

Navigating Boundaries: Conflicting Roles, Agency, Trust, and Risk in Sports Interpreting*

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ABSTRACT

The scandal involving Ippei Mizuhara, former interpreter for baseball star Shohei Ohtani, has highlighted the potentially expansive roles of sports interpreters. Mizuhara's duties included acting as Ohtani's personal assistant, media liaison, and cultural broker, which ultimately enabled him to manipulate financial transactions and embezzle nearly \$17 million. This paper examines the causes of this scandal by analysing the unique roles and responsibilities of sports interpreters and drawing on key concepts of agency, trust, and risk within sports interpreting. Through interviews with interpreters in Japanese baseball and Italian football, this study conducted a comparative analysis of their experiences in different cultural and sports contexts. The analysis involved both professional interpreters hired by sports clubs and freelancers, as well as ad-hoc interpreters such as former players. Findings revealed that interpreters often face role conflicts, such as balancing professional boundaries with personal involvement, and take on responsibilities far beyond linguistic mediation, including cultural adaptation, logistical support, and conflict resolution. These expanded roles, while critical to athletes' success, create vulnerabilities when trust is misplaced, as seen in Mizuhara's case. This paper highlights the complex dynamics in sports interpreting, emphasizing the need for clear ethical guidelines and training to ensure accountability and professional standards.

* This chapter is the result of a joint co-ordinated effort on the part of the authors. For the sake of convenience, the article's sections have been divided as follows: Kayo Matsushita is the author of the parts dealing with baseball interpreting and Paola Gentile is the author of the parts dealing with football interpreting.

KEYWORDS

Sports interpreter, Japanese, Italian, English, Chinese, baseball, football, agency, trust, risk.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Mizuhara scandal, involving the embezzlement of millions of U.S. dollars by baseball superstar Shohei Ohtani's former interpreter, highlights the expansive and often ambiguous roles of sports interpreters. Beyond linguistic mediation, interpreters frequently act as personal assistants, media liaisons, and cultural brokers, making them indispensable figures in professional sports. This paper examines the complexities of these roles using the concepts of agency, trust, and risk.

Through a comparative analysis of Japanese baseball and Italian football interpreters, this study explores how interpreters perceive their roles, manage relationships within teams, and mediate communication. Interviews with freelance, in-house, and ad-hoc interpreters form the basis of this research, offering insights into their challenges and ethical dilemmas. Detailed findings from these interviews will be presented in the following sections to contextualize the Mizuhara scandal and its broader implications.

1.1 BACKGROUND

Ippei Mizuhara, the former interpreter for baseball superstar Shohei Ohtani, became the central figure in a scandal that shocked the sports world in 2024. For over six years, Mizuhara had been a trusted confidant, facilitating Ohtani's transition to Major League Baseball (MLB) in the United States (Gonzalez, 2024). His role extended far beyond language interpretation, encompassing personal assistance, logistics, and financial matters. However, Mizuhara betrayed this trust when he embezzled millions from Ohtani to fund his gambling debts.

Shohei Ohtani, a three-time Most Valuable Player (MVP) often referred to as the "Babe Ruth of the modern era", is widely regarded as one of the most extraordinary athletes in history. As both an elite pitcher and a powerful hitter, he has broken numerous MLB records. After a six-year stint with the Los Angeles Angels, he moved to the Los Angeles Dodgers in 2024. The Dodgers signed him to a 10-year, \$700 million contract, placing him among the highest-paid athletes globally, an achievement which is comparable to football legends Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo (Brandt, 2023). His fame transcends baseball. Ohtani is a global icon, which amplified the attention this scandal received, with headlines appearing across Japan, the U.S., and other nations where baseball is popular.

According to Gonzalez (2024), the allegations against Mizuhara surfaced in March 2024 when federal prosecutors accused him of wiring nearly \$17 million from Ohtani's bank account to settle gambling debts with an offshore bookmaker. Between

2021 and 2024, Mizuhara reportedly placed 19,000 bets, winning \$142 million but losing \$182 million. None of the bets involved baseball, according to investigators, but the staggering scale of his activities underscored the severity of the fraud. Mizuhara had gained access to Ohtani's finances by helping him open a U.S. bank account in 2018, later altering account settings so that he would receive notifications himself. He impersonated Ohtani during at least 24 phone calls with bank representatives to authorize wire transfers. The fraud extended beyond gambling. Prosecutors revealed that Mizuhara even used Ohtani's funds to cover personal expenses such as dental bills. U.S. Attorney Martin Estrada described the case as "deep and extensive", emphasizing how Mizuhara systematically exploited Ohtani's trust. The betrayal was profound, with Ohtani publicly expressing his shock and sadness.

Mizuhara initially pleaded not guilty in May 2024 but later changed his plea to guilty during a June court hearing in Santa Ana, California. The charges—bank fraud and tax evasion—carry a combined maximum sentence of 33 years in federal prison and fines exceeding \$1.25 million (Gonzalez, 2024). Additionally, as a non-U.S. citizen, Mizuhara faces potential deportation after serving his sentence. MLB swiftly concluded its own investigation, clearing Ohtani of any involvement and affirming his status as a victim of fraud (Castrovince, 2024)¹. This high-profile case inadvertently highlighted the hidden power of sports interpreters, sparking our interest in an academic investigation of the matter beyond media reports.

1.2 RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The objective of this study is to identify the unique and multifaceted role of interpreters in major professional sports, analyse their behavioural patterns as well as their ways of thinking, and apply the findings to Ipppei Mizuhara's case in order to provide an explanation for his misconduct beyond medical and financial reasons. As seen in the previous section, Mizuhara reportedly played several roles that extended beyond interpreting. Some of the roles identified by the media include personal assistant, media liaison, and cultural broker.

1.2.1 PERSONAL ASSISTANT

Mizuhara was deeply involved in Ohtani's day-to-day activities, helping manage his schedule and public interactions. According to Arango and Schmidt (2024), the Los Angeles Angels hired Mizuhara as Ohtani's translator when Ohtani joined the team in 2018, but Ohtani also separately employed him as a "de facto manager and assistant", according to the complaint. Mizuhara drove his employer to and from the ballpark

1 After the completion of this study, Mizuhara was formally sentenced in federal court in February 2025 to 57 months' imprisonment and was ordered to pay restitution of approximately USD 17 million.

and managed certain “business and personal matters” outside of baseball. As will be explained later in this paper, playing such a role is not atypical for interpreters working closely with high-profile athletes.

1.2.2 MEDIA LIAISON

Mizuhara regularly facilitated communication between Ohtani and reporters, as seen numerous times in MLB-related media broadcasts over the past seven years. He was expected to ensure that communications were handled appropriately in order to manage public perception, but he often went even further, making headlines with his creative, audience-friendly interpretations. The Angels demonstrated their appreciation of his style when they bestowed upon him the title of “Most Valuable Interpreter (MVI)” in 2021, following Ohtani’s win of the American League’s MVP award in the same year. If reporters wanted quotes from Ohtani, Mizuhara was always contacted first, which made it easier for Ohtani to focus on baseball but gradually created a buffer between Ohtani and the English speakers (Beacham, 2024).

1.2.3 CULTURAL BROKER

Mizuhara also played a crucial role in helping Ohtani navigate the cultural complexities of moving from Japan to the United States, guiding him in social and professional settings outside of baseball. For instance, Mizuhara helped Ohtani navigate practical aspects of life, from grocery shopping to renting a car, tasks that are often overwhelming for newcomers in a foreign environment (Diamond & O’Connell, 2024). His intimate understanding of both Japanese and American cultures enabled him to bridge gaps, ensuring Ohtani’s seamless integration into his new surroundings (Diamond & O’Connell, 2024). In the clubhouse, Mizuhara introduced and explained American baseball rituals and jargon, as well as what was trending in the team, to Ohtani, making the American baseball culture accessible to the Japanese player (O’Connell, 2021). At the same time, he played a pivotal role in introducing elements of Japanese culture to Ohtani’s teammates and coaching staff, fostering mutual understanding and camaraderie. This dual facilitation strengthened team dynamics and eased Ohtani’s isolation as one of a few Japanese players in the team.

The roles that Mizuhara played are representative of the complex responsibilities sports interpreters are expected to assume, which go far beyond what is generally perceived as the interpreters’ scope of work, involving significant trust and influence on the athlete’s public and private life. To further explore the unique characteristics of sports interpreters from multiple perspectives, we conducted a literature review of prior research on the topic.

The literature on interpreting in sports contexts is limited, as evidenced by the entries found in the Translation Studies Bibliography. At the time of writing, there are only 12 studies listed under “football/soccer”, and the entries for “sport” and “baseball” are even fewer. Given the scarcity of literature directly related to our targets of discussion, this review categorizes the existing literature into three main areas: (1) interpreting during press conferences, (2) public perception and the image of interpreters, and (3) the roles of interpreters within professional sports.

2.1 PRESS CONFERENCES

Research on interpreting within press conferences has predominantly focused on the interactions between interpreters, coaches, and players, and on the linguistic and situational challenges of these settings. Sandrelli’s work (2012, 2015) drew on observational data from the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) EURO 2008 and pointed out key insights into football press conferences as high-stakes, interactive environments where interpreters must be able to cope with rapid speech, concise exchanges, and the high emotional stakes associated with sporting events. Sandrelli (2012) presented the results of an observational analysis of simultaneous interpreting during the press conferences of EURO 2008 in English, French, Spanish, and Italian. The study identified key characteristics of the FOOTIE² corpus, including dialogicity, brevity, rituality, and intertextuality. Analysis of turn-taking revealed that high speech rates frequently posed significant challenges for interpreters. Despite this, the study concluded that omitted turns in the target language (TL) version did not compromise the overall communicative effectiveness of the situation, highlighting the adaptability required of interpreters in high-pressure, fast-paced environments.

Sandrelli (2015) emphasized the vital role interpreters play in ensuring effective communication during sports press conferences. The analysis of turn-taking highlighted that interpreters often acted as *recapitulators*, assisting players by suggesting words, or as *coordinators*, managing the flow of responses. This study also discussed strategies employed by football clubs to address linguistic barriers, referencing research by Lavric and Steiner (2012). Larger clubs often relied on personal interpreters dedicated to foreign players, while other clubs used *factotums*—typically former players with language skills—who accompany and assist players in various contexts. Another approach involved teammates who acted as interpreters and cultural mediators, leveraging their familiarity with both local customs and club-specific dynamics to guide newcomers through the adjustment process. Some clubs organized language

2 FOOTIE (Football in Europe) is a corpus of press conferences interpreted simultaneously during the 2008 European football championships held in Austria and Switzerland (EURO 2008).

courses, though these were often unpopular among players due to their perceived lack of football-specific content.

On the other hand, Sandrelli (2018) identified another critical dimension of football interpreting: the interpreter's role in mediating emotionally charged exchanges, especially following losses. Here, interpreters often employed selective summarization to neutralize confrontational tones, a practice that requires careful judgment to balance fidelity with tone. More recently, Suarez Lovelle (2024) broadened this analysis by evaluating whether interpreters working for the Spanish national team could maintain the original tone in press conferences. The findings suggest that interpreters generally succeeded in preserving the intended tone, although technical issues occasionally caused minor shifts in perceived tension levels.

2.2 INTERPRETER PERCEPTION

Studies on interpreter perception, such as those carried out by Baines (2013) and Diriker (2022), have revealed that interpreters in sports are not merely linguistic facilitators but occupy highly visible, often celebrated positions within the media. Baines explored how interpreters in high-profile football scenarios, such as with players like Argentine star Carlos Tévez and Uruguayan goaler Luis Suárez, navigate power dynamics, where nuances in translation influence public opinion and institutional power.

For example, Tévez's statements, misinterpreted in English media as "I will not play", became central to his public disputes with Manchester City, demonstrating how translation can either enhance or mitigate reputational damage. Similarly, Suárez's use of racist language³ led to misunderstandings that fuelled tensions with the English Football Association (Baines, 2013). Diriker (2022) expanded this by examining interpreters' status in Turkish media, where football interpreters are sometimes as celebrated as the players themselves. This media portrayal grants interpreters a form of "insider" status, as their close association with star players heightens public interest and visibility. This phenomenon underscores the cultural fascination with interpreters as more than mere conduits but as figures enmeshed within the social and political networks of sports teams, in which they steer both linguistic and personal relationships.

Sandrelli (2020) conducted a pilot study with 10 former top-level football players in Italy, focusing on their experiences with language barriers and the perceived value of sports interpreters. The participants, primarily non-native Italian speakers who had gained language skills abroad, indicated that language gaps were most evident in tactical discussions during pre- and post-match meetings and, to a lesser extent, during half-time or medical consultations. Players preferred solutions that integrated language support into existing structures, favouring language teachers or bilingual staff over dedicated interpreters. Only a small number (three out of 10) would actively seek

3 The player Luis Suárez used the term "negro" (black) to insult another player, later claiming that in his home country, Uruguay, the term is commonly used without offensive connotations.

an interpreter, reflecting a tendency to prioritize bilingual support personnel within sports teams. Participants highlighted the ideal interpreter's qualifications: bilingual proficiency, cultural competence, familiarity with football, and strict confidentiality.

2.3 MULTIFACETED ROLES

Research into the role of interpreters within the context of sports has highlighted their significant influence on communication dynamics and their functions beyond simple linguistic translation. Baines (2018) provided insights into the role conflicts between sports interpreters and media managers during and after press interviews and conferences. This was revealed in anonymised interviews with interpreters and media managers, as well as with a translator and a former player. In interpreted press conferences, interpreters have no advance notice of questions, though briefings on potential questions and responses may occur. Journalists, typically monolingual, rely on interpreters. Media managers' interventions before the final edit of translated texts resemble censorship, often involving post-editing by someone who may not know the source language. In press interviews, media managers have more control, leading to frequent post-factum interventions.

In Baines (2018), the interpreter played a pivotal role as a mediator and facilitator of communication, operating within a tightly controlled environment orchestrated by media managers and club officials. During press interviews and conferences, interpreters were not only tasked with accurately conveying the player's responses but also steering the club's editorial priorities and reputational concerns. The interpreter's role often extended beyond linguistic translation to encompass pre-briefings and alignment with club directives, ensuring that sensitive or potentially controversial topics were handled in accordance with the club's interests. These mechanisms of control underscore the interpreter's involvement in shaping the narrative, balancing professional integrity with the implicit expectations of compliance from the club.

In contrast, Itaya's study (2021) on interpreters in Japanese professional baseball demonstrated the breadth of roles and responsibilities held by the interpreters. Conducted within the high-context Japanese culture, Itaya interviewed twelve interpreters from Nippon Professional Baseball (NPB) and MLB, utilizing the Modified Grounded Theory Approach (M-GTA) to analyse their roles. The study revealed that interpreters in Japanese baseball assume a "whole-self work" ethos, encompassing functions beyond linguistic translation. A common theme was the emphasis on "immediacy" or "speediness" necessary for the high-paced, time-constrained environment of sports. Interpreters described their social roles in multiple ways such as "stagehand", "family caretaker", "public relations", "mediator", "listener", "glue", "manager", and "mastermind", serving not only as linguistic facilitators but also providing other services such as emotional support, public relations, and administration. This demanding role often led to significant personal sacrifices, with interpreters on-call 24/7 for nearly 10 months a year, maintaining limited private lives due to the constant need to

be available for players and their families. Itaya (2021) succeeds in contextualizing the interpreter's role by underscoring its emotional and cultural dimensions.

3. RESEARCH METHOD

Based on the findings from the literature review, we formulated a list of questions and conducted interviews with practicing sports interpreters to better understand their roles and responsibilities and apply these insights to Ippei Mizuhara's case. Interviews were conducted with sports interpreters who, like Mizuhara, work in professional baseball using Japanese as their working language. For comparative purposes, interviews were also conducted with sports interpreters working in professional football using Italian.

The participant selection was based on three categories: (1) interpreters employed by professional baseball teams or football clubs, (2) freelance interpreters, and (3) ad-hoc interpreters who do not work as professional interpreters full-time. For Japanese-language interpreters, interpreters meeting the required criteria were identified through the Sports Management Interpreter Association, Incorporated, and the Japan Association of Conference Interpreters. For Italian interpreters, three colleagues and personal acquaintances of the co-author were interviewed. Details of the interpreters' profiles are provided in Section 4.1.

The interviews, conducted between September and November 2024, followed a semi-structured format, with 33 questions covering eight themes. To standardize the conditions, all interviews were conducted remotely via Zoom and were recorded with the participants' consent. The interviews were conducted in Japanese, Italian, or English, depending on the interviewee's preference, and audio recordings were fully transcribed. The content was translated into English by the two authors (all citations hereafter are the authors' translations except for Interpreter F who answered in English).

4. INTERVIEW RESULTS

4.1 INTERPRETERS' PROFILES

A total of six interpreters were interviewed for this study (Table 1). The following provides a brief explanation of their backgrounds, which have been anonymised to protect their identities and personal information.

| | IN-HOUSE | FREELANCE | AD-HOC |
|-------------------------|---|---|---|
| BASEBALL (JAPAN) | Interpreter A | Interpreter B | Interpreter C |
| | In-house Spanish interpreter with a full-time contract with a baseball team | Freelancer with experience as a full-time English interpreter for a baseball team | Former player-turned-scout with experience as a Chinese interpreter on an ad-hoc basis |
| FOOTBALL (ITALY) | Interpreter D | Interpreter E | Interpreter F |
| | In-house interpreter with a full-time contract at a football club | Former player who became a freelance interpreter | Freelance translator with no training in interpreting who occasionally worked as a football interpreter |

Table 1: An Overview of the interpreters interviewed

4.1.1 INTERPRETER A

Interpreter A was working as a Spanish interpreter for a professional baseball team in Japan, a role he had held since 2018. His career began as a baseball player during his youth, competing from elementary school through university. At university, he participated in Japan’s unique semi-hardball league while studying international relations in a cooperative society framework. After graduation, he joined a major sports equipment company, where he worked for two years. Seeking to combine his passion for baseball and international cooperation, he applied to the Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteers (JOCV) program and was accepted as a baseball volunteer. He was dispatched to a Central American country, where he promoted youth baseball and coached international tournaments. During this time, he independently translated a youth baseball coaching manual into Spanish, fostering connections with domestic professional teams. Upon returning to Japan, he worked for two years as a coach at a youth baseball academy before transitioning into his role as a Spanish-language interpreter.

4.1.2 INTERPRETER B

Interpreter B was a freelance English interpreter. He specialized in sports and primarily received direct assignments while also collaborating with agents for specific events. His interpreting career began at a hotel in the Pacific Islands owned and managed by an American couple. Later, he joined a satellite broadcasting team, working on American sports programs covering baseball, American football, and basketball. These experiences built his professional connections and eventually led to interpreting opportunities at events related to MLB. A significant turning point in his career was his work as a personal interpreter for a well-known manager in the Japanese base-

ball league. Afterward, he returned to broadcasting work and expanded his portfolio to include roles such as official interpreter for international tennis tournaments and various high-profile baseball events, including international series and tournaments. He also worked on MLB's opening games held in Japan. Through a combination of agent collaborations and direct client relationships, he continued to interpret for major sports events and projects.

4.1.3 INTERPRETER C

Interpreter C was an Asia scout for a professional baseball team, a position he assumed after transitioning from his role as a professional baseball player and interpreter. His baseball career began in his youth, culminating in his selection by a professional baseball team through the developmental draft. From 2014 to 2016, he played for that team before moving to an independent league team in Japan, where he played for one year. Subsequently, he spent two years with a corporate baseball team in Taiwan before returning to Japan in 2018. After returning, he worked as a coach for an independent league team until January 2020. Later that year, he received an offer from another professional baseball team to serve as an interpreter for a Chinese-speaking player, marking his first experience as an interpreter. Although his role as an interpreter was brief, lasting only two months, his performance led to his recruitment as an Asia scout for a professional baseball team. In this role, he continued to support efforts to identify talent across Asia while making full use of his language ability.

4.1.4 INTERPRETER D

Interpreter D held a Master's degree in conference interpreting and was employed full-time as a "language expert" for an Italian football club. After graduating, he began working as an interpreter for uefa.com, the UEFA's official website, translating from Italian into English, a role he held for nearly 10 years. During this period, he also worked on a variety of other translation and interpreting assignments, but his work with UEFA remained his primary focus. In 2011, he transitioned to a full-time position with a football club, initially for a short-term assignment that, due to a series of fortuitous circumstances, turned into a permanent role. Following that, he continued working with the team and in sports interpreting and language services.

4.1.5 INTERPRETER E

Interpreter E was a former football player. His passion for football, stemming from 13 years of playing in Greece, has greatly influenced his career path. While he did not start his career as an interpreter, his background as a former football player eventually

led him to work in the field of sports interpreting. His approach was further refined during time spent in England, where he observed the use of interpreting booths and learned simultaneous and consecutive techniques. He was working at the time of the study as a freelance football interpreter and a language services consultant, managing interpreting services for a company specializing in technical football interpreting. As a professional consultant, he organized information sessions for interpreters by offering younger colleagues the opportunity to observe live press conferences and learn from experienced professionals.

4.1.6 INTERPRETER F

Interpreter F, who studied French and Italian at university in England, began his career as a language teacher in Italy before transitioning into translation and, occasionally, football interpreting. Although he studied interpreting during his university studies, this was limited to a single module rather than a comprehensive course of study. He was self-taught in interpreting, and his early assignments lacked a structured method. Instead, he relied on improvised shorthand notes that were often unclear. Over time, he refined his technique through observation, research, and practice, enhancing his ability to organize and interpret effectively. While his primary focus for the past 15 years was football translation, he remained familiar with the interpreting profession, partly due to his wife's background as an interpreter.

4.2 ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The interview contained 10 questions about the roles and responsibilities of interpreters and interpersonal relations and cultural mediation. The results of the analysis follow, categorized by sport.

4.2.1 BASEBALL INTERPRETERS

The interviews revealed that Japanese baseball interpreters, most of whom are not formally trained, take on diverse and multifaceted roles that extend beyond linguistic mediation, which encompass support for players, coaches, and team operations. Their responsibilities typically vary according to team and player needs, but they are particularly involved in facilitating communication between foreign players and their teams during training, medical procedures, and game-day activities.

On a standard game day, interpreters start early by assisting players with their daily routines, such as transportation to the stadium or coordinating schedules. For example, Interpreter A, who primarily worked with Spanish-speaking pitchers and batters, often managed communication across multiple levels of the organization, possibly in

separate locations such as the bullpen, bench, and meeting rooms. His involvement extended to coordinating pre-game activities, interpreting strategy meetings, and providing linguistic support during physical training sessions, such as batting or fielding practice. He was also responsible for managing media interactions, including pre- and post-game interviews and press conferences.

Interpreter B, who had experience as the personal interpreter for a manager, focused on facilitating communication during coaching and strategy meetings, as well as assisting with player performance reviews. This included interpreting during benchside discussions and even umpire disputes. Furthermore, post-game responsibilities often involved translating for media interactions, particularly for foreign managers or key players, ensuring their statements align with team messaging and cultural expectations.

Interpreter C, who worked with Chinese-speaking players, highlighted the interpersonal aspect of the role. Beyond interpreting technical and strategic discussions, his duties often included building rapport with players to ensure they felt supported in a foreign environment. He assisted with off-field matters, such as driving players to and from games and helping them adapt to Japanese culture, ensuring a smooth transition and minimizing isolation.

Regarding how they perceived their own roles, the three interviewees gave varying answers. Interpreter A explained that his responsibilities extended beyond interpretation, requiring him to facilitate communication between players, coaches, and medical staff, ensuring that both foreign players and team staff were aligned towards common goals throughout the season. Interpreter A described his multifaceted role in different ways, calling himself a “coordinator”, a “facilitator”, a “motivator”, and an “emotional supporter”, corroborating Itaya’s (2021) findings and expanding the list of roles. He explained that these multiple roles were necessary in order to “have everyone move in one direction as a team” toward the shared goal of winning the championship in 10 months’ time. This perspective contrasts with the more limited expectations of freelance interpreters hired only for press conferences and other events.

Interpreter B was in a unique position because he had experienced working for a single team for six years, even though he was a freelancer at the time of the interview. Unlike Interpreter A, Interpreter B was able to focus exclusively on the manager, ensuring that all needs were met. He described his role during that time as that of a caretaker, always available to handle logistics or personal requests, including non-baseball-related tasks such as finding a church. Comparing his experiences as an in-house interpreter and as a freelancer, he characterized the former role as leaning more toward being a 24/7 caretaker, with no boundaries between work and non-work hours—something that is not the case for freelancers.

Interpreter C, on the other hand, distanced himself from the identity of a sports interpreter, as his interpreting experience primarily consisted of two months working for a professional baseball team that had signed a Chinese-speaking player mid-season and was suddenly in need of an interpreter. As a former player and coach who then worked as a scouting staff member, he occasionally interpreted for his boss when

traveling to Chinese-speaking regions for scouting, but he did not consider himself a professional interpreter. Instead, he described his role at the time as that of a “go-between”, similar to a “personal assistant”, bridging communication between the player and other team members while supporting the player on and off the field. He recalled helping the player obtain a cell phone and set up a bank account, as well as driving the player to the stadium, much like Ippei Mizuhara.

While maintaining a core focus on effective communication, they all adapted their role to the specific needs of their environment. Interpreter A saw his work as coordinating and facilitating team dynamics, Interpreter B as being a caretaker who ensures logistical and personal support for the team, and Interpreter C as being a bridge between the player and team, providing intimate, individualized support. All these roles align with those identified by Itaya (2021, p. 145).

The interviews revealed that all three interpreters faced role conflicts. Interpreter A reflected on the challenge of maintaining professional boundaries with players, especially when their expectations extend beyond interpreting duties. He recalled an instance when a player who misunderstood the interpreter’s role asked him for a cup of coffee during a match. Recognizing this as a common misconception among professional athletes, Interpreter A maintained clear boundaries by refusing the request, emphasizing the importance of fostering an equal, respectful relationship with players. However, his personal experiences, such as when his homestay family helped him during a health emergency, shaped his understanding of the unique challenges faced in foreign environments. These experiences reinforced his belief that, in unfamiliar settings, there is a natural inclination to assist others, even if it extends beyond one’s responsibility and work hours. This dual perspective created a tension between professional expectations and personal obligations, highlighting how the interpreter’s role can sometimes blend with that of a caretaker, making it challenging to delineate personal and professional boundaries.

Interpreter A also recalled the cultural challenges and conflicts he worked to resolve. One particular instance involved a foreign player whose frustration, stemming from being unexpectedly reassigned to a relief pitching role, was misinterpreted by the coaching staff as defiance or dissatisfaction with the team’s decisions. This miscommunication escalated, leading to tensions between the player and the coaching staff. Interpreter A stepped in, advising the player to address the coaches directly and explain his feelings to prevent further misunderstandings. Acting as a mediator, he also approached the coaches, clarifying the player’s perspective and encouraging a face-to-face conversation. The subsequent meeting allowed both parties to clear the air, ultimately fostering mutual respect and understanding. Interpreter A emphasized that moments like these highlight the need for interpreters to navigate cultural nuances and ensure that differing communication styles do not lead to unnecessary conflict.

Interpreter B reflected on his role as a cultural mediator, particularly in managing the nuances of communication among the members of the organization. When working closely with the manager, he emphasized the importance of respecting the manager’s philosophy of not openly criticizing players for mistakes. The manager

believed that professional players at that level inherently understood their errors and that pointing them out unnecessarily would only diminish morale. Instead, the focus was on constructive communication to prevent repeated mistakes. Interpreter B was entrusted with ensuring that the manager's approach was effectively conveyed, particularly during challenging times such as a losing streak, where motivation and clarity were critical to the team's recovery.

In another scenario, during the opening ceremony of an MLB game held in Japan, Interpreter B faced a delicate situation involving conflicting demands. A request from the MLB team's public relations representative clashed with the expectations of the event organizers. When one party made a statement that risked creating tension, Interpreter B paused to confirm the intent behind the words before translating them. He explained to the speaker that directly interpreting the statement could lead to significant friction and suggested rephrasing. This careful intervention helped to mediate the situation, maintain harmony, and avoid unnecessary conflict. Reflecting on the experience, Interpreter B noted the delicate balance required in cultural mediation and the need to sometimes act beyond the conventional interpreter role to preserve relationships and ensure effective communication.

Interpreter C reflected on his unique experience in sports interpreting, emphasizing that high levels of language proficiency are not the sole determinant of success in this field. As a former baseball player, he noted that his understanding of the game's flow and his firsthand experience on the field allowed him to support players effectively, even though his language skills were not as advanced as those of professional interpreters. He acknowledged that others with strong language proficiency but without a sports background could also contribute effectively by excelling in linguistic aspects, showing that interpreting in sports requires a diverse set of skills tailored to the situation. Interpreter C recalled how he often participated alongside the player in training session activities such as playing catch, running, and weight training. These activities went beyond linguistic assistance, creating a sense of camaraderie and helping the player avoid feelings of isolation by integrating into the athlete's routine and offering holistic support.

All three interpreters demonstrated that sports interpreting involves far more than translation—it requires adapting to the player's needs, fostering a supportive environment, and bridging cultural and professional gaps as mediators. This approach highlights the multifaceted nature of sports interpreting, where personal connection and practical support often outweigh pure interpreting skills—a tendency that was also evident in Mizuhara's work.

4.2.2 FOOTBALL INTERPRETERS

All interviewees in the football group were mainly working between Italian and English and involved in various aspects of interpreting for football matches. Their responsibilities typically began on matchday 1, when they assisted with pre-match press

conferences, providing interpretation for both coaches and players from the home and away teams. These tasks mostly entailed consecutive interpreting. Additionally, the interpreters were on hand for security briefings, which involved a range of technical language related to safety and logistics, and official lunches, where they translated formal speeches and discussions between club executives. On matchday, their duties extended to post-match press conferences, where they continued to translate for the teams' coaches. Contrary to the Japanese baseball interpreters, they were also available to interpret announcements in the stadium, including security messages, team lineups, and logistical updates. In some cases, such as during incidents or disruptions, the interpreters could be called upon to translate procedural warnings. Interpreter D's work also extended beyond matchdays, because he participated in the daily activities of the team. He assisted during training sessions, explaining tactical discussions, interpreting motivational talks or reprimands during training, as well as providing assistance during meetings.

All three emphasized the importance of language teaching as part of their broader role, which was not the case with Japanese baseball interpreters. Both interpreters D and E actively taught Italian to players and coaches, but they also accompanied players to police stations to file theft reports or assist with house inspections following burglaries. They both performed these roles with one difference: for Interpreter D all the above-mentioned tasks were performed within his full-time contract with the club while interpreter E provided these services separately through agreements with the players or the coaches requiring his assistance.

Their diverse roles were also reflected in the responses given to the question: "If you were to describe your role in one or two words, what would it be?" Interpreter E replied that he perceived himself as an *anello di congiunzione* 'conjunction link' between the players, the coaches, and the managers of the club. Interpreter D used the metaphor "a good referee, in the sense that you should notice where there is a specific need and you should be ready to intervene". Interpreter F declared that the interpreter should be "self-effacing, a conduit" and that the role highly depends on the context. In his opinion, behind the scenes, the role shifts to include more cultural mediation and a closer relationship with players, and the interpreter acts more as a guide than just a linguistic relay. In a way, interpreter F made a distinction between the roles played in official contexts (such as press conferences) and more informal activities (on-pitch training, language teaching).

The roles pointed out by the three interpreters converged with those proposed by Itaya (2021). All in all, they did not perceive their role as interpreters in official settings (i.e., press conferences) and that of "cultural mediator" in more informal contexts as conflicting but as an integral part of their job. One example of this complementary duality is provided by interpreter F.

Apart from linguistic skills, it's essential to be discreet and self-effacing in this field, without overstepping your role. Some interpreters can be starstruck, asking for autographs or photos with coaches, which creates a poor impression. As an interpreter in the media

spotlight, you need to stay professional, approachable, and reserved. However, behind the scenes, you must strike a balance—being friendly and approachable to build rapport with players while maintaining professionalism. For instance, I once worked with a coach who, despite six months with an English-speaking team, struggled to convey the tactical concept of *in profondità*. They incorrectly used “in the deep”, which confused players as it referred to the opposite tactic in English football. I introduced the correct term, “in behind”, which finally clarified their instructions.

Interpreters D and F highlighted that the need to mediate conflicts or clarify misinterpretations can arise even in formal settings. For instance, Interpreter D recounted an incident during a retreat with a new coach, where an Argentine player—still not fluent in Italian after a season in Italy—faced loaded questions from journalists. The reporters appeared to steer the player into criticizing the previous coach to elevate the current one. Despite the player’s neutral responses, one reporter twisted his words, prompting Interpreter D to intervene and clarify, “No, you’re putting words in his mouth that he hasn’t said”. The journalist retorted that the interpreter should “just stick to interpreting”. The incident later led to an article with the headline “The Interpreter Advocate”. Interpreter F shared a case involving cultural stereotyping during a press conference. A journalist from a southern Italian city inquired about Liverpool’s statement warning fans about this Italian city’s safety. The Liverpool manager reacted angrily, escalating the situation. Although the local media accused the interpreter of distorting the question to appear more provocative, the interpreter had conveyed it accurately.

Interpreter E emphasized the importance of neutrality. Although he rarely encountered extreme conflicts, maintaining impartiality and avoiding escalation were deemed critical in such situations. For instance, during a press conference dispute between a journalist and a football player, Interpreter E faithfully translated the exchange without altering its content or taking sides. Similarly, when faced with profanity or inappropriate language, he avoided verbatim translation, choosing instead to summarize without inflaming tensions.

Just like in the case of baseball, interpreters in football handle a range of tasks beyond linguistic translation, including press conferences, training sessions, and logistical support like language teaching and personal assistance. They balance formal roles as neutral communicators with informal duties as cultural mediators and bridge gaps between players, coaches, and clubs.

4.3 AGENCY, TRUST, AND RISK

Agency, trust, and risk are key elements in understanding the dynamics of sports interpreters. The interview results pointed to the fact that each of these dimensions highlights the intricate power balance, vulnerabilities, and ethical challenges inherent in the interpreter–athlete relationship, indicating how breaches in any of these areas can lead to catastrophic consequences.

Agency in the context of interpreting often refers to the interpreter's capacity to act independently and exert influence within the interpreted interaction (Mason & Ren, 2012). As seen previously, Interpreter D described stepping beyond linguistic duties to defend a football player's words during a press conference, countering a journalist's misrepresentation and earning the nickname "The Interpreter Advocate". Similarly, Interpreter B shared that while working as the team manager's interpreter, his responsibilities included translating medical reports about injured players and providing quick summaries to inform the manager's lineup decisions—a task requiring both decisiveness and discretion.

Based on media reports, it is likely that Mizuhara's agency also extended far beyond linguistic tasks, as he managed many aspects of Ohtani's personal and professional life, from opening bank accounts to facilitating logistical arrangements. However, as Mizuhara's case demonstrates, when agency is exercised without ethical guidelines or institutional oversight, it can lead to dire consequences. Mizuhara's misuse of his role to impersonate Ohtani in financial transactions underscores how uncontrolled agency can harm those it is meant to support.

As scholars like Pym (2015) have argued, trust is the cornerstone of the interpreter–client relationship, enabling interpreters to operate effectively in high-stakes environments. Ohtani seems to have placed immense trust in Mizuhara, granting him access to his finances and personal information. This dynamic is mirrored in other interpreters' accounts. For example, Interpreter E highlighted how trust was critical in his role, often acting as a language tutor or cultural mediator, particularly for players' families. Interpreter F, meanwhile, shared that players and coaches frequently expressed appreciation for his work, indicating the mutual reliance inherent in these relationships. Interpreter B recounted how his role often blurred professional boundaries, with players and their families seeking advice on personal matters like managing health emergencies or navigating daily life in Japan.

Interpreter A's and C's narratives further emphasized the centrality of trust. Interpreter A described the trust players placed in him to mediate conflicts with coaches, such as when misunderstandings arose about training routines or game strategies. This trust, he argued, stems from the interpreter's ability to align both parties toward the shared goal of enhancing team performance. Interpreter C, meanwhile, highlighted how trust is earned through a combination of professionalism and empathy, particularly when supporting players exploring unfamiliar cultural environments. However, Mizuhara's betrayal—embezzling millions to fund his gambling debts—exemplifies the fragility of trust. As Pym (2015) observed, "Risk, in translation, is first and foremost risk of losing credibility" (p. 69). Mizuhara's actions not only shattered Ohtani's trust but also created various other risks.

Risk is an inherent factor in relationships involving high levels of trust and expanded agency. Mizuhara's actions exposed Ohtani to substantial financial and reputational risks, including the loss of \$17 million and public scrutiny. Other interpreters' experiences provide additional context for understanding these risks. Several interpreters described situations where public misinterpretations during press conferences

could lead to media backlash, threatening the reputations of both the interpreter and the athlete. Interpreter F shared an anecdote about an interpreter misidentifying the Italian word “Monaco” as the principality in France instead of Munich in Germany, an error that highlighted the risks of insufficient contextual knowledge in high-profile events. Interpreter B’s account of translating complex medical terminology in real time underscored another dimension of risk—accuracy in critical situations where decisions are time-sensitive. Furthermore, Interpreter B recalled the challenges of translating culturally nuanced terms like “commitment” which has no direct equivalent in Japanese or context-dependent terms like “plate discipline”, where inadequate interpretation could affect team communication and performance.

Interpreter A described the potential consequences of cultural miscommunications, such as Latin American players being perceived as unmotivated due to differing attitudes toward training. He recalled intervening in such situations to prevent unnecessary escalations, highlighting the interpreter’s role in mitigating risks that stem from cultural misunderstandings. Interpreter C, on the other hand, emphasized the operational risks interpreters face, particularly when fulfilling roles beyond their linguistic expertise. He noted that interpreters are often tasked with managing off-field matters like transportation and housing, where errors or oversights could lead to logistical complications or even player dissatisfaction. These examples highlight how even minor lapses in an interpreter’s role can lead to disproportionate consequences, emphasizing the need for robust risk management strategies. As Interpreter E noted, institutions like UEFA impose heavy financial penalties on clubs that fail to provide competent interpreters, demonstrating the high stakes involved.

The Mizuhara scandal serves as a stark reminder of the complexities involved in the interplay of agency, trust, and risk within the realm of professional sports interpreting. The interviewee’s accounts illustrate the multifaceted nature of their roles, often navigating high-pressure environments while managing ethical and professional boundaries. Their experiences, alongside the cautionary tale of Mizuhara, underscore the importance of clear guidelines, oversight mechanisms, and risk mitigation strategies to protect both interpreters and their clients. By addressing these issues, institutions can strengthen the interpreter–athlete relationship, ensuring it remains a source of support rather than vulnerability.

5. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

This paper aimed to analyse the roles and responsibilities of interpreters in baseball (Japan) and football (Italy) in order to explore how and why they perform their tasks. Above all, this investigation—whose need was urgently felt after the Mizuhara scandal—sought to assess how far interpreters’ roles extended beyond interpreting and how concepts of agency, trust and risk can provide meaningful guidance in our analysis.

Ippei Mizuhara's scandal has raised broader questions about the vulnerabilities faced by high-profile athletes who entrust substantial responsibilities to close aides. Mizuhara's actions, which undermined the foundation of trust central to his role, have highlighted the need for stronger oversight and ethical safeguards in the management of athlete support relationships. The case, documented globally due to Ohtani's immense fame, serves as a cautionary tale about the risks inherent in such positions of trust. Media reports showed that Mizuhara exercised his influence as an interpreter consistently. His translations frequently made headlines, which may have impacted his perception of his role and possibly enabled him to control not only Ohtani's words but also his finances.

One lesson from this scandal is the need for sports interpreters to undergo media training. This would enhance their understanding of how reporters construct their articles and news clips using quotes and soundbites as primary resources. They could learn to manage risks by providing literal translations or even the original words used in the statements along with their interpretations. It is hoped that such training will not only provide the practical skills required but also alleviate the ethical dilemmas faced by sports interpreters, a future step that the industry should seriously consider.

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