 2020; Gile, 2009; Mellinger & Hanson, 2019; Pöschhacker, 2016; Wen & Dong, 2019). The dual-competition framework (Pessoa, 2009) proposes that affective information can influence processing in a cognitive task. Affective information is given precedence when incoming information is processed. If this affective information is task-relevant, it may facilitate cognitive task performance, yet if it is task-irrelevant, it may impair performance (Pessoa, 2009; Schweizer et al., 2019). In an interpreting context, the affective valence of information may be irrelevant to the

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interpreting task of finding an equivalent word in another language. The cognitive resources required to process affective information has been hypothesised to reduce the cognitive processing capacity available for the interpreting task, thereby compromising interpreting performance (Chen, 2017; Dean & Pollard, 2001; Lai et al., 2015). However, in a systematic review and meta-analysis, the impairing effect of task-irrelevant affective information on working memory task performance amongst healthy individuals was found to be only small and statistically non-significant (Schweizer et al., 2019). The strength of the affective response evoked by the affective information may be a factor. Affective information presented in a laboratory context may be less emotionally evocative than an interpersonal interaction involving real life accounts of trauma.

Wilson (2020) explored how emotionally evocative information affects interpreting accuracy in interpreter-mediated investigative interviews. Across two studies, the first analysing recorded actual investigative interviews and the second adopting a mock interview set-up, emotionally evocative utterances were interpreted significantly less accurately than neutral utterances with a medium effect size (Wilson, 2020). However, this preliminary finding was based on small samples of 12 recorded interviews for the first and nine participants, all of whom trainee interpreters, for the second study. Additionally, emotionally evocative and neutral utterances were not matched on linguistic aspects, such as sentence length or structure. The first aim of the current study was to replicate Wilson's (2020) findings in a mock asylum interview context, exploring the impact of emotionally evocative information presented by an asylum applicant on interpreting accuracy. To address shortcomings of earlier studies, the current study aimed to recruit a larger sample and control for sentence length and structure between conditions.

Interpreters have reported an effective response lasting beyond the interpreting assignment, affecting their personal and professional lives (Lai et al., 2015). This manifests itself in elevated scores on depression, anxiety, stress and secondary traumatic stress (STS) indices (Kindermann et al., 2017; Mehus & Becher, 2016). STS describes a profile of behaviours and affective responses that resemble those associated with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), but that are related to vicarious exposure to traumatic events (Bride, 2007). Schweizer et al.'s (2019) systematic review and meta-analysis found that unlike healthy controls individuals with mental health difficulties performed worse on working memory tasks that included distracting emotionally evocative stimuli compared to distracting neutral stimuli. This may be due to effort required to disengage from the affective information (Cisler et al., 2011; Koster et al., 2011). The systematic review hypothesised that the affective information may have higher personal meaning in this population, making disengagement from it harder (Schweizer et al., 2019). Thus, interpreters with higher levels of depression, anxiety or STS may find disengaging from emotionally evocative content more difficult and show a larger discrepancy in interpreting accuracy of emotionally evocative versus neutral information. The second aim of the current study therefore was to explore if STS moderates the relationship between the interpreted information's affective valence and interpreting accuracy.

The current study explored the accuracy of interpreters' consecutive interpretations of emotionally evocative and neutral information in a controlled mock asylum interview context. Consecutive interpreting is the interpreting mode frequently used in asylum interviews (Pöllabauer, 2015) and involves listening to a few sentences of the source communication before producing the source communication in a different language whilst the source communication is paused. The presence of emotionally evocative information provided by a mock asylum applicant (hereafter referred to as 'applicant') was systematically manipulated by including both neutral and emotionally evocative scripted responses, matched for sentence length and type. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the study was conducted via videoconferencing with remote interpreting (S. Braun & Taylor, 2011). Arabic was the language selected, as it is one of the most prevalent languages amongst asylum applicants in the UK (Bolt, 2020). The study additionally explored the possible moderating effect of STS on interpreting emotionally evocative versus neutral information, controlling for interpreter experience as an identified protective factor against STS (Michalopoulos & Aparicio, 2012) and as a factor associated with interpreters' working memory performance (Dong & Li, 2020) and interpreting performance (Díaz-Galaz et al., 2015; Hale et al., 2022).

The two hypotheses were:

H1. Emotionally evocative information will be interpreted less accurately than neutral information.

H2. STS will moderate the relationship between the interpreted information's emotional valence and interpreting accuracy. Higher STS is associated with reduced interpreting accuracy of emotionally evocative but not neutral information.

2 | METHODS

The study received ethical approval from a Research and Ethics Committee associated with an academic institution.

2.1 | Participants

Recruited through convenience sampling, the final sample included 28 Arabic-English interpreters and trainee interpreters. 17 (60.7%) were female. 19 (67.9%) were of Arab ethnicity, one (3.6%) was Black African, one (3.6%) was White, two (7.2%) were of mixed ethnicity and five (17.9%) were another or unknown ethnicity. 22 (78.6%) were resident in the UK, six (21.4%) were non-UK resident. For 27 (96.5%) Arabic was a native language, this information was missing for one participant. Various Arabic dialects were represented (21.4% Levantine, 17.9% Mesopotamian, 10.7% Maghrebi, 7.1% Egypto-Sudanic, 7.1% Arabian Peninsula and 35.7% unknown). Five (17.9%) disclosed having refugee status and three (10.7%) disclosed having a personal trauma history. Based on data from 26 participants,¹ on average the

sample was 44.31 years old ($SD = 12.11$ years, range: 25–70 years), had 8.37 years of interpreting experience ($SD = 7.92$ years; range: 1–35 years) and worked 16.04 h per week as interpreters in recent months during the COVID-19 pandemic ($SD = 13.87$ h; range: 0–40 h per week). 25 (89.3%) participants had completed an interpreter training course, of which 18 had completed a course meeting criteria for registration with the National Register of Public Service Interpreters (such as the Diploma in Public Service Interpreting or equivalent), whilst seven had completed other training courses which were not of an equivalent level or for which equivalence could not be determined. Two (7.1%) were currently enrolled on a training course and one (3.6%) was due to start a training course. 11 participants (39.3%) had not previously interpreted for asylum interviews, seven (25%) had previously interpreted for 1–3 asylum interviews, four (14.3%) for 4–9 interviews and six (21.4%) for 10+ interviews.

Originally 32 Arabic-English interpreters and trainee interpreters were recruited between September 2020 and March 2021 through online advertisements distributed via interpreting agencies, interpreter training courses, individual interpreters and a research Twitter account using the title 'Factors influencing interpreting during asylum interviews'. Participants were not informed of the study's intention to explore the differences between interpreting neutral and emotionally evocative information to avoid biasing interpreting performance during participation. Participants were reminded in the information sheet that they were free to withdraw from the study at any point. They were given an £18 Highstreet e-Gift voucher for their participation.

Eligibility criteria for participation in the study were language proficiency in Arabic and English, having access to a computer, laptop or tablet for a videoconference call via Zoom, having access to a private space, and meeting one of the following criteria: at least 1 year experience of working as an interpreter in the public sector or completion of or current enrolment on an interpreter training course (e.g., Diploma in Public Service Interpreting or equivalent). Eligibility criteria were widened during recruitment to achieve a larger sample including residential status in any country. The only exclusion criterion was previous participation in the study's pilot study.

Of the original 32 participants, data from four were excluded. Two participants repeatedly interrupted the applicant, impairing mock interview transcription and subsequent coding of interpreting accuracy. Two participants experienced technical issues, precluding full participation in the mock interview.

A priori power analysis was run to determine the required sample size. Literature on the association between PTSD, as a proxy for STS (Mehus & Becher, 2016), and performance on affectively-valenced cognitive tasks, as a proxy for interpreting emotionally evocative information, suggested the existence of small to medium effects (Cisler et al., 2011; Schweizer et al., 2019; Shields et al., 2017). Based on this and the heuristic of adopting a medium effect size if no more comparable study is identified, a medium effect size was chosen to determine the sample size required for this study to achieve a power of 0.80 at an alpha-level of 0.05. Based on a medium effect size of $d_z = 0.5$, the power analysis suggested that 34 participants were

required to address [Hypothesis 1](#). Based on a medium effect size of $f^2 = .15$, 55 participants were required to address [Hypothesis 2](#). Despite widening the eligibility criteria during recruitment, the suggested sample sizes were not reached, highlighting the challenges of recruiting from a small population pool, such as that of Arabic-English public service interpreters.

3 | MATERIALS

3.1 | Questionnaires

3.1.1 | Demographic data

Age, gender, ethnicity, country of residence, native language, native Arabic dialect, refugee status, personal trauma history, interpreter training courses completed and currently enrolled on, years of interpreting experience, average hours of interpreting per week, number of asylum interviews completed, registration with the National Register of Public Service Interpreters and number of hours of interpreting completed prior to participation on the day of the study were collected through an online survey, adopting multiple choice and free-text box formats.

3.1.2 | Secondary traumatic stress scale

The Secondary traumatic stress scale (STSS) (Bride et al., 2004) was chosen to measure STS. It mirrors the DSM-IV diagnostic criteria for PTSD, allowing a more direct extrapolation of the research on PTSD and cognition onto the relationship between STS and the interpreting task. The scale comprises 17 items across three subscales (intrusion: e.g., 'I had disturbing dreams about my work with clients'; avoidance: e.g., 'I felt emotionally numb'; and arousal: e.g., 'I felt jumpy') rated on a 5-point scale (1: never; 5: very often). The sum of STSS item scores ranges between 17 and 85. STSS has been adopted in studies with social workers (Bride, 2007), mental health professionals (Robinson-Keilig, 2014), forensic interviewers (Bonach & Heckert, 2012) and victim advocates (Benuto et al., 2021). In its original version capturing responses in relation to 'the last seven days', it has good internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.93$ – 0.94), factorial validity, adequate convergent validity with single-item depression ($r = 0.50$) and anxiety measures ($r = 0.55$) and discriminant validity with age, ethnicity and income (Bride et al., 2004; Ting et al., 2005). In an adapted version widening the timeframe to 'the last six months', STSS had good internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.94$) and good concurrent validity in relation to a single-item question on 'indirect traumatisation' ($r = 0.72$; Bonach & Heckert, 2012). Due to the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, the current study adopted a timeframe of 'the last three months'. One participant had one missing item on the STSS. Person-mean imputation was adopted to address this. Risk of bias was considered to be low as it applied only to one item for one participant (Eekhout et al., 2014).

3.1.3 | Manipulation checks

Two single-item 100-point visual analogue scales (Freyd, 1923) were adopted to measure how distressing participants experienced the applicant's account (0: not distressing at all; 100: very distressing) and how realistic they found the interview (0: not realistic at all; 100: very realistic). Participants were invited to explain their ratings in accompanying text boxes.

3.2 | Mock asylum interview

3.2.1 | Script development

An English version of an asylum interview script was developed, consisting of questions and responses between a mock interviewer (researcher LM) and applicant (a Sudanese Arabic-English speaking actor). The fictional applicant was a Darfuri Sudanese man who spoke Sudanese Arabic. Events were based on information from governmental and third-sector reports (Home Office, 2019b; Jaspars & Buchanan-Smith, 2018). The script was refined following feedback from an individual with experience of an asylum interview, an interpreter and an immigration lawyer.

The structure of the script was modelled on Wilson's (2020) mock investigative interview scripts. The interview commenced with introductions and scene-setting by the interviewer, followed by 18 questions and corresponding neutral responses and 18 questions and corresponding emotionally evocative responses. Following the structure of the PEACE model of investigative interviewing and asylum interviews (European Asylum Support Office, 2014; Home Office, 2019a; McGurk et al., 1993), the 18 questions and responses of the neutral condition were always presented first. The conditions were not counterbalanced, as presenting emotionally evocative conditions first can have a residual impact on performance on subsequent emotionally neutral conditions (Forgas, 2017).

Responses were defined as emotionally evocative if they included sensitive topics (e.g., violence) or emotions (Wilson, 2020). Emotionally neutral responses included no emotionally evocative information. The interviewer's questions in the two conditions were matched for structure and length. The applicant's responses in the two conditions were matched for number of sentences, sentence length and sentence structure. Table 1 provides examples.

3.2.2 | Pilot study

Five Arabic-English interpreters participated in an online survey to determine the presence of emotionally evocative information and level of distress in the two conditions. None of these interpreters participated in the main study. The interpreters were presented with a random sample of nine neutral and nine emotionally evocative applicant responses out of context and in random order. The

TABLE 1 Examples of matched questions and responses.

Example type	Neutral condition	Emotionally evocative condition
Matched questions	Question 5: In your application you say that you are Beri. Describe who the Beri people are	Question 14: In your answers you are saying that 'they' did things. Describe who 'they' are
	Question 14: When was it built?	Question 8: When were you detained?
Matched responses	Answer 18: Sometimes my uncle gave me work. And he said 'you can do the simple things, son of my brother'. And I cleaned for him, and I sold products and I counted the money, in his shop, and on the market	Answer 13: Sometimes they stripped me naked. And they said 'we will do the easy things, son of a whore'. And they spat at me, and they slapped me, and they punched me, on my face, and on my body

online survey was programmed to show each extract an equal number of times across participants. After reading each extract, participants were asked to indicate on two single-item 100-point visual analogue scales: (1) To what extent the extract included emotionally evocative information (0: no emotionally evocative information included; 100: a lot of emotionally evocative information included), and (2) how distressing they rated the extract (0: not distressing at all; 100: extremely distressing). They were additionally asked to indicate the type of emotionally evocative content they identified from a checklist including 'positive emotions (e.g., joy, pride and interest)', 'negative emotions (e.g., fear, shame and anger)', 'sensitive topics (e.g., sex and violence)' and 'none of the above'. For each visual analogue scale, each participant's average extract rating per condition was calculated. Then the average per condition across participants was calculated. Due to the small sample size of five, no statistical analyses are reported. Descriptively, the neutral extracts were rated lower than emotionally evocative extracts on the presence of emotionally evocative content (neutral: $M = 40.87$, $SD = 21.52$; emotionally evocative: $M = 66.58$, $SD = 27.23$) and experienced distress (neutral: $M = 26.96$, $SD = 25.52$; emotionally evocative: $M = 73.89$, $SD = 22.33$). Moreover, participants descriptively attributed different qualities of emotionally evocative information to the two conditions (see Supporting Information Table S1). All emotionally evocative extracts were rated as including negative and/or sensitive information. Neutral extracts received mixed ratings with some extracts rated as including positive information, some as including negative information and some as including neither. The descriptive data suggest that Arabic-English interpreters viewed the neutral and emotionally evocative extracts sufficiently differently, not warranting changes being made to the script.

3.2.3 | Script translation

The applicant's responses of the final English version of the script were translated into Sudanese Arabic by a professional Arabic-English translator and back-translated into English by another translator blind to the original English script. The back translation allowed verification of the similarity between the English script and Sudanese Arabic translation. Any deviations between the original English script and the backtranslation were discussed with the actor playing the applicant and where required the Arabic script was adapted accordingly to increase similarity to the original English script.

3.3 | Procedure

In the UK, the Home Office had been using videoconferencing for some substantive asylum interviews pre-Covid-19 (Home Office, 2019a). Its use increased substantially during the pandemic (Home Office, 2020). Despite pre-Covid-19 guidelines recommending not to use videoconferencing when interviewing victims of torture (Ellis, 2004; Home Office, 2019a), individuals with histories of experiencing torture have reportedly been subjected to substantive asylum interviews via videoconferencing (e.g., Immigration Law Practitioners' Association, 2017). Thus, interpreters are required to interpret accounts of torture via videoconferencing.

The first author (LM), participant and actor remotely attended a videoconference call via Zoom in a gallery view format. The researcher and interpreter were present throughout the call. The actor joined solely for the mock interview. Participants were first sent two Qualtrics survey tool links via the Zoom chat box or email to complete the information sheet, consent form and questions on demographic information and the STSS. The researcher then read out scripted instructions to explain the task for the mock asylum interview. Participants were instructed to interpret in first-person and use consecutive interpreting. To establish uniformity in approach across interpreters, interpreters were asked not to take notes. Interpreters differ in their approaches to note-taking in police interviews (Wilson, 2020) and no clear guidance on note-taking in asylum interviews exists (Home Office, 2019a; Pöllabauer, 2015).

The actor was admitted to the call for the mock interview. This part of the study was video- and audio-recorded on Zoom for subsequent transcription. The interview script was performed with the researcher speaking the lines of the interviewer in English, the actor speaking the lines of the applicant in Sudanese Arabic and the interpreter interpreting between parties. The researcher was not blind to the study hypotheses, whilst the actor was blind to the study hypotheses. If the interpreter interrupted the actor's account, the actor attempted to finish the response. If this was not possible, the actor finished the current sentence before allowing interpretation. The actor followed the script as closely as possible when responding to clarification requests. Across participants, the interview lasted between 35 and 62 min ($M = 41.42$ min, $SD = 6.27$ min). Following

the mock interview, participants received the link to the manipulation check questions and were subsequently debriefed.

3.4 | Coding interpreting accuracy

The interpreting accuracy coding framework was adapted from Flores et al.'s (2003) and Wilson's (2020) adjustment to Barik's (1975) coding framework. Within these coding frameworks, accurate interpreting is described as relaying all information without omissions, additions, substitutions or other alterations in meaning. Consequently, an interpreting error is defined as the presence of one of multiple possible interpreting error categories. This study applied Wilson's (2020) error categories (see Table 2).

Flores et al. (2003) and Wilson (2020) distinguished between errors of medical or legal consequence and errors of no medical or legal consequence respectively. In the current study, a distinction between non-meaningful and meaningful errors was applied (Barik, 1975). Non-meaningful errors subtly change the meaning of the utterance, but overall result in little loss, alteration or addition of content and maintain the gist of the utterance. Meaningful errors significantly change the meaning of the utterance through significant loss, alteration or addition of content. Table 2 provides examples of non-meaningful and meaningful errors.

Interpreting accuracy was coded by comparing the interpreter's transcribed English interpretations with the responses in the original and back-translated English scripts. Responses were divided into utterances, a phrase that includes a unit of meaning and usually concludes with a natural pause in speech, marked by a full stop or comma. Responses ranged between two and seven utterances, resulting in 78 utterances per condition. Per utterance, the presence (score of 1) or absence (score of 0) of at least one interpreting error was coded (L. Wilson, personal communication, February 22, 2021). If an utterance included both meaningful and non-meaningful errors, only the meaningful error was coded. A total error score (the proportion of utterances including at least one meaningful or non-meaningful error) and a meaningful error score (the proportion of utterances including at least one meaningful error) were calculated. Proportion of errors (the number of utterances including an error divided by the total number of utterances spoken by the actor) was chosen as the error score to control for utterances omitted during the scripted exchange between the researcher and actor.

The first author (LM) coded all 28 transcripts. A second coder, blind to the study hypotheses and conditions, was trained in the interpreting accuracy coding framework on one transcript. The second coder coded five transcripts, equating to approximately 20% of the sample data (see Syed & Nelson, 2015). The five transcripts were chosen by asking the second coder to blindly name five numbers between 1 and 28 corresponding with participant IDs. The second coder did not have any prior data access. Using the two-way random-effects model absolute agreement intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC) for single measures there was good interrater reliability for both the

TABLE 2 Error categories with examples of meaningful and non-meaningful errors (adapted from Wilson, 2020).

Error category	Definition	Example		
		Original utterance	Interpreted utterance—non-meaningful error	Interpreted utterance—meaningful error
Omission	Omitting a word or phrase from the original utterance	Around Christmas when many people spend time with families, I went...	Around Christmas many people spend time with families. I went...	I went...
Addition	Adding a word or phrase that was not present in the original utterance	My dog is playful	My dog is incredibly playful	My dog is playful. He loves playing with anybody
Substitution	Replacing a word, short or longer phrase with another	He is good at problem solving because he is a fast thinker	He is good at problem solving because he has a fast brain	He is good at problem solving because he thinks things through
Summarisation	Providing a more succinct account of the original utterance(s). This involves new phrasing and not mere omission of words	The brother and sister went to the supermarket to buy milk, bread, eggs and apples	The siblings bought milk, bread, eggs and apples at the supermarket	The siblings bought stuff
False fluency	Using a word/phrase that does not exist in the target language or is incorrect in the context used	The bridge was new	N/A	The [word for bridge in source language] was new
Editorialisation	Sharing a personal opinion on what the original utterance means	X was hesitant to say what happened	N/A	She said X was hesitant to say what happened, with this she meant that X was lying

proportion of meaningful errors ($ICC(9,9) = .90$, 95% CI: [0.25, 0.98]) and the proportion of total errors ($ICC(9,9) = .87$, 95% CI: [0.57, 0.97]). This is in the upper range of interrater reliability ratings previously reported by other interpreting studies (e.g., Flores et al., 2003; Wilson, 2020).

4 | RESULTS

4.1 | Manipulation checks

The mean realism rating of the mock interview across participants was calculated to ascertain the generalisability of the below results to an actual asylum interview. Based on responses from 27 participants, participants' mean realism rating was 79.56 (SD = 20.18; range: 10–100). The mean subjective distress rating across participants was calculated to explore if the mock interview overall was experienced as emotionally evocative. Based on responses from 27 participants, participants' mean distress rating was 39.59 (SD = 32.45; range: 0–100). Informed by V. Braun and Clark's (2006) methodology, thematic analyses were conducted on the free-text responses accompanying the realism and subjective distress ratings (see Supporting Information Tables S2 and S3). Accompanying their realism ratings, participants commented on how the mock interview's content and format corresponded to their own personal and professional experiences. They also commented on the believability of the acting by the researcher and actor. Accompanying their subjective distress ratings, participants described two sources of distress. First, participants noted the

TABLE 3 Descriptive statistics of the proportion of errors per condition.

Error score	Neutral		Emotionally evocative	
	M	SD	M	SD
Total errors	0.78	0.09	0.82	0.07
Meaningful errors	0.50	0.11	0.58	0.11

emotional nature of the interview content, sharing that the content was unexpected, evoked empathy, triggered mental images or personal memories and was experienced as critical to the asylum interview. Second, participants reported experiencing worries about not interpreting correctly. Participants also shared how they managed the distress, including being habituated to, preparing themselves for, or seeking to detach from the distressing content.

4.2 | Interpreting accuracy of emotionally evocative and neutral information

The first aim was to test if emotionally evocative information is interpreted less accurately than neutral information. Within-subjects *t*-tests were conducted on the total and meaningful error scores of the emotionally evocative and neutral conditions.

Table 3 provides the means (M) and standard deviations (SD) of the total and meaningful error scores per condition. Based on the total error scores, the error rate was on average 4% higher for the

emotionally evocative than for the neutral condition. Based on the meaningful error scores, the error rate was on average 8% higher for the emotionally evocative than for the neutral condition. Within-subjects t -tests revealed that these percentage differences were statistically significant and showed medium- to large-sized effects (total error scores: $t(27) = 3.15$, $p = .004$, $d_z = 0.60^2$; meaningful error scores: $t(27) = 4.05$, $p < .001$, $d_z = 0.77$). These results suggest that interpreters interpreted significantly less accurately during the emotionally evocative than the neutral condition, as hypothesised.

As emotionally evocative information was always presented after the neutral condition, the impact of a possible confounding effect of fatigue on this significant difference was explored. It was hypothesised that if a fatigue effect existed the error rate for each of the 18 neutral and 18 emotionally evocative responses would show a positive linear relationship with the chronological position of responses, whilst the absence of a fatigue effect would be characterised by relative stability in error rates within conditions and an overall shift in error rates between conditions. The error rates for each of the 18 neutral and 18 emotionally evocative responses were calculated by dividing the number of utterances with an error by the total number of utterances in each response. Two such line charts, one for meaningful error rates and one for total error rates, were plotted with neutral and emotionally evocative responses in chronological order on the x axis

and the corresponding error rates on the y axis (see Figures 1 and 2). These line charts were visibly inspected for the possible presence of a fatigue effect. Figures 1 and 2 show variability in error rates across the 36 responses. The graphs do not suggest a linear relationship between chronological position of responses and their error rate but indicate an overall upward shift in error scores for the emotionally evocative condition as compared with the neutral condition. The graphs do not indicate the presence of a substantial confounding effect of fatigue.

4.3 | The possible role of secondary traumatic stress

The study's second aim was to explore if secondary traumatic stress (STS) moderated the difference in interpreting accuracy of emotionally evocative and neutral responses. Moderation analyses for within-subject designs (Judd et al., 2001; Montoya, 2019) were run through Montoya's Mediation and Moderation for Repeated Measures (MEMORE) macro created for SPSS (<https://www.akmontoya.com/spss-and-sas-macros>). This statistical method adopts a linear regression approach to infer the presence of an interaction between a between-subject predictor and repeated measures factors. The



FIGURE 1 Meaningful error rates (x-axis) for each of the 18 neutral (blue shading) and emotionally evocative (red shading) responses (y-axis).

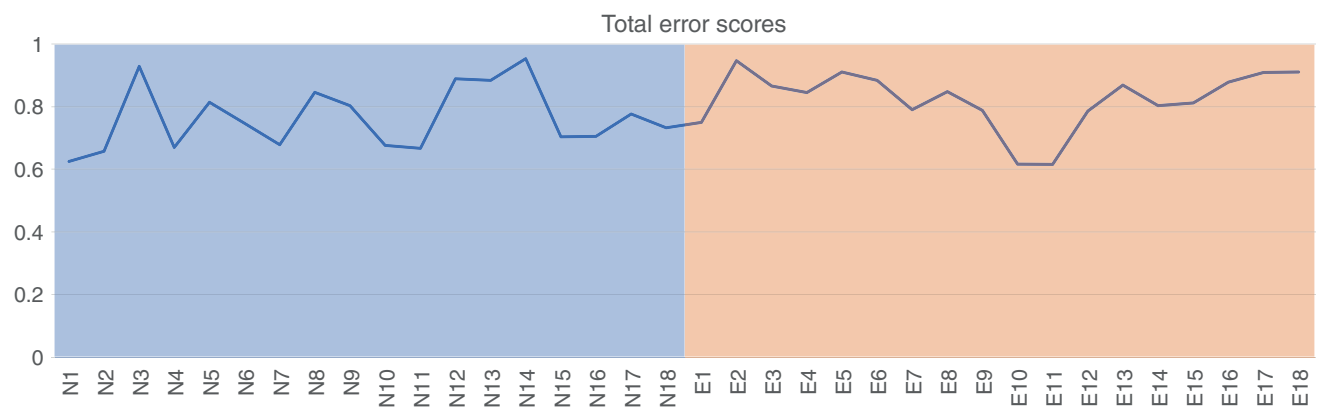


FIGURE 2 Total error rates (x-axis) for each of the 18 neutral (blue shading) and emotionally evocative (red shading) responses (y-axis).

difference score of the repeated measures factors (in this study the difference in total or meaningful error scores between the neutral and emotionally evocative conditions) is regressed on the between-subject predictor (in this study the STSS scores). Years of experience, an identified protective factor against STS (Michalopoulos & Aparicio, 2012) and a factor associated with interpreting performance (Díaz-Galaz et al., 2015; Hale et al., 2022), was included as a covariate to control for its possible influence on the relationship between STSS scores and error score difference.

The mean STSS score was 29.35 ($SD = 8.76$), which is at the lower end of the mild STSS range. 75% of participants scored within the no and mild STS ranges. Controlling for years of experience, STSS did not, as hypothesised, account for a significant amount of variance in the difference between performance on the neutral and emotionally evocative conditions for either total error score ($R^2 = .02$; $F(2, 23) = 0.28$, $p = .76$; $f^2 = 0.02$), or meaningful error scores ($R^2 = .04$; $F(2, 23) = 0.48$, $p = .62$; $f^2 = 0.04$).

As the study did not achieve the sample size suggested by the power analysis for the moderation analysis, a sensitivity analysis was run. With a sample size of 28, an alpha of 0.05 and a power of 0.08, the minimum detectable effect size was $f^2 \geq 0.30$, suggesting the study was underpowered to explore Hypothesis 2.

5 | DISCUSSION

The impact of emotionally evocative information on interpreting accuracy in a mock asylum interview was explored. There was a higher error rate for emotionally evocative information, compared with neutral information, for both total and meaningful error scores. The effect size of this difference was medium to large. The results support the hypothesis that emotionally evocative information is interpreted significantly less accurately than neutral information. No support was found for the second hypothesis that STS moderates this difference.

The significant difference between interpreting accuracy of emotionally evocative and neutral information replicates the findings from a previous set of studies analysing interpreting accuracy in investigative and mock investigative interviews (Wilson, 2020). Of note, this study had a larger sample and controlled for interviewer question type and sentence length, increasing statistical power.

There are multiple possible explanations for this observed difference. The pilot study suggests that the neutral and emotionally evocative conditions descriptively differed in the presence of emotionally evocative, especially negative and sensitive, information. The emotionally evocative condition inherently included more emotion (e.g., 'My family was scared') and abstract words (e.g., 'They broke my spirit'). There are often multiple possible translations of emotion and abstract words. This can make the translation of such words into other languages harder (Basnight-Brown et al., 2020). Additionally, emotion words often have nuanced linguistic and cultural specificities (Kalin, 1986). Direct equivalents across languages often do not exist, further complicating the translation or interpreting process (Basnight-Brown & Altarriba, 2016; Kayyal & Russell, 2013). Thus, the inherent

increased presence in the emotionally evocative condition of emotion and abstract words, which are lexically harder to interpret, may have contributed to the increased error rate in this condition.

However, the emotionally evocative condition was not characterised solely by the presence of emotion or abstract words. It also included substantial sections in which concrete language was used to describe distressing events (e.g., 'One time, they beat me and dragged me by my feet on the concrete...'). Thus, a difference in translatability of the two conditions is not considered to fully account for the significant difference in error rates.

The dual-competition framework (Pessoa, 2009) proposes that affective information presented as part of a cognitive task can influence cognitive processing. Emotionally evocative information, especially if negative and sensitive, may demand more cognitive resources, distracting from the task at hand (Pessoa, 2009), in this case the interpreting task (Lai et al., 2015). In the free-text responses to the manipulation check questions, some participants described the emotionally evocative content as evoking mental images. This may be due to preferential processing of negative information at a perceptual level (Kensinger, 2009). Perceptual processing of negative information may reduce capacity to recall accompanying contextual information (Kensinger, 2009), reducing interpreting accuracy. Furthermore, the perceptual images may make disengaging from the content harder (Schweizer et al., 2019). This might divert cognitive resources away from the interpreting task of identifying the semantic equivalent of the source speech in the target language.

The dual-competition framework also posits that an individual's affect state during a cognitive task can influence cognitive processing (Pessoa, 2009). The pilot study suggested that the conditions differed in the level of distress evoked. In response to the manipulation check question on self-rated distress, some participants reported being impacted by the distress of the emotionally evocative information and being concerned that this influenced their interpreting accuracy, consistent with previous reports (Lai et al., 2015). Interpreters report employing various strategies to regulate their affect, such as detaching from the emotional content of the source speech by re-focusing attention on identifying the semantic equivalent of the source word in the target language (Swain, 2011). This could be a problem-focused strategy aimed at reducing the distress by addressing what is in their control or an avoidance-focused strategy intending to distract from the evoked affect (Endler & Parker, 1994). Conversely, some interpreters report that they allow themselves to experience the emotion to better convey the emotional nature of the information (Swain, 2011), an emotion-focused strategy (Endler & Parker, 1994). Such affect regulation strategies may recruit cognitive resources also required for the interpreting task.

The possible confounding effect of fatigue also warrants acknowledgement. Interpreting accuracy reduces after 30 min of interpreting (Moser-Mercer et al., 1998), an effect that is accelerated for video-conference remote interpreting (S. Braun & Taylor, 2011; Moser-Mercer, 2003). The conditions were not counterbalanced, as first exposing to emotionally evocative information may have influenced subsequent neutral information processing (Forgas, 2017). The aim

had been to design a mock interview of approximately 30 min duration, but the actual mock interview length varied between 35 and 62 min across participants.³ The graphical analysis of error rates across time did not suggest a substantial fatigue effect.

The hypothesis that individual differences in STSS would moderate the relationship between the interpreted information's emotional valence and interpreting accuracy was not supported. This finding is not in line with the dual-competition framework, which posits that affective information is more likely to impact cognitive task performance if it holds personal relevance to the individual (Pessoa, 2009). It also contradicts previous findings that affective information impairs performance on cognitive tasks, such as working memory tasks, in individuals with mental health difficulties (Schweizer et al., 2019).

There are many possible explanations for the lack of a moderating effect of individual differences in STSS on interpreting accuracy of emotionally evocative compared with neutral information. First, the recruited sample size was half the size of what the power analysis suggested was required to detect a medium effect. A sensitivity analysis suggested that the study was substantially underpowered to detect a true effect if one existed. Second, the study may not have included a wide enough range in STS scores to find a moderating effect. 75% of the sample scored in the no or mild STS range. These proportions are comparable to some studies (e.g., Kindermann et al., 2017), but lower than others (e.g., Loutan et al., 1999; Mehus & Becher, 2016). Interpreters with a history of traumatic event exposure or who are sensitive to emotionally evocative content may have avoided signing up to this study. An alternative explanation is that the emotionally evocative information may have held sufficient affective relevance for all to impact interpreting accuracy even amongst participants with low STS scores. The more ecologically valid context of this study, supported by the high mean realism rating, is likely to be inherently more affectively charged than a lab-based cognitive task.

6 | LIMITATIONS

There are some study limitations. First, drawing on a small and specific population posed a challenge to recruitment, affecting the sample size and power. Of note, the achieved sample size is still larger than many interpreting studies. Second, widening to worldwide recruitment to maximise the sample reduced generalisability of the sample to a UK-based interpreting population. Third, the main coder (LM) was not blind to the study hypotheses. However, interrater reliability with a second coder, blind to the study hypotheses, was good. Fourth, the validity of this study's interpreting accuracy coding framework is hard to determine. There is no one definition of 'interpreting accuracy' (Pöchhacker, 2016). Reflecting other interpreting studies (Díaz-Galaz et al., 2015; Wilson, 2020), interpreting accuracy was scored by coding each utterance for the presence of at least one error. This approach does not capture multiple errors per utterance, which may have reduced the size of the true difference between neutral and emotionally evocative conditions. Despite this limitation this approach was chosen to promote equivalent treatment of neutral and

emotionally evocative sections, to reduce risk of potential coding bias between conditions and to protect against stringently coding literal interpretations of the source speech. Literal interpretation, although requested by the Home Office (2021), is often not possible or appropriate (Hale, 1996), especially when interpreting emotion words (Basnight-Brown & Altarriba, 2016; Kayyal & Russell, 2013) and when interpreting across languages from different cultures (Kalin, 1986; Määttä, 2015; Pöllabauer, 2015), as in the case of English and Arabic. Nonetheless, this study's proportion of error scores were high compared with other studies (e.g., Wilson, 2020), which could suggest a tendency by this study's coders to code literal interpretations, introducing a low error threshold. The coders being non-interpreters and coding having been carried out using transcripts may have contributed to a lower error threshold (Gile, 2017). Running the analyses on both meaningful and total error scores may have helped to minimise the tendency towards coding literal interpretation.

Finally, despite the high mean realism rating there remain limits to the ecological validity of a mock interview set-up. Mock contexts may remove variables typically present in real-world situations, such as an asylum decision hinging on the interview (Dean & Pollard, 2001). Additionally, this study adopted a videoconference interpreting format due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The generalisability to the more regularly employed face-to-face UK asylum interviews remains to be determined. The self-reported distress ratings of this study remained below the mid-point of the 100-point scale. Real-world, face-to-face interpreting scenarios may trigger higher levels of affect and distress due to the increased importance and physical immediacy of the emotionally evocative information. If the above proposed explanations of how affective information impacts on interpreting held true, emotionally evocative information may be even harder to interpret in real-world face-to-face asylum interviews.

7 | IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

Trauma-informed interpreting may be a helpful framework to promote accurate interpreting of emotionally evocative information and to protect interpreter well-being during emotionally evocative interpreting assignments. Trauma-informed interpreting acknowledges the impact of trauma on survivors and interpreters interpreting for them (Bancroft, 2017). Suggested strategies include note-taking, pre- and de-briefing or supervisory discussions and engaging in pre- and post-assignment emotion regulation activities. These strategies may support protecting the interpreter's cognitive resources. When the interpreter experiences the high demand of interpreting distressing content and often low control within their impartial role, such strategies may increase the perceived control, which may protect interpreting accuracy and interpreter well-being (Dean & Pollard, 2001).

To further support interpreting accuracy, service providers should train interpreters in skills required for specific interpreting contexts (Pöchhacker, 2016; Wilson, 2020). Within an asylum interview context, this may include training in cultural factors impacting expression

of emotionally evocative information (Vredevelde et al., 2023), as well as training in interview processes and interviewing and information gathering techniques and principles (European Asylum Support Office, 2014; Pöllabauer, 2015; UNHCR Austria, 2017), such as the PEACE model of investigative interviewing (McGurk et al., 1993) and the Principles on Effective Interviewing for Investigations and Information Gathering (Association for the Prevention of Torture, 2021).

The impact of these suggested strategies on interpreting accuracy of emotionally evocative content warrants systematic investigation. The role of note-taking has not been examined. Participants of this study were asked not to take notes to promote uniformity of approach across participants. Future research should explore if consecutive interpreting with note-taking would produce improved interpreting accuracy overall and would reduce the difference in interpreting accuracy between interpreting neutral and emotionally evocative information. Future research should also explore interpreting accuracy of emotionally evocative information contexts beyond videoconference remote interpreting and consecutive interpreting, such as face-to-face and simultaneous interpreting.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Consent for data archiving was not sought from participants. Participants were informed that data would be held for maximally 12 months after completion of the study. Thus, the data are not publicly available.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Missing age, interpreting experience and hours worked data for two participants each.

² Cohen's *d* was calculated by dividing the mean difference score between the two conditions by the standard deviation of the difference score.

³ Variability in actual mock interview length is explained by differences in interpreting style and occasional fluctuating internet connection.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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