



## Working with interpreters – at the heart of intercultural communication

### Contents

1. Introduction.....	2
2. Translation versus interpretation.....	2
3. Non-verbal communication to the rescue.....	2
4. Interpretation apps as a resort.....	3
5. Working with interpreters.....	3
What sort of interpreter?.....	4
Non-professional interpreters – advantages and disadvantages.....	4
Children.....	5
Professional interpreters – advantages and disadvantages.....	6
6. The three stages in an interpreter-assisted interaction.....	7
Before the interaction: preparation.....	7
During the interaction : respective roles.....	7
After the interaction: debriefing.....	8
7. Conclusion.....	8



## 1. Introduction

Working in a multicultural society means that we often have to interact – and try to develop a common understanding – with people with whom we have no shared verbal language.

This happens, for example, in local government offices, in day nurseries and schools, in doctors' surgeries and hospital departments, during police interventions, during interactions between tenants and property management agencies or caretakers, and at consulates, public swimming pools, and centres for asylum seekers.

How can we communicate and find solutions if we are unable to understand each other verbally?

## 2. Translation versus interpretation

In the fields of translation and interpretation, the word « translation » is used essentially in relation to documents, while « interpretation » applies to oral communication. Translators translate written materials, while interpreters facilitate oral communication between people who have no shared language. This article is about the intercultural challenges of interpretation.

## 3. Non-verbal communication to the rescue

When we need to communicate but have no shared language, our first impulse is to resort to non-verbal communication.

This is the right reflex, given that non-verbal and para-verbal modes of communication are so vital to mutual comprehension. Their contribution to the development of a shared understanding is more important than the words exchanged... if we pay attention to them.

It is our non-verbal behaviour that conveys our openness to the other person, our respect, and our desire to achieve mutual understanding. A look, a smile or a tone of voice can help to create a feeling of trust... or just the opposite.

In intercultural situations, however, caution is required : gestures, silences, eye contact and smiles are all governed by cultural codes. A smile, an exchange of eye contact, an assured tone of voice or a firm handshake will not be understood in the same way in all cultures.

So we must be careful how we interpret the non-verbal signals of people from a different culture. What do their gestures and silences mean? Their cultural code may be different from ours. Equally, we need to ensure that they



interpret our non-verbal signals in the way we intend... and there is absolutely no guarantee of that.

#### 4. Interpretation apps as a resort

These days, we have technology to help us. There are plenty of translation or interpretation apps to make our lives easier. And they are widely used. Some of them function very well. But, here too, caution is required : the same words can mean different things in different countries. And apps are not always completely reliable when it comes to highly specific or specialised terms. Usually, two or three questions and answers will be sufficient to check that we are really talking about the same thing. If not, it will be necessary to obtain accurate interpretations for the key terms.

Various central government departments can provide documentation in a wide range of languages, hugely facilitating some procedures and interactions.

#### 5. Working with interpreters

Calling in a person fluent in both languages will often help to facilitate mutual understanding.

This article is not about using the professional, university-trained interpreters who work in major companies, conference centres, international organisations etc. It is about the use of interpreters in individual face-to-face situations and smaller institutional settings.

In our everyday professional lives, diaries are full and we often work to tight deadlines. Even so, it is worth taking a few moments to imagine what it is like to be the client coming to see us with an interpreter. Changing perspective in that way will make us aware of his or her fragility, vulnerability and dependence. Living and surviving in a country where you can't speak the language and don't know how things work can be extremely stressful.

Everything may be so different. Once you realise this, you can approach the interaction in a slightly different way, showing respect for the person, putting them at ease and encouraging them on their way.



## What sort of interpreter?

### Non-professional interpreters – advantages and disadvantages

Clients frequently arrive accompanied by a friend or family member who speaks the language of the host country.

#### *Advantages*

For the client, this has many advantages. You know, understand and trust each other. The 'interpreter' will often be familiar with your current circumstances and personal history. And he or she will be able to convey things with the necessary cultural sensitivity. Also, of course, their services come free of charge – not a negligible consideration.

#### *Disadvantages*

But the ability to speak a language does not necessarily make someone a good interpreter. They will often be unfamiliar with highly specific or specialised terms (legal, medical or administrative) and their interpretation will be at best approximate and at worst inaccurate. Any institution that relies on the services of such 'interpreters' will therefore have no guarantee that the translation corresponds to what has been said. Moreover, it will have no guarantee of confidentiality.

When clients and interpreters know each other, there will often be (untranslated) discussions or even disagreements between them. This is completely inappropriate.

In principle, the interpreter's loyalty should be to the professional mandating his or her services. But in the situation we are exploring here, the interpreter's loyalty will certainly be to your client, and this will distort the situation.

Finally, it will be very difficult and sometimes even impossible for a friend to give bad news (medical diagnosis, eviction, etc.). A friend acting as an interpreter will sometimes learn things that he or she would prefer not to know, or which will subsequently affect the relationship.

The disadvantages therefore outnumber the advantages, and it is strongly recommended to use trained community interpreters if at all possible.



## Children

It is not unusual for immigrant parents to arrive for an appointment with an administrative authority, a medical practitioner or school staff accompanied by a school-age child able to speak the language of the host country better than they can. While this situation is understandable from the point of view of the parents, it should be handled with extreme care by the professionals involved. After all, children are supposed to be in school and not sitting in an office or surgery interpreting for their parents.

Moreover, it is not appropriate for sensitive or painful information (such as a serious medical diagnosis, an educational difficulty, an eviction or a financial or legal problem) to be conveyed through the mouths of children. The emotional burden is too heavy for them to bear and may affect future relationships within the family.

If it is simply a matter of interpreting a few bits of non-sensitive information, an exception can be made if necessary. Otherwise, it will be better to postpone the meeting and ask the parent to come back with an adult friend or family member or with a professional interpreter.

Sometimes the parent may not know anyone who can help and may be unaware of the networks of professional interpreters. If the staff of the service concerned take the time to supply the relevant information and addresses, they will be doing a great deal to advance the integration and empowerment of the individual concerned.

Clearly, therefore, the use of children as interpreters presents no possible advantage. The websites listed below echo this opinion.

[https://api-gbv.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/LanguageAccessforLE\\_2020-Children-as-Interpreters.pdf](https://api-gbv.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/LanguageAccessforLE_2020-Children-as-Interpreters.pdf)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RT3kQMtSxLM>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jLNNsQI4clc>

<https://www.childrenshospitals.org/news/childrens-hospitals-today/2023/10/why-we-shouldnt-ask-kids-to-interpret-for-their-parents>

<https://rmccaustralia.org.au/kids-as-translators-the-burden-of-being-helpful/>



If you read French or German, check for additional interesting references in the French and German versions of the text.

## Professional interpreters – advantages and disadvantages

### *Advantages*

The advantages of using such professional interpreters are beyond question. They provide a guarantee of quality, confidentiality and professional ethics. Community interpreters receive not only an excellent basic training, but also very good ongoing supervision and further training.

In Switzerland, organisations like **Appartenances**, **Interpret** or **Caritas Suisse** offer extremely good training courses.

#### **Appartenances**

( <https://www.appartenances.ch/activites/interpretariat-communautaire> ) or

**Interpret** ( <https://www.inter-pret.ch/fr/home-1.html> ) or

#### **Caritas Suisse**

( <https://www.caritas.ch/fr/offres-de-formation-interpretariat-et-migration/> )

Interpreters trained in this way have thought deeply about the ethics of professional interpreting. They are trained in interpretation and have extended and refined their repertoire to include specific and demanding fields (legal, medical, administrative, etc.).

Those trained by the organisations listed above usually join the pools of professional interpreters they assign in response to requests and are therefore frequently employed by them.

### *Disadvantages*

The disadvantages are rare and are essentially of two kinds.

Good interpreters are in great demand, and therefore not always available at the time requested.

Since professional interpreters are paid for their work, there are contractual obligations to be met and fees to be paid. These are set by the organisation assigning the interpreter and not the client requesting their services.



## 6. The three stages in an interpreter-assisted interaction

To get the most out of an interpreter-assisted interaction, attention needs to be paid to the following three stages.

### Before the interaction: preparation

The preparatory stage is very often neglected.

It need not take long, but it gives the professional needing the interpreter the chance to clarify the following issues:

- Is interpretation to be simultaneous or consecutive ?
- If consecutive, approximately how much time should be allowed before the pause for translation ?
- Does the professional want a word-for-word translation? Or will it be enough to convey the gist of what is said, taking account of cultural variables (taboo terms, non-existent words, etc.) ?
- What is the meeting about? (Knowing this will allow the interpreter to prepare for it mentally.)

### During the interaction : respective roles

The experience will be more valuable and there will be less loss of meaning if the professional keeps the following points in mind :

- The interpreter is there to serve as a mouthpiece for the two main players. He or she is **not** the protagonist. It is important, therefore, that the professional looks at the client, rather than at the interpreter.
- Equally, the professional should ALWAYS speak directly to the client, rather than to the interpreter and not say things like « tell him/her that » or « I didn't understand what he/she said ».
- The interpreter should sit slightly apart, and the key contact should be between professional and client (even though the interpreter and the professional will, of course, work as a team and will prepare for the interview together).
- If at any time it is necessary to deviate from this distribution of roles, the professional should say so formally – « We need to clarify a point here, I will ask the interpreter to pose a question to the client, etc. » – and the two professionals should resume their respective roles as quickly as possible.
- There should be no conspiring between the professional and the interpreter, but a collaboration based on transparent principles.



### After the interaction: debriefing

A short debriefing session with the interpreter immediately after the interview and the departure of the client can be extremely useful. If there is no time to do it immediately, it can be done by phone within the next few hours, before memories fade.

The debriefing session is an opportunity to address cultural issues and obtain information that could not be conveyed during the interview, for example :

- « Did you notice anything culturally significant that I may have missed in the client's behaviour, any non-verbal messages that I may not have been able to decode? »
- « Were there difficulties surrounding any particular words or exchanges? »

This final stage in the interaction with the interpreter will often allow the professional to glean cultural information that will be very important in helping him or her understand the client better.

## 7. Conclusion

Communicating via a third party will always be more complicated than interacting directly with a client. It takes more time and, since perceptions are filtered through a second consciousness, there will always be some slight modification of what is said. But, if the interaction is properly prepared and if the two professionals handle it correctly, it can be as useful as – or indeed more useful than – communicating directly with a client.

I wish you every success in your future work with professional interpreters.

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