"I Preach My Own Sermons" – Seeking Fidelity in the Breath of the Holy Spirit

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Abstract: Over the last decade, church interpreting (i.e. interpreting taking place during Christian services) has become the object of an increasing number of publications for its distinct setting and the peculiarity of the message it seeks to convey. Many such contributions have highlighted the religious affiliation of nearly all church interpreters and, most importantly, its key significance for Christian communities. The present study seeks to contribute to the growing field of church interpreting research by exploring the potential implications of religious faith for role identity and source-text fidelity. Data has been gathered through ethnographic methods, chiefly participant observation and focus groups, in an English-speaking evangelical church located in Northern Italy, where simultaneous interpreting of Sunday services is provided by a team of six committed but nonprofessional believers, all of whom took part in the study. Results suggest that both religious faith and secular culture contribute to the development of church interpreters' understanding of their duty to fidelity and the ways in which it ought to be fulfilled.

Keywords: church interpreting; fidelity; NPIT; service; holy spirit.

1. Introduction

This article aims to investigate the implications of religious affiliation for source-text fidelity when it comes to church interpreting tasks accomplished by believers, and specifically evangelical Christians, with no formal training in interpreting.

Over the last decade, church interpreting (i.e. interpreting taking place during Christian services) has become the object of an increasing number of publications (Downie, 2024a: 68) for its distinct setting and the peculiarity of the message it seeks to convey. Many such contributions have highlighted the religious affiliation of nearly all church interpreters and, most importantly, its key significance for Christian communities (Downie, 2016: 154–157; Karlik, 2010: 167; Tison, 2016: 141–146; Vigouroux, 2010: 347). Within church interpreting studies, it has also been argued that "when emotional experiences are narrated, […] the process of narration always draws on culturally available storylines and vocabularies" (Hokkanen, 2016: 69), a claim that is consistent with the view of interpreting as a situated communicative practice "permeable to both cultural norms and societal blueprints", which ought to be addressed further (Angelelli, 2004: 84).

Against this backdrop, I set out to explore if and how the evangelical faith influences believers who perform interpreting tasks for their community during Sunday services. I was especially interested in the issue of fidelity, long debated among professionals and interpreting scholars, but often reduced to a mere matter of source and target text comparison, as is the case for the Problems, Challenges and Evaluation[1] approach to church interpreting (Downie, 2024a). Instead, through ethnography, I sought to shed light on the way in which non-professional church interpreters themselves conceive their duty to fidelity with the help of categories provided by their own religious framework.

In this article I first provide a brief overview of some relevant aspects of evangelical theology (§ 2) and church interpreting literature (§ 3). Next, I present the research setting, that is a non-denominational anglophone church in Northern Italy (§ 4). After a discussion on methodology and data collection (§ 5), I present research findings (§ 6), focusing on two noteworthy conflicts that church interpreters appear to face.

2. Gospel transmission in evangelicalism

In order to appreciate the potential impact of the evangelical faith on interpreting, one must first grasp how gospel transmission is thought to work among evangelical Christians and according to protestant theology.

In all Christian denominations, the gospel is the good news of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ who has come to wash away the sins of the world. It is understood that every Christian has a duty to bear witness to it and share it so as to facilitate its propagation. The redemptive story of the sacrifice of Christ is told in the Bible, whose correct interpretation is deemed possible through the work of the Holy Spirit, who is God himself.

The message of repentance and grace that the Sprit conveys is eternally relevant and unchanging, because God's perfect will for humanity does not waver; this is why "a preacher's task can never be about innovation. [They] must be faithful to the given word" (Gertzen, 2025) and the Bible itself warns adding or taking anything away from it (NIV,

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[1] This approach, also known as "PCE", "involves the interpreter's output being transcribed, analysed, and evaluated by the researcher", rarely considering contextual factors (Downie, 2024a: 81).

2011, Revelation 22: 18–19). The result is that preachers, and more broadly, all Christians, are commonly thought of as vessels which God fills with his Spirit and uses to his liking. Their job is to be pliable and lend themselves fully to his influence in order to convey a message that does not belong to them.

All which has been said so far about the gospel is applicable to most Christian denominations, including evangelical and catholic Christians. Therefore, the specificity of the evangelical faith does not lie in the source of the gospel to be preached (i.e. God), but rather in the access that laypeople are believed to have to such a source. In Catholicism, the church and its clergy play a major role in gospel interpretation and transmission; the fellow Christian may pray for guidance and understanding, but they must ultimately rely on the institution to correctly interpret God's word (Vatican Council II, 1965; CCC, 687–688). Evangelicals, on the other hand, place a strong emphasis on a believer's personal relationship with the Lord; they are persuaded that such a relationship can allow every individual Christian to discern God's will and correctly interpret his word, without the need for institutional mediation.

This information is relevant to our discussion on church interpreting, as it suggests that evangelical Christians who engage in Sunday service interpreting perceive themselves as having equal access to, and understanding of, the gospel as the preachers whose sermons they interpret. They do not work with a message that is unknown to them; quite the opposite, as Christians they are supposed to be intimately familiar with the gospel – not just conceptually but spiritually – and seek God's will with the help of the Holy Spirit exactly like any preacher. This belief effectively places the evangelical church interpreter on an equal footing with the speaker, thus allowing for the potential expression of agency. Evidence for this claim can be found in church interpreting literature.

3. Church interpreting within TIS

For the sake of this article, church interpreting can be defined as a subset of faith-related interpreting (Tipton & Furmanek, 2016: 237) which takes place during Christian worship services, and especially Sunday services, attended by groups of believers who seek spiritual nourishment and guidance. It can be classified as a form of community interpreting (Adebayo & Zulu, 2023; Alvarenga, 2018; Da Silva et al., 2018; Tekgül-Akın, 2020), whose mode of delivery varies across countries and denominations, ranging from consecutive – mainly without notes (Makha & Phafoli, 2019; Odhiambo et al., 2013; Vigouroux, 2010) – to simultaneous – whispered (Da Silva et al., 2018) or with conference-like equipment (Hokkanen, 2014; 2016; 2017; Tekgül Akın, 2020).

Although this claim has recently been challenged (Downie, 2024b), literature seems to suggest that most churches across the globe rely on trusted members for the provision of interpreting services (Hokkanen, 2014; 2016; 2017; Karlik, 2010; Kotzé, 2018; Rayman, 2007; Da Silva et al., 2018; Tekgül-Akın, 2020; Tison, 2016; Vigouroux, 2010). It follows that church interpreters are usually devout Christians, who partake in the same religious culture as interpreting users. Consistently with the Christian narrative, these interpreters view interpreting as a way to put their spiritual gifts to the service of the church, but first and foremost of the Lord, who bestowed them (Alvarenga, 2018; Kotzé, 2018; Hokkanen, 2012; 2017; Rayman, 2007; Tipton & Furmanek, 2016; Tison, 2016).

For the sake of our research, it is interesting to note that – regardless of their background – evangelical interpreters across the globe tend to describe themselves as receptive mediums, such as "a vessel" (Friedner, 2018: 664–665), "a hose that carries water from God to the believers" (Tekgül-Akın, 2020: 10), and other images that bear a striking resemblance to the conduit model; so much so that church interpreters have been

labelled "spiritual conduits" (Kotzé, 2018: 6–7). However, one noteworthy difference between the Christian and the secular metaphors apparently resides in the source of the message to convey; if in the secular world it is the speaker, in the Christian narrative it is undeniably God, who is believed to fill both the interpreter and the preacher of his Spirit so as to enable them to jointly spread his gospel. Hence, church interpreting is best envisioned not as a tripartite, but as a quadripartite communicative act, which involves the interpreter, the preacher, the audience and God (Tison, 2016). This explains why church interpreters view themselves (Tison, 2016: 143–146) and are described (Karlik, 2010: 167) as "co-preachers" and, most importantly, why they speak of their duty as "hearing from God" (Hokkanen, 2017: 207–209) "by the Holy Spirit" (Tekgül-Akın, 2020: 9) and rarely portray it as a mere interlinguistic transfer of a preacher's speech.

The implications of this understanding for ST fidelity are still unclear, as research on the topic has yielded partially contradictory results. For instance, PCE research seems to suggest that church interpreters often adopt unsuccessful strategies (Odhiambo *et al.*, 2013), though it is not clear which: according to some scholars, church interpreters tend to interpret word for word (Awafo *et al.*, 2024; Thembhani, 2016), while others appear to imply that they are too far removed from the semantic content of the original (Adebayo *et al.*, 2023; Makha *et al.*, 2019). In all this, Karlik's claim that church interpreters "exhibit the same attitudes, in respect of […] fidelity, as are expected of language professionals" continues to stand out (Karlik, 2010: 181). However, the fact that church interpreters "have a very high regard for fidelity to the *sacred texts*" (*ibid.;* emphasis added), which are regarded as the infallible and word of God, does not appear to be directly transferable to sermons, that are speeches given by preachers, who – according to evangelical theology – are not in a privileged standing with God, and are therefore as fallible as any member of the congregation.

If one seeks to contextualize these findings on church interpreting and fidelity within the broader framework of TIS, it becomes less obvious what attitude professionals are expected to have towards fidelity. Suffice it to say here that, despite a recent shift towards a sociolinguistic approach which seeks to portray interpreters as co-participant in the interaction who contribute to meaning making (Angelelli, 2004; Berk-Seligson, 1990; Diriker, 2021; Eraslan, 2011; Wadensjö 1998; Zwischenberger, 2015), norm-setting authorities such as AIIC have been found to uphold the conduit-model, i.e. the idea that the good interpreter is "a passive and emotionless channel which solely has to convey a sense that is inherent in the message as delivered by the speaker" (Zwischenberger, 2015: 107). This standard appears indeed so binding for (conference) interpreters that – through apparently untenable in practice – it can be rightfully regarded as a "supernorm that governs it all" (*ibid.*: 90). The research presented in this paper has yielded interesting results regarding church interpreters' attitude towards fidelity and their adherence to this supernorm.

4. The field

The field I chose for my research is an anglophone Christian church planted in Northern Italy by an Australian missionary in late 1990s. The church is attended by people of over thirty nationalities, many of whom are first- and second-generation migrants or international students. Attendees of Italian origin make up a very small minority, so that – upon setting foot into the church – one gets the impression of entering a small bubble, almost like a parallel universe, where children of all nationalities play together and all languages are spoken while soft Christian music plays in the background.

As confirmed by one of its pastors, the church is best described as a non-denominational church of evangelical leanings. This means that it is a stand-alone entity with its own Statement of Faith and is managed internally by its pastors and elders. It does not claim to be anything other than "Christian", although a quick browse through its website reveals a strong evangelical orientation, reflected in its doctrine and phraseology.

All church activities are held in English, including the Sunday service, which is broadcasted live on the church's platforms and physically attended by around fifty people every week. Most of them speak English as a second language except for the two pastors and a few international students, who are native speakers. Those who do not understand English well enough to follow the activities are the overwhelming minority.

In spite of this, the church has chosen to provide interpreting for members that wish to listen to the service in Italian. Like all other church keeping duties (serving breakfast, distributing Bibles, filming), interpreting is understood as service (§ 3) and provided by bilingual members who have no special training for the task, but undertake it with an admirable degree of dedication and commitment.

Interpreting takes place simultaneously with one person interpreting the full one-to-two-hour service themselves: prayers, liturgy and sermon, with the only exception of songs. The appointed interpreter whispers into a microphone connected to several Bluetooth headsets worn by the members who need interpreting (normally no more than two or three people a week). The task is by no means easy: the interpreter sits at the back of the main room, far from the speakers and with no sound insulation whatsoever, their vision is partially occluded by a large pillar and people constantly pass in front of them to enter and leave the room. With one hand they hold the microphone and with the other they quickly flick through the pages of their Bible to find the passages that the speakers are quoting. They are sometimes given preparation material concerning the sermon in advance, but this is highly dependent on the preacher.

On my first day at church, the head of the interpreting team told me that there were about six active interpreters working on a rota at the time. I was later lucky enough to meet and have prolonged conversations with all of them about their service.

5. Methodology

In order to study the potential implications of the evangelical faith on the notion of fidelity in church interpreting, I chose to conduct ethnographic research. My aim was to answer the following research questions:

1. How does the evangelical faith influence the way that interpreters perceive their duty to fidelity?
2. What role, if any, do interpreters attribute to the Holy Spirit in regard to fidelity?

Ethnography was deemed to be the most suitable approach to data collection for reasons that will soon become evident.

5.1 Doing ethnography

Ethnography as a philosophy of research has gained ground in interpreting studies over the last two decades. It entails studying "people in everyday settings, with particular attention to culture, that is how people make meaning of their lives" (Anderson-Levitt, 2006: 284). The ethnographer seeks to seize the point of view of the members of a

community, their outlook on life and their understanding of the world, which is exactly what I sought to accomplish with my study.

As is often the case with this kind of research (Koskinen, 2008), my positioning in relation to the participants was not clear-cut, but somewhat "hybrid". I was not an insider because I learnt about the church through an acquaintance and I attended it for the first time with the explicit and declared intention of carrying out research there. Despite this, I also never truly felt like an outsider. I am a believer myself who weekly attends a different protestant church which shares similar theological stances. As a result, I feel part of the universal community of believers that all Christians consider to be the living body of Christ. During my time on the field, this was widely acknowledged by church members some of which told me that denomination was unimportant to them, and they considered me, for all intents and purposes, "one of them".

My hybrid positioning proved to be a powerful asset in the data collection process, as interpreters likely felt more at ease disclosing intimate details about their calling than they would have been otherwise. Of course, this could also be rightfully regarded as a source of bias; for instance, had I not been a Christian I would have probably taken more field notes and paid closer attention to interpreters' performance, instead I was often carried away by the service itself and by the feeling of God's presence. At some point, I also felt like the research was distracting me from something of the utmost importance and I decided to "give more room to the Christian in me" (Hokkanen, 2016: 53). As a result, I do not make any claim to objectivity either in collecting or analyzing research data. Instead, I encourage the reader to consider the findings that will be presented in the following sections as the result of a subjective attempt at a fair portrayal of the culture of a small group of evangelical church interpreters by a protestant researcher.

5.2 Data collection

For the purpose of my research, I opted for two main data collection methods, both commonly employed in ethnography: participant observation and focus groups. A semi-structured interview format was used only once with the pastor in order to assess the church's theological positioning.

Participant observation data was gathered over eight different Sundays between January 5th and May 18th, 2025. On said days, I attended the service, made friends and had many informal exchanges with believers of different backgrounds and church interpreters. I also had the chance to witness three baptisms and partake once in the Lord's Supper. The community soon picked up on the fact that I did not live in the city and proved very hospitable, often inviting me out for lunch after the service so that I did not have to make the trip home on an empty stomach. All such social gatherings turned out to be very good opportunities for data collection, so that – at the end of my time on the field – I found myself with 2,345 words of notes.

After attending the church for a few months and getting to know the community, I felt my position in the church established enough to introduce my second and main research gathering method: focus groups. I preferred this to interviews because it is relatively egalitarian and the results it yields are often described as "more ecologically valid" (Lee & Renzetti, 1994: 124), since they are the product of participants' interaction among themselves rather than just with the interviewer. Consequently, by choosing focus groups, I was aiming to reduce self-censorship and emphasize participants' point of view, creating room for contradiction.

In total, I held two focus groups of 1:09:46 and 46:21, respectively, through an online platform, each with three interpreters, plus myself acting as the moderator. The

focus group started with a brief presentation of my work as a researcher, then I asked every participant about their testimony (that is how they came to know Christ) before moving on to questions about interpreting. The following are some key questions[2] I asked once our exchange reached the core issues:

1. How would you describe what you do? Is it work or is it service? Do you think God calls to translation[3] as to other ministries?
2. If you know you are in charge of translating on a given Sunday, do you prepare in any way (linguistically, spiritually)?
3. As Christians, have you ever had to translate something you disagreed with? How did you handle it? Would you ever translate for a different church?
4. Should a translator have any leeway to make minor adjustments (additions or deletions) to the original text with the aim of better conveying the message?

As the reader may notice, no explicit mention to the Holy Spirit was made and the potential trigger words "fidelity" and "faithful interpretation" were intentionally avoided. From the beginning, the interpreters seemed very eager to cooperate, taking long turns (up to five minutes) and sharing intimate details of their faith journeys and their interpreting struggles. All chose to speak Italian, though only two were native speakers. Very little moderator control was necessary to keep them on track.

Both focus groups were recorded with the interpreters' consent and machine-transcribed; any relevant extract was then integrated using a simplified version of Jefferson's transcription conventions (2004) (Table 1).

Table 1. Transciption conventions.

Symbol	Use
(.)	Brief unfilled pause
ehm	Filled pause
?	Sharp rising intonation
te:::xt	Vowel lengthening
<u>text</u>	Emphasis
text-text	Repetition
()	Unintelligible utterance
[text	Beginning of an overlap
((text))	Analyst comments on non-verbal or para-verbal communication
[…]	Cut

6. Research findings

The following sections summarize the main research findings in the form of commented extracts from the two focus groups and the interview with the church's pastor. For clarity, P1 to P5 refer to participants and M to the moderator (i.e. myself); I and F refer to the interview and the focus groups, respectively. Participant observation played a crucial

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[2] These questions can be classified as "elaborate questions". (Putcha & Potter, 1999: 321). I chose this type of questions in lieu of traditional linear ones because it was found that that elaborate questions can be useful to encourage participation and minimize irrelevant intervention, especially if non mundane matters are discussed.

[3] When speaking with participants, all references to interpreting were replaced with references to translation, reflecting community terminology and avoiding potential confusion with exegesis, i.e. the interpretation of biblical texts.

supporting role by providing the contextual knowledge required to situate and interpret participants' claims within their cultural framework.

6.1 On faithfulness and faith denial

As Christians, participants believed that God was the source of the message to be conveyed during any Sunday service. They explained to me that the gospel belongs to the Lord who uses his people to spread it. As Evangelicals, they made it very clear that all believers are indwelt by the Holy Spirit and have equal access to God, without any need for mediation (§ 2). It followed that interpreters – quite like preachers and in line with existing research (§ 3) – strove to be conduits of the Holy Spirit, who spread the good news so that God's will may be fulfilled on Earth.

Church interpreting thus appeared to rest on a tacit understanding between preacher and interpreter, both of whom accepted to cooperate for the higher sake of spreading God's message. This peculiar role configuration had quite astonishing consequences for role expectations: the preacher's words were not regarded as final or untouchable. Instead, it was peacefully acknowledged by all parties that an interpreter could potentially even improve on the original speech. During our interview, the church's pastor touched on this point.

Extract 1 – I1 00:19:14

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1        my sermon is not the word of god if you like so we believe that the bible is
2        the word of god so my sermon is already some kind of interpretation of that
3        (.) well translation is then just another version of that and yeah they may do
4        it worse ehm they could even do it better at times like (.) god doesn't just
5        speak through me so ehm I'm relaxed I think if they're doing their best and
6        trying to communicate the sense ehm sometimes I might say something
7        wrong I might use the wrong word or the wrong person they might actually
8        correct it ehm so yeah (.) I think god can easily use them
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As vessels of God equal to the speaker, evangelical interpreters appeared to enjoy considerable leeway with respect to the ST if compared to what the "secular" supernorm would imply. For instance, various participants admitted to making changes to preachers' speeches not just as a last resort strategy, but with the specific intent of better conveying the message. My research suggests that – within the evangelical framework – this practice is best understood as cooperation rather than antagonism. Here's what one interpreter said when they were asked about the topic:

Extract 2 – F2 00:31:04

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1   P1:  io mi ricordo che a volte           I remember that sometimes
2        cambiavo un po' anche perché se      I changed (it) a bit also because if
3        a volte magari c'è di mezzo          sometimes perhaps it involves
4        un'espressione che non si traduce    an expression that doesn't translate
5        bene oppure non ti viene subito      well or the expression doesn't come
6        l'espressione                        to you right away
7        allora traduci modo un po' più       so you translate in a simpler way or
8        semplice o magari ti vengono (.) è   maybe they come (.) it's
9        normale no? […] a volte tu           normal, right? […] sometimes you
10                                            add some words to reinforce
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11	aggiungi delle parole per rinforzare	because you it's as if you were
12	perché tu è come se	preaching yourself in that moment
13	predicassi tu in quel momento lì	right ((laughs)) that you say I
14	no ((ride)) che dici	reinforce the message because
15	rinforzo il messaggio perché	an expression or an idiom comes to
16	mi viene in mente un'espressione o	mind that reinforces
17	modo di dire che rinforza	the message a little better
18	un po' meglio il messaggio	and so I use more words right rather
19	e quindi uso più parole no piuttosto	then less then there is the time you
20	che meno poi c'è la volta in cui	are struggling more so you use
21	sei un po' in difficoltà allora usi	less words or you simplify or
22	meno parole o-o semplifichi o	yes-yes I think that's fair enough
	sì-sì quello secondo me ci sta	

From P1's answer it seems clear that there are two distinct reasons to deviate from the speech of the preacher: (a) the interpreter is struggling, so they simplify the original (lines 7–8; 19–21) (b) the interpreter considers that the message could be more effectively conveyed by using more words than the original (lines 9–10). When this is the case, the interpreter is allowed – and even compelled by their faith – to intervene in God's best interest, as if they were preaching themselves (lines 11–12).

The scholar might argue that this speaker-interpreter arrangement is particularly empowering for the latter in terms of agency recognition and expression. This, however, is only true from a secular standpoint. Christian interpreters would reject such an argument, because in their view a believer should seek to obey God and submit to him, rather than give into their own individual (and potentially sinful) agency. Participants were adamant about this: the only worthy goal when interpreting and in life is the fulfilment of God's will, made intelligible through the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit. Ultimately, communion of intent with God is what seems to legitimize any changes to a preacher's speech. The following extract shows how such communion is not taken for granted but actively sought through prayer before and during the service.

In this case, the interpreter found themselves in a situation where they had to interpret a budding speaker in front of a group of forty Muslim students, all of which were new to the gospel. The speaker preached in a way that the interpreter considered too harsh and ineffective. Here's how they handled the situation:

Extract 3 – F1 00:44:56

1	P2:	ho fatto questo okay capisco questa	I did this okay I understand this
2		persona le sue intenzioni e poi	person their intentions and then
3		ho detto cosa lui ha detto ma	I said what he said but
4		in un modo più (.) più scialla più	in a way more (.) more chill more
5		sciallo più soft quindi:: perché cosa	chill softer so:: because what
6		lui ha detto era vero ma non era il	he said was true but it was not the
7		momento giusto […] anche pregavo	right time […] also I prayed
8		nel momento dio se vuoi che io	in the moment god if you want me
9		traduca così va bene (.) ma	to translate like this it's okay (.) but
10		quindi ho sentito un po' sì c'era	so I felt a bit yes there was
11		questo conflitto in me ma sono	this conflict in me but I am
12		contenta che abbia scelto questo alla	glad that I chose this in the
13		fine perché sono alcuni sono	end because have some have

14		ritornati e poi hanno sentito il	returned and then they heard the
15		vangelo predicato in modo più non	gospel preached in a way I don't
16		so (.) meno aggressivo ((ride))	know (.) less aggressive ((laughs))

As the reader will have noticed, P2 does not take their intervention on the ST lightly. Quite the opposite, they are torn between a more literal and a freer transposition of the speaker's words. This "conflict" (line 11) cannot be fully explained in terms of faithfulness to the speaker; rather, it seems to reflect an inner struggle between the interpreter's human nature and the Holy Spirit dwelling within them, as P2 seeks to discern the will of God and relinquishes their agency to fulfill it.

In the eyes of participants, faithfulness to God was so pivotal to their service that they would not interpret religious claims which fell outside of their understanding of the gospel. This applied not only to other religions, but also to different Christian denominations. The interpreters clarified that such choice had nothing to do with religious affiliation per se; instead, it was strictly related to the message. The gospel should not be altered in any way, and no believer should facilitate the spreading of false doctrine, not even by means of interpreting. Doing so could be classified as faith denial. Here is what a participant said when they were asked if they would interpret for another Christian church, such as the Catholic church.

Extract 4 – F2 00:38:50

1	P3:	ehm no ovvio no	ehm no obviously not
2	M:	[no	[no
3	P1:	no assolutamente no	absolutely not
4	P3:	ma un conto sto pensando	but (it's) one thing I'm thinking
5		un conto forse se lo fai	(it's) one thing perhaps if you do it
6		di lavoro ma anche lì forse puoi	as a job but even then perhaps you
7		scegliere se accettare un lavoro	can choose whether to accept a job
8		ma noi no nel nostro caso da poveri	but not us in our case as poor
9		volontari in servizio no penso sia	volunteers in service no I think it's
10		tra virgolette ovvio no?	quote unquote obvious right?
11		sarebbe un po' rinnegare la tua fede	It would be a bit like denying your
12			faith
13	P1:	sì sì sì	yes yes yes
14	M:	addirittura? cioè questa è una cosa	really? I mean this is something
15		forte comunque perché magari	strong anyway because maybe
16		prima mi avete detto ehm	before you told me ehm
17		semplicemente traduciamo delle	we simply translate words
18		parole	
19	P1:	sì ma se tu credi che lo scopo del	yes but if you believe that the aim of
20		messaggio è di convertire o di	the message is to convert or
21		comunque ehm piantare la-il buon	anyway to plant the good
22		seme nel cuore di qualcuno	seed in someone's heart
23	P3:	[e senti don	[and you hear father
24		gianni dire dovete pregare maria	gianni say you need to pray to mary
25		perché se voi pregate maria lei	because if you pray to mary she
26		ti ascolta lei vi benedirà sarà lei	listens to you she will bless you she

27	andare da dio a dire	will be the one to go to god and say
28	che avete avuto delle difficoltà e	that you are in trouble and
29	allora lì dici sì è quasi	then you (may) say yes it is almost
30	un-un rinnergare sì perché <u>non devi</u>	a-a denial yes because <u>you must not</u>
31	no? cioè se non per mezzo di lui e	right? I mean only through him and
32	quindi sì penso sì	so yes I think so

To explain why interpreting for a different denomination could be considered faith denial (lines 11–12), P3 and P1 put forward a compelling argument based on doctrinal differences between churches. Interpreting in a Catholic setting was deemed risky, because an evangelical interpreter might find themselves, for instance, advocating for the mediation of Mary (lines 23–28) and thereby leading listeners astray (praying to the mother of Jesus is common practice among Catholics but considered idolatry by most evangelicals).

Of course, P3's answer must be contextualized in light of her experience as a non-professional church interpreter who provides her services free of charge (line 9), yet there is no reason why the same criteria could not apply to paid professionals if they shared the same faith, as suggested in lines 5–7.

Therefore, my research suggests that service denial and ST intervention – in the form of corrections, additions, reformulations and tone softening – are some of the ways in which an interpreter can express their faithfulness to God as they interpret. Ending on this consideration, however, would not tell the full story.

6.2 Wrestling with gold standards

So far, I have addressed the evangelical interpreter's leeway with respect to the ST. On the basis of participants' claims, I have argued that this leeway appears greater than what is generally expected under the conduit-model supernorm, likely as a result of evangelical doctrine concerning the transmission of the gospel. I have also shown that participants did not casually take advantage of the agency ascribed to them by their own religious culture; instead, at least one of them declared living an internal conflict – seemingly between their own self and the Holy Spirit, sought in prayer to fulfill the will of God. However, I have not yet examined how participants actually positioned themselves vis-à-vis the supernorm.

As a matter of fact, despite operating in empowering environments, as shown above (§ 6.1), the church interpreters also produced – alongside agency-demanding claims – discourse that upheld Zwischenberger's supernorm. The traditional conduit model was not entirely rejected; instead, it seemed to be understood as a secular gold standard that church interpreters acknowledged and, at times, wrestled with. Traces of this struggle emerge in a series of contradictory statements that were common among the interpreters.

For instance, during the second focus group, P1 stated that UN interpreters – presumably highly skilled professionals – interpret word for word. Yet, when asked about their own behavior – as illustrated in extract 2 – they reported making additions and reformulations to convey the message more effectively. In other words, they seem to acknowledge the existence of the supernorm but – by their own admission – did nothing to abide by it.

A similar pattern emerged during the first focus group, when P4 made a strong agency-demanding claim immediately mitigated by a face-saving laugh and an attempted justification.

Extract 5 – F1 00:42:43

1	M:	vi è mai successo di dover di	has it ever come to you to have to
2		trovarvi a interpretare delle	find yourselves to interpret
3		affermazioni con cui teologicamente	statements with which theologically
4		o comunque non risuonavano con la	or anyway they didn't resonate with
5		vostra comprensione del vangelo	your understanding of the gospel
6		cosa avete fatto? vi siete tirati	what did you do? did you take a step
7		indietro? vi siete tutelati in	back? Did you protect yourselves in
8		qualche modo?	any way?
9		(.)	(.)
10	P4:	ah beh io predico le mie prediche la	ah um I preach my own sermons on
11		domenica non sento il pastore	Sunday I don't hear the pastor
12		((ride)) no scherzo però-però (.) a	((laughs)) no I'm joking but-but (.)
13		volte io non riesco a predicare a	sometimes I can't preach
14		tradurre[4] parola per parola quindi (.)	translate[6] word for word so (.)
15		cerco di-delle volte	I try to-to sometimes
16		sbaglio probabilmente perché	I make mistakes probably because
17		poi son troppo indietro nel cercare	then I am too behind in trying
18		di riordinare i quello che è stato	to reorganize the what was
19		detto però sì mi capita magari	said but yes it happens to me maybe
20		di-di pensare che una certa	to-to think that a certain
21		affermazione possa essere	statement could be
22		riformulata diversamente e quindi	reformulated differently and so
23		di farlo	I do that

What P4 seems to be implying here is that they do not encounter the problem described by the moderator (lines 1–8), because their leeway is so great that it is as if they were "preaching [their] own sermons" (line 10), a very bold claim that the participant ultimately does not fully endorse. Instead, they try to justify themselves by saying that sometimes they cannot interpret literally[5], in a way that closely resembles an admission of guilt. It is as if P4 were compelled to act in a certain way, but they were unsure about how their behavior could be received by the moderator – who may be taken as a representative of scholarly consensus – and plausibly even by other participants, some of whom may not have fully realized that they tend to do the same. Lastly, P4 themselves may not be perfectly at ease with their conduct, but they too like P1 do not declare attempting to change their behavior to make it fit the perceived gold standard of word-for-word interpreting.

I'll share one last extract with the reader which shows a real-time clash between the agentic potential of the Christian narrative and the curbing effect of the secular supernorm. The exchange was not prompted by the moderator:

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[4] This is a very interesting slip of tongue from the point of view of agency. P4 does it twice; once here and once after a couple of sentences.

[5] In my opinion, once context is taken into account, this statement is best understood as P4 saying that they cannot bring themselves to interpret literally, rather than just not being able to.

Extract 6 – F1 01:02:13

1	P2:	posso farti	can I ask you
2		una domanda piccolissima	a very small question
3		anche perché () della conversazione	also because () of the conversation
4		cosa fate quando c'è una	what do you do when there is an
5		preghiera aperta e non puoi sentire	open prayer and you can't hear
6		qualcuno perché quindi ho fatto	someone because so I did
7		questa conferenza	this conference
8		il weekend scorso	last weekend
9		la settimana scorsa e non potevo	last week and I couldn't
10		non perché non capivo ma	not because I didn't understand but
11		perché le persone parlano piano	because people speak softly
12		quindi questi casi tu dici okay non	so these cases you say okay I can't
13		posso capire non voglio tradurlo	understand I don't want to translate
14		o invento qualcosa che magari	it or I invent something that maybe
15		sento qualcosina o cosa-cosa fate	I hear something or what-what do
16		voi?	you do?
17	M:	è una domanda rivolta a me	is it a question addressed to me
18		((ride)) come professionisti	((laughs)) as professionals
19		che cosa faremmo ((ride)) allora	what we would do ((laughs)) so
20	P5:	[diciamo che io	[let's say that I
21		sinceramente quello che ho sempre	honestly what I have always
22		saputo è che quando traduci	known is that when you translate
23		non devi mettere del tuo no?	you must not put your own spin (on
24			it) in right?
25	P2:	[mh-mh]	[mh-mh]
26	P5:	devi cercare di essere il più fedele	you have to try to be as faithful as
27		possibile io quando non ho capito	possible when I don't understand
28		(.) taccio (.)	(.) I keep quiet (.)
29	P2:	okay, sì io faccio così ma	okay, yes I do this but
30	P5:	[piuttosto non dico	[rather I don't say
31		niente perché se dico qualcosa	anything because if I say something
32		che non è quello che (.) aveva detto	that is not that that (.) was said
33		ehm non lo so	ehm I don't know
34		in modo consapevole	in a conscious way
35		diciamo magari qualche volta posso	let's say maybe sometimes I can
36		tradurre male dicendo un'altra cosa	translate badly saying something
37		((ride))	else ((laughs))
38		ma avevo capito quella (.)	but I had understood that (.)
39		ma se-se non ho capito	but if-if I haven't understood
40		niente taccio	anything I keep quiet

As the reader can see, the exchange begins with P2 asking the group how an interpreter ought to behave when they do not hear the speaker well (lines 1–16). By definition, this means that P2 has doubts on the matter and even envisions "inventing something" (line 14). However, after a quick comment by the moderator, P5 interjects by stating that an interpreter shall not put their own spin on the ST (lines 20–24). Here, P5 is positioning themselves as a person who is knowledgeable about interpreting practice. Without background information, this may look like two church interpreters holding contradicting

views about their service – and, in a sense, it is. However, there is more to this exchange than meets the eye. P5 is the only participant out of the six who took a one-semester course in translation and interpreting as part of a foreign language degree, twenty to thirty years prior to the focus group.

Therefore, I think this exchange shows how two different cultural narratives can compete in the formation of church interpreters' role identities. One internal narrative – the Christian narrative – that ascribes remarkable agency to them and one external narrative – the supernorm – which deprives them of such agency. Both appear equally compelling. As we have seen (§ 6.1), religious narratives certainly shape the way believers understand the nature and purpose of their service; however, external "secular" narratives – which religious people are exposed to in most western societies – also have the power to affect believers' role perception by making them doubt their intuition and plausibly even change their behavior, if internalized.

7. Conclusion

The aim of my research was to investigate the potential implications of the evangelical faith on fidelity in church interpreting. In order to do this, I conducted ethnographic research in an Italian evangelical church where simultaneous interpreting of Sunday services is provided by believers with no prior experience in the field. Six of them agreed to take part in my research, comprising two focus groups lasting about one hour each, with three participants plus myself in the role of the moderator. Data from the focus groups – paired with participant observation – allowed me to answer my two research questions:

1. How does the evangelical faith influence the way that interpreters perceive their duty to fidelity?
2. What role, if any, do interpreters attribute to the Holy Spirit in regard to fidelity?

Since the two questions are strictly intertwined, I will now attempt to answer them jointly. Data suggests that evangelical doctrine may have powerful repercussions on role identity and role performance for believers who act as interpreters in their churches. This is because in evangelicalism all Christians (not just preachers) receive the gospel directly from God, without the mediation of church hierarchies. All believers are also indwelt by the Holy Spirit who makes them capable of understanding the message and enjoins them to spread it. As a result, evangelical interpreters are expected to be faithful to God before they are to the speaker. If possible, they shall correct the speaker's mistakes and even improve on their speech via means of addition, reformulation and tone softening so that it conveys the gospel more effectively. Were they to suspect that the gospel is not being faithfully preached, they should deny service. In secular terms, this means that evangelical interpreters are ascribed significant agency by their cultural context; however, they do not seek to express it, but, instead, they make a point of surrendering it to God. To achieve communion of intent with him, they pray and seek his guidance before and during their service, leading to what can be described as an inner struggle between the interpreter's will and the will of Holy Spirit that dwells in them. This conflict can be regarded as dependent on (and determined by) the religious framework that the evangelical interpreter operates in.

In my research, however, faith was not found to be the only noteworthy influence on religious interpreters. The secular supernorm (Zwischenberger, 2015) was also identified as a compelling factor. More specifically, research participants seemed to

wrestle with commonly accepted stereotypes about interpreting practice, such as the idea that word-for-word interpreting equals good interpreting and that any autonomous initiative on the interpreter's side is a mistake. Most participants appeared to have internalized the conduit model as a gold standard; however, strangely enough, only one of them declared striving to abide by it. This person was also the only one to have followed a one-semester interpreting course decades prior to the focus group.

To conclude, my research highlights both the empowering effects of the Christian narrative on church interpreters and the compelling influence of the supernorm in shaping their role identity and approach to fidelity.

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