

Interpreting in a Refugee Context



Self-study Module 3

1 January 2009



UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

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Note

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Introduction

Overview

This document, which focuses on interpreting in the context of forced displacement, is one of a series of self-study modules developed by UNHCR's Division of International Protection Services. UNHCR first published a self-study module on interpreting in a refugee context in June 1993. That earlier module helped to create a greater awareness and understanding of interpretation issues arising in the context of refugee protection. However, interpretation standards and principles have been constantly evolving, and advances in the field over the past fifteen years have been significant. The module has thus been revised to reflect these latest developments in the field of interpretation.

Purpose

The function performed by interpreters, that of *overcoming the barrier of language*, is vital in any international context. It assumes an added dimension when practiced in an effort to assist UNHCR in its core work: protecting and seeking durable solutions for refugees.

Persons who are called upon to provide interpreting services, especially those with little previous experience of UNHCR's work, need guidance on how to perform their role effectively. This self-study guide is designed to

- familiarize interpreters with the principles and techniques of interpretation
- be used as a reference tool for UNHCR staff in the field
- assist UNHCR staff and partners in the field, who frequently use the services of interpreters, in designing and conducting their own training sessions

In sum, this self-study module is a practical reference tool that can be used for self-learning as well as classroom training.

Contents

The module assists interpreters in understanding how the two or more languages that they speak differ from one another, and why it is sometimes difficult to correctly translate one language into another. It also trains interpreters on the various techniques they can use to help people who cannot understand each other while, at the same time, making themselves unobtrusive. Further, it advises interpreters on the difference between professional and unprofessional behaviour, and the impact of both on the institution for which they are working and its clients. The module also includes basic information about how interpreters can take care of themselves, since interpreting in a refugee-interview context can be demanding and possibly dangerous.



How to use the module

This document is designed as self-study module, whereby the reader can look at the table of contents and choose any subject/module according to her/his professional needs. The module's contents are subdivided into questions about interpreting that non-specialists frequently ask.

Professional behaviour is central to every module, in

- drawing professional boundaries (see Module I: **Professional Interpreting**)
- achieving linguistic neutrality (see Module II: **Language Issues**)
- making good use of the interpreter's working tools (see Module III: **The Interpreter's Toolkit**)
- attaining correct and transparent behaviour (see Module IV: **It's Interpreting Time!**)
- preventing one's subjectivity from interfering in the process of interpreting (see Module V: **Basics of Self-care**)

Trainees will gain most from the guide by reading it from cover to cover. Each time a question is posed, whether at the beginning of a module, within a paragraph, or at the end of a module, trainees should attempt to give an answer based on their knowledge of the topic. There is no answer-key section in the guide, as it is assumed that critical reading of the material, combined with reasoning from personal experience and a thorough understanding of the Code of Conduct, will allow trainees to deduce the correct answer.

It is fundamental that trainees apply self-analysis in the course of their work as interpreters. This would ideally include constant note-taking on difficult questions, obstacles, and dilemmas. The result of informed debate among colleagues on possible solutions to any problem encountered should be submitted to the person in charge, and eventually considered for inclusion in subsequent editions of the this self-study guide.

Module I: Professional Interpreting

To perform efficiently, professionally and ethically as an interpreter, you need to be aware of the purpose and content of your work, particularly in relation to the institution for which you will be working, its mandate, scope of action, and objectives. Further, you need to know that the task of an interpreter in a refugee-interview context is challenging in any circumstances. The conditions in which you work may be difficult. People might expect from you what you cannot, and possibly should not, give them. Your own personal values might conflict with your Code of Conduct. The circumstances in which you find yourself might make it difficult to take decisions according to the Code. This module is based on the notion that being aware of obstacles to your work is the first step toward overcoming them.

Chapter 1

Understanding the Context

In this chapter you will learn about

- the origin of UNHCR and its place within the United Nations
- its mandate in relation to the 1951 and 1969 (OAU) Conventions
- the refugee definition and refugee status determination
- the different categories of persons of concern to UNHCR
- the kinds of interviews you may take part in as an interpreter

A. Protecting refugees and the role of UNHCR

1. Why was UNHCR created?

UNHCR was conceived in the aftermath of the Second World War, at a time when the issue of human rights was high on the agenda of the international community. Its immediate predecessor, the International Refugee Organization (IRO), had been concerned with repatriating and resettling people displaced by the war, and reached the end of its mandate in 1950. Yet there remained over one million refugees, many of whom were living in camps.

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees was established on December 14, 1950 by the United Nations General Assembly. The High Commissioner is elected by the General Assembly and reports to that body through the Economic and Social Council. Policy directives are provided by the General Assembly. In accordance with its Statute, UNHCR's work is humanitarian and non-political in character.

2. What is UNHCR's mandate ?

UNHCR has two core mandate functions:

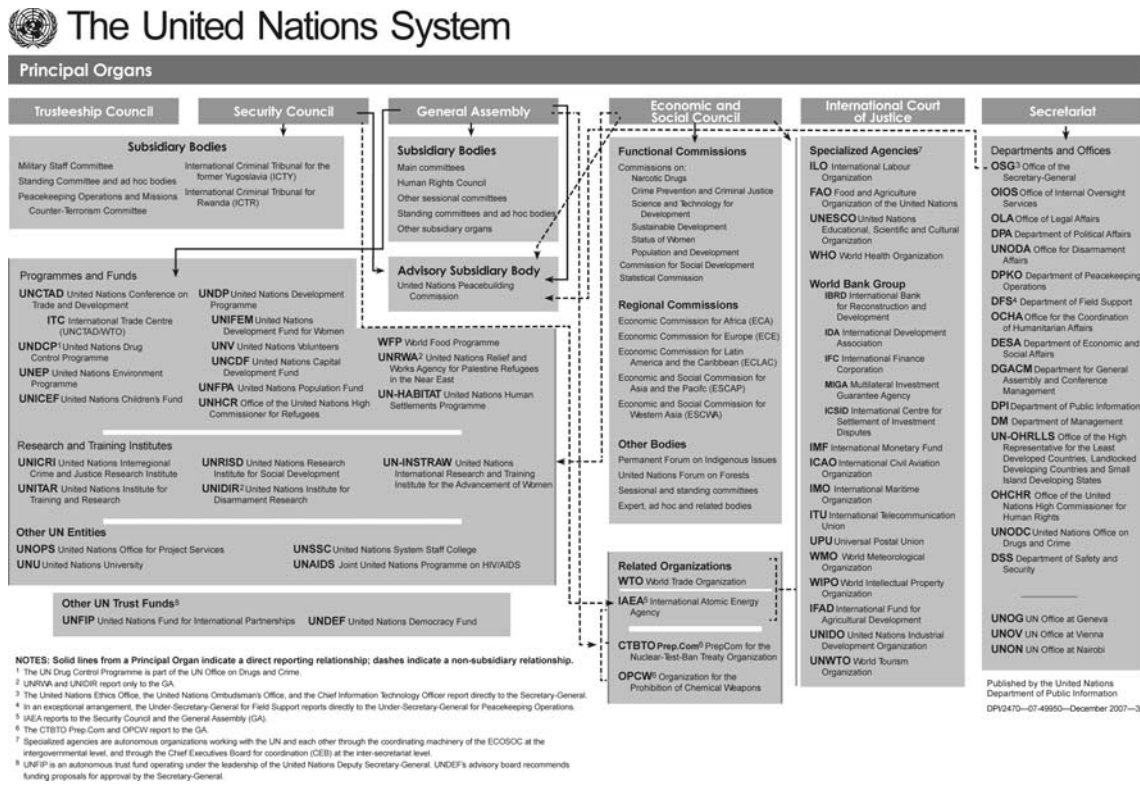
- i to provide international protection to refugees
- ii to seek lasting solutions to their problems

These fall into three categories:

- voluntary repatriation: usually the preferred solution
- local integration: assisting refugees in integrating into the host community
- resettlement: finding third countries ready to accept and integrate refugees

Professional Interpreting

3. Where does UNHCR fit within the UN system?



4. Where and how does UNHCR operate?

UNHCR's Headquarters are located in Geneva, while it has field offices throughout the world.

5. Who is a refugee?

According to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, a refugee is someone who, owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality or habitual residence, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country. People fleeing conflicts or generalized violence are also generally considered as refugees, although sometimes under legal mechanisms other than the 1951 Convention.

The 1951 Convention and its 1967 Protocol are the cornerstones of international refugee law, and the legal principles they enshrine have permeated into countless other international, regional and national laws and practices governing the way refugees are treated. One of the most crucial principles laid down in the 1951 Convention is that refugees should not be expelled or returned "to the frontiers of territories where (their) life or freedom would be threatened." The Convention also outlines the basic rights that states should accord to refugees.

The term “asylum-seeker” and “refugee” are often confused. An asylum-seeker is an individual who says he/she is a refugee but whose claim has not yet been finally decided on by the country in which he/she has submitted it or by UNHCR. Not every asylum-seeker will ultimately be recognized as a refugee, but every refugee is initially an asylum-seeker. A person is a refugee as soon as she/he fulfils the criteria contained in the definition of the international refugee instruments. This would necessarily occur prior to the time at which her/his refugee status is formally determined. Recognition of her/his refugee status does not therefore make him/her a refugee, but declares him/her to be one.

Although refugees are increasingly confused with economic migrants, the difference is, in principle, quite clear. Refugees do not choose to leave their countries, but are forced to do so out of fear of persecution or as a result of armed conflict. By contrast, economic migrants do enjoy the protection of their home countries but voluntarily decide to leave, for instance, to improve their economic situation or because of family links.

6. How are refugees protected?

Governments bear the primary responsibility for protecting refugees on their territory, and often do so together with local non-governmental organizations (NGOs). However, in many countries, UNHCR staff work alongside NGOs and other partners in a variety of locations ranging from capital cities to remote camps and border areas. They promote and provide legal and physical protection, and minimize the threat of violence, including sexual and gender-based violence.

UNHCR’s activities to protect and assist refugees include:

- securing the admission of asylum-seekers, especially when States are tempted to close their frontiers indiscriminately
- preventing *refoulement*, which implies opposing measures that expel or return refugees to a country where their lives or liberty may be threatened
- assuring that the treatment of asylum-seekers corresponds to certain basic humanitarian standards; it is UNHCR’s duty to encourage governments to make adjustments to their national laws and regulations, and make sure they are properly applied
- ensuring that asylum-seekers have access to refugee status determination
- protecting asylum-seekers/refugees from arbitrary detention
- promoting the reunification of separated refugee families.

7. How does the refugee status determination process work?

According to the 1951 Convention and UNHCR’s Statute, five criteria must be met for a person to qualify as a refugee:

- Well-founded fear
- Persecution
- Reasons: race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion

- Outside country of nationality/former habitual residence
- Unable or unwilling, for fear of persecution, to seek that country's protection or to return there

The purpose of the interview is to establish whether the applicant meets these criteria. UNHCR's direct involvement in the determination of refugee status varies from country to country.

- It can confer refugee status in accordance with its Statute. This is what happens when the country is not a party to the 1951 Convention or other international treaties. It can also happen in a country that has signed and/or ratified the Convention, but has not introduced national legislation to implement it.
- It can conduct the determination process on behalf of the national authorities, which might prefer to leave this responsibility to UNHCR.
- It can participate in the determination process, as an observer or advisor. This usually occurs at the appeal stage.
- Outside the procedure itself, UNHCR may review rejected applicants who are due to be expelled.

8. Other persons of concern to UNHCR

Over the years, UNHCR has assumed responsibility for a number of other groups that are similar to refugees in some ways, but that were not explicitly mentioned in its mandate at the time of its founding.

Returnees are former refugees who have returned to their home country voluntarily. Although UNHCR's Statute gives the organization responsibility for promoting and facilitating voluntary repatriation, its involvement with refugees was traditionally thought to end once refugees crossed over the border into their countries of origin. However, various conclusions of UNHCR's Executive Committee – the organisation's oversight body - over the past decades confirm that, in seeking to find durable solutions for refugees, UNHCR has a legitimate interest in the consequences of return, and so activities, such as returnee monitoring and further assistance in the country of origin, are justified.

Stateless persons are men, women and children who are not considered to be nationals by any State. As such, they are without any effective national protection and may face discrimination when it comes to accessing rights generally available to nationals. It should be noted that a stateless person may also be a refugee, depending on his/her circumstances.

The key international instruments concerned with stateless persons are:

- the Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons (1954)
- the Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness (1961)

UNHCR is the only international agency with a general mandate, derived principally from General Assembly resolutions, to help stateless persons. Guided by the above treaties, UNHCR works:

- to ensure that the rights of stateless persons are respected
- to prevent/reduce statelessness by, for example, encouraging States to grant nationality to those with a significant link to their territory who might otherwise be stateless

Internally displaced persons are people who have fled their homes to another part of the country as a result of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights, or natural or human-made disasters. The United Nations Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement (1998) set standards for international action on behalf of internally displaced persons. UNHCR's mandate specifically covers refugees, but in the last 30 years it has assisted in more than 30 operations involving internally displaced persons around the world. In 2005, the UN reached a comprehensive agreement wherein it clarified and reinforced the roles of specialist agencies in helping internally displaced people. Under this agreement, UNHCR assumed lead responsibility for protection, emergency shelter, and camp coordination and camp management as of 1 January 2006.

B. UNHCR and interpreters

1. When does UNHCR require the help of interpreters?

These are some of the encounters in which UNHCR officials meet with persons of concern to UNHCR and might need the help of an interpreter:

- Registration procedures: when the personal information of refugees, internally displaced persons or returnees are recorded
- Refugee status determination: when an interview is conducted with an asylum-seeker to determine whether she/he meets the criteria of the refugee definition
- Resettlement interviews: when an interview is conducted with a refugee for determining his/her needs to be resettled to a third country
- Monitoring: when UNHCR collects information relating to the protection, rights and well-being of refugees, returnees and internally displaced persons through interviews
- Participatory Assessment: when a structured dialogue is conducted with women, girls, boys and men of concern to UNHCR, in order to gather accurate information on the specific protection risks they face and underlying causes, to understand their capacities, and to hear their proposed solutions
- Counselling sessions and/or medical interviews: when informed and professional advice on private and/or illness-related matters is made available to refugees and other persons of concern to UNHCR
- Screening survivors of violence or torture: when more information on psychological and/or physical consequences of torture is sought

2. What is my role in UNHCR's scope of action?

Interpreters are essential to UNHCR in fulfilling its core mandate functions, including registration, refugee status determination, resettlement, and counselling, which, in many cases, also involves sensitive issues related to sexual and gender-based violence. Thus, interpreters perform a key role in many UNHCR offices. A correct interpretation of refugees' statements is essential in enabling UNHCR to understand refugees' concerns and make appropriate interventions. At the same time, interpreters are in a position of significant influence and power over persons of concern. Although most interpreters discharge their functions in a professional manner in keeping with their terms of reference, this power has at times been abused to the detriment of refugees as well as UNHCR's overall program integrity.

Note!

Your services might be needed in any one of these scenarios. It is the responsibility of the interviewer to explain which process applies, and the sequence of events. It is also the responsibility of the interviewer to listen carefully to the interviewee's case, ask questions, and assess the case. As an interpreter, your role is to assist in this process by providing a channel for communication. Since each party speaks through your voice, your role is important and must be approached with a high degree of professionalism.

Chapter II

Ethics of Interpreting

In this chapter you will learn

- how to be a member of both a language community and a professional body
- how social pressure can affect your work as interpreter and how to deal with it
- how to deal with difficult situations that may arise in the context of interpretation
- how to draw professional boundaries
- what the Code of Conduct says about professional behaviour

A. Community interpreting

1. What does being a community interpreter mean?

You may be defined as a community interpreter if

- you are a member of a *language community*
- you offer your services as an oral translator to its members
- its members do not speak or have a good command of an official language
- such language is spoken at the institution whose services they wish to access

Community interpreters may be first-generation immigrants and/or refugees or their descendants. They may or may not claim to have strong ties with an immigrant and/or refugee group. They are often perceived as *social workers*, in that they assist people who are part of a minority group in overcoming a language barrier that may prevent them from fully enjoying their rights. Community interpreters may also be described as *culture oriented*, as they may be expected to act as *cultural mediators* who bridge the gap created by cultural differences between two people who would not be able to understand each other if what they say was literally translated.

Question: What category do you belong to?

2. Can someone pressure a community interpreter?

Social and work pressure affects the quality of your performance if it is directly connected with

- your role as an interpreter

Professional Interpreting

- what your employer expects of you
- what your language-community colleagues, with whom you have sometimes important personal relationships, expect from you.



We speak the same language.
We understand each other.

This is the
interpreter:
a non-involved
conduit.



Such relationships may interfere with the interpreter's functions and make it impossible for her/him to be that *translation box* or *conduit* she/he is often expected to be, according to what appears to be an anachronistic idealization of the interpreter's role.

On the contrary, the interpreter's age, gender, social status, political and religious orientation play a role in the interview's dynamics, and can have a negative or positive effect on the quality of communication through translation.

Chapter II

It is advisable not to ignore such effects, as they could be minimized and possibly neutralized if one is aware of at least some of their causes.

3. What might someone do to pressure me?

To attempt to answer this question, we can examine what might be expected from you. Let's start from your language community and assume that, *while you are sitting at home*, you break the news to a couple of friends...



MODULE I

...and there is a strong possibility that within the next 48 hours the whole community will have found out. Depending on what you do and do not do, whether you are seen as more or less powerful, knowledgeable, respectful, trustworthy, well-connected or politically and financially influential, the members of your community may look at you with a sense of expectation and/or believe that you have certain obligations to fulfil, according to any of the following fictional scenarios:

Scenario 1: You are a member of your country's most important opposition party, which is also dominating the political life of your community. There is a certain consensus on what refugees should and should not tell UNHCR.

Scenario 2: It is quite a small community, and most of its members are related to each other. Culturally, it is vitally important to please family members.

Scenario 3: Your brother owes a big favour to a member of your community who comes to you to strike a deal: He wants his unmarried sister to be resettled to the United States, and he is sure you know what to do for her. If you do this, he will forget about the favour your brother owes.

Scenario 4: Several community members claim to be Christian; however, Islam is dominant in your community. There are rumours that those community members used to be Muslim and converted to make their claim more credible. Some people suspect you might be one of them.

Scenario 5: Life as a refugee is tough, and one always needs money. Refugees also need credible testimonies, certificates, documents, and a beneficial marriage. Sometimes, one solution can resolve a few of these problems at once.

Scenario 6: The number of people from your community who claim to have been persecuted in your country of origin is increasing. Your country's embassy is quietly getting involved. People are being threatened and some of the claims are being indirectly denounced. You have a wife and a young daughter.

Scenario 7: Survivors of sexual assault or those who are HIV positive are socially marginalized in your community, whose members are always very closely scrutinized. A close relation of yours just arrived from your country of origin. She is three months pregnant, but she has not seen her husband for six months. The two are going to be interviewed separately.

Note!

It often appears that a refugee needs to be fully acknowledged as a member of a community to be credible as an interpreter. What would you do if you were an interpreter in any of the scenarios above? Turn each of the scenarios into a complete story. Your role as an interpreter, the decisions you take, and the reasons for taking such decisions will be central to the story.

Professional Interpreting

4. What could someone at work do to pressure me?

After a while, you might become aware of social pressure. Certainly, when it comes to work, you will need to build up some experience to be able to draw professional boundaries...



Questions!

- What about you? Would you share John's doubts? After all, this is a very simple request, something that looks quite all right at a first glance. Why do you think John is hesitant?

Some time passes, and you find yourself in the following scenarios:

Scenario 1: Some interviewees try to put pressure on you, using bribes or threats and demanding that you lie on their behalf during an interview.

Scenario 2: You receive threats and are eventually attacked by refugees who were not considered for resettlement.

Scenario 3: The interviewer asks you to tell her/him what you know about an applicant, her/his life, and to report on community members' opinions of the applicant. Eventually, the interviewer asks for your opinion on the case.

Scenario 4: Two fellow interpreters blame you for adversely influencing the outcome of refugee status determination and resettlement interviews that several of their relations went through.

Scenario 5: After having completed six interpreting sessions and feeling exhausted, an interviewer asks you to interpret for another applicant.

Drawing professional and personal boundaries is not easy. Whenever you do, you need to be able to justify those boundaries to yourself and possibly to others: your colleagues, friends, and acquaintances. *Professional boundaries* are limits to what you can and cannot do, as well as to what can and cannot be expected from you at work. These limits should never be crossed, unless under exceptional circumstances and in the mutual, full awareness of the consequences for crossing them.

Question: Where would you set your professional boundaries if you were to be involved in any of the scenarios above?

Note!

Also bear in mind that you may need to be aware of your personal security and mental health if you are facing pressure both inside and outside your workplace. Drawing professional boundaries may not be enough to eliminate such pressure entirely, although it can reduce the pressure.

B. Professional behaviour

1. What does *being professional* mean?

Someone is a *professional* if they are skilled in a profession, in other words, if they know how to do a job to the satisfaction of their clients. By *professional* we also mean someone who, ***even if it is his/her first day at work and he/she has never done the job before***, is ready to go step by step and make sure that things are done in the right way.

Someone who is aware of what she/he can and cannot do, and does not try to ignore or cover up his/her limits is professional. Someone who is prepared to learn, starting with the very basics and aiming to achieve competence, is professional. Being clear on your attitude and conduct as an interpreter, that is, *drawing boundaries*, is also a sign of professionalism.

2. Are there some guidelines I can follow to be professional?

There are some guidelines you can follow to be professional, and we strongly recommend that you use them for what they are, *guidelines*, and not a set of rules and regulations that you blindly apply regardless of the situation in which you find yourself. You can find these guidelines in Appendix I of the Code of Conduct.

The best way to test the validity and applicability of the guidelines is to understand what lies behind them. Consider each of them in terms of *consequences*. That is, by asking ***What if I do not stick to it?*** or ***What if I do this and do not do that?*** While you do so, note all the doubts and questions that come to mind. Also, try to see if the guidelines can be applied to the scenarios presented in the previous sections.

Professional Interpreting

3. What subjects do the main guidelines in the Code of Conduct address?

- | | |
|-------------------------------|---------------------------|
| ● Impartiality and neutrality | ● Transparency |
| ● Confidentiality | ● Accuracy in translation |
| ● Competence | ● Boundary-drawing |

Questions!

- Where is each of these items described in the Code?
- What is your understanding of the following professional values: integrity, accountability, care, trustworthiness and respect? Do you think they are relevant to the Code and to your role as an interpreter and, if so, how?

4. Do I need to be fluent in two languages?



Note: Professional behaviour can be maintained only if the interpreter's level of linguistic competence is not an obstacle to doing his/her job well.

Question!

- Can you think of any strategy you could use to interpret when you are not fluent in both languages and no other interpreter is available?

5. Is it demanding to keep switching languages?

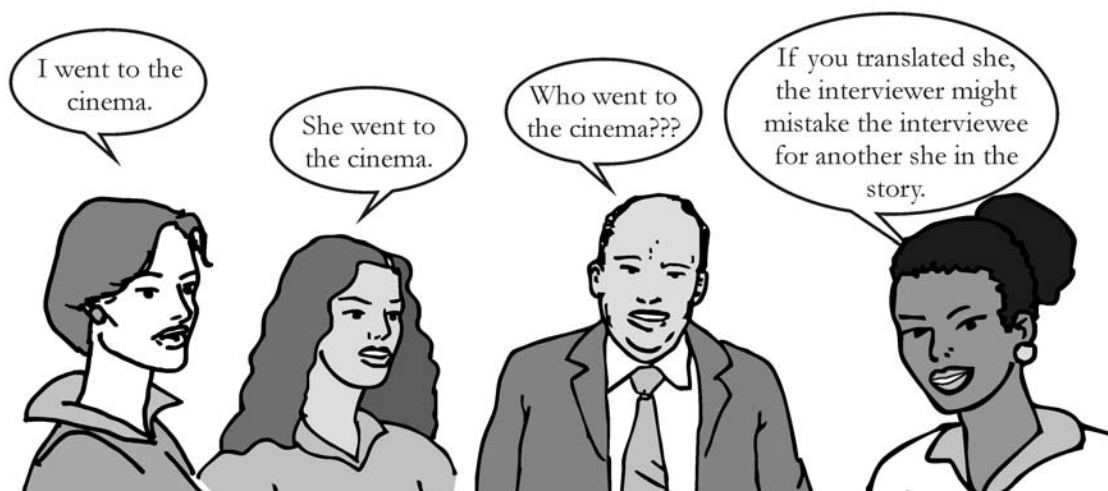


Note/Conclusion/Guideline: The interpreter shall be prepared to apply bi-directional consecutive interpretation to accurately translate the speaker's words.

Questions!

- The interviewer is working against the clock, and you keep on making mistakes. What are you going to do? Are you prepared to say, *I made several mistakes?*

6. What pronoun am I to use when interpreting?



Note/Conclusion/Guideline: The interpreter is to use the same grammatical person as the speaker.

Questions!

- Can there be other consequences if you kept saying “she” rather than “I”?
- Can you think of any other case in which you might unconsciously switch to “she/he”?

Professional Interpreting

7. What do neutrality and impartiality mean?



Note: The interpreter is responsible for accurately translating without adding or omitting anything.

Question!

- How could the interviewer eventually find out that there was no torture involved?

8. Can I give my opinion on a case?



Note: The interpreter shall not provide any kind of sociological, anthropological, or historical information to express or assist in developing an opinion on the case she/he is involved in.

Questions!

- On the other hand, it could be very useful to have the interpreter as a source of *country-of-origin information*. In what situations do you think this would be beneficial? If it were beneficial, could it be reconciled with what the Code of Conduct says? If so, how should the interpreter do his/her work?



9. Can I interpret for members of my family?



Note: The interpreter shall not interpret for close relations and/or personal friends, except in emergency situations.

Questions!

- This is quite a tough a guideline, isn't it? Do you think it is applicable as it is? Can you see that it might actually turn out to be a good idea to interpret for your own brother?

10. Can I speak about what I hear during an interview?



Note: Under no circumstances shall the interpreter disclose or repeat oral and/or written information obtained in the course of her/his work at UNHCR for any reason.

Questions!

- Is anyone else going to suffer for what the interpreter is doing?
- Under what circumstances do you think you should speak? And within what boundaries?

Professional Interpreting

11. Can I accept presents, money, and/or favours from people?



Note: The interpreter shall never accept any additional compensation, money or any other favours.

Questions!

- Do you think you should really never accept anything? A cup of tea? A hand-knit jumper? A meal? Explain the reasons for accepting some things and refusing others.

SELF-STUDY QUESTIONS

Chapter II

1. **UNHCR's mandate is to protect refugees and to find a durable solution for their problem.**
True False
2. **UNHCR has also assumed responsibilities for stateless persons, returnees and internally displaced persons.**
True False
3. **According to the 1951 Convention, an economic migrant can be given refugee status.**
True False
4. **Go through the scenarios listed from page 10 to 12. Where can you find an answer to the problems they present?**

Write down your thoughts and discuss them with your supervisor.

MODULE I

Chapter II

5. See cartoon on page 11 (“What might someone do to pressure me?”). What would you do to prevent anyone from expecting from you what you cannot give them? Consider fear, power, money, and shame as some of the obstacles you might find in your way.

Write down your thoughts and discuss them with your supervisor.

6. See cartoon on page 13 (“What can someone at work do to pressure me?”). What would you do if you were in John’s shoes? Why?

Write down your thoughts and discuss them with your supervisor.

7. To be a community interpreter, you have to be a refugee.

True False

8. To be professional. I just have to stick to the Code of Conduct.

True False

9. Community interpreters are useful because they know a lot about the interviewee’s country of origin, its culture, history, and society.

Write down your thoughts and discuss them with your supervisor.

10. It does not make sense to advise interpreters not to interpret for close relations and/or friends. If you were to translate for your own sister, you would do an excellent job, because you perfectly understand what she went through.

Write down your thoughts and discuss them with your supervisor.

11. Community interpreters are social workers. Their main task is to help people who belong to minority groups and who are therefore socially weak and vulnerable.

Write down your thoughts and discuss them with your supervisor.

Professional Interpreting

12. Test your capacity to take ethical decisions on the basis of your own values, the guidelines given in the Interpreter's Code of Conduct, the situation, circumstances, social and work pressure, and (positive or negative) consequences of your decisions on you and everyone else involved regarding the following cases.

Write down your thoughts on each of the following cases and discuss them with your supervisor:

Case 1: You are interpreting for a female refugee who is also a member of your community. During the interview, you find out that she is HIV positive. Your older brother is in love with her and wants to marry her.

Case 2: You and your sister are living in a country where no adequate health assistance is offered to refugees. Your sister is quite ill, and could be treated properly if she were resettled to Australia. If she stays where she is, chances are that her condition may become critical. She is going to go through an RSD interview. You know that, unlike you, she had no reason to leave your home country except to look for a better life.

Case 3: Lately you have been interpreting a lot for the same interviewer, who has come to trust you so much that he increasingly asks for your opinion on each of the cases he examines. One case in particular is about a refugee who claimed to have been imprisoned and tortured by the same opposition group that the vast majority of refugees claim to be part of during their interviews. You, too, declared that you are an active member of that group at your refugee status determination interview, and now a number of people in the community seem to think you owe them something.

Case 4: Someone comes to you with \$5,000 in cash and says he knows very well that you have access to refugee files at work. You are in dire need of money. He says that the money is yours; all you have to do is to replace a few photos and names.

Case 5: You know that you are not to advocate for clients, but you strongly sense that if you do not intervene, this particular refugee will not be given refugee status because no one understands her. You know that she is suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and this prevents her from showing any emotion when she speaks about torture. It is also a matter of cultural differences, in that *in your and her language*, euphemisms are used all the time as a matter of respect when someone speaks about shocking subjects.

Module II: Language Issues

Language is what we often produce when we open our mouths. How well are you acquainted with this formidable tool of communication? In this module, we will first introduce you to the basics of interpreting and give you the opportunity to practice by asking you to draw your own language profile and become aware of the way you speak. Then we will briefly discuss language in a social context by examining some of the complexities you will confront when working as an interpreter. We will also offer the tools necessary to provide high-quality interpretation.

Chapter I

My Language Profile

In this chapter you will learn

- what an interpreter does
- how to define your working languages
- how to analyze your way of speaking
- what exercises to do to test your language abilities and decide what your working languages will be
- what exercises to do to improve your voice and pronunciation

A. The starting point of interpreting

1. What does an interpreter do?



Someone must be identified who speaks both languages and who can act as an interpreter, patiently translating what these two groups of people are saying to each other. Who can do this?

To answer, you should consider how important it is that they understand each other perfectly. If they are not “just” socializing, what kind of trouble could an untrained interpreter cause?

2. What does a good interpreter do?



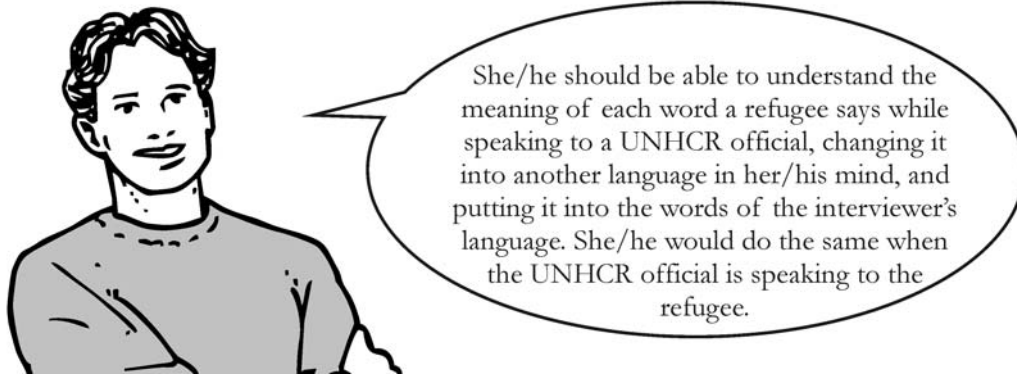
Question!

Understanding matters a great deal in interpreting. What do you think you need to do in order to understand what is going on?

Language Issues

3. And what should a UNHCR interpreter do?

In addition, she/he should do this knowing that the outcome of the conversation will be affected by the precision of the translating.



4. What would happen if I improvised interpreting?



If you improvise, chances are you will stumble on a word or expression that you will not know how to translate. You will not *understand* its meaning, and might end up either ignoring or guessing it.

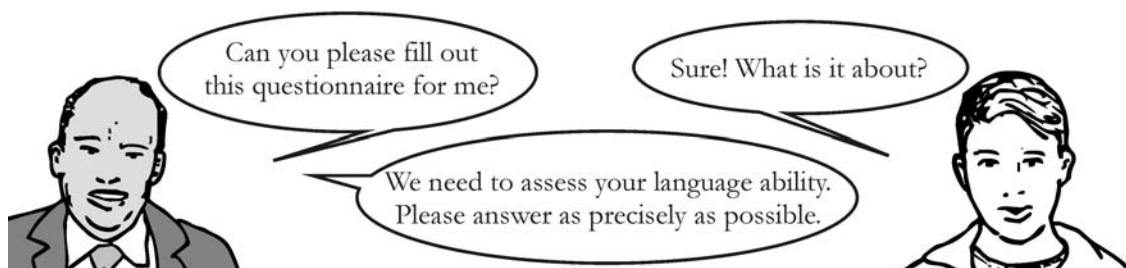
Note!

When you improvise, you will not be *translating* what the refugee or UNHCR official is saying, you will be saying what you have in your own mind. After *putting it into the other language*, you will have created a completely fictional reality, one that is not based on what the two people for whom you are translating are actually saying, but on what *you think*, or want to think, that they are saying. If you continue to do this during the encounter, there is a serious risk that the refugee and the UNHCR official may end up talking to you rather than to each other without realizing it.



B. My working languages

1. What shall I do before I agree to interpret?



Questionnaire

- What is the first language (A) you learned? _____
- Where did you learn language A? _____
- Do you still speak language A? _____
- Do you speak language A on a regular basis? _____
- Are you fluent in language A? _____
- Has it been a long time since you last spoke language A?
If so, how long? _____
- Do you speak any variation(s) of language A? _____
- Where is/are this/these variation(s) spoken? _____
- Does language A have a standard form? _____
- Does language A have a written form? _____
- Can you read it? _____
- Do you know any other language (B, C, D)? _____
- When, where, and how did you learn it/them? _____
- Does language B (C, D) have a standard form? _____
- Does language B (C,D) have a written form? _____
- Can you read it? _____
- Do you feel you can speak about everything in languages
A and B (C, D) _____

Language Issues

2. What shall I do with the questionnaire I filled out?

You should discuss it with your supervisor, revise it if necessary, and turn it into a brief description of your language abilities that you can copy onto a card (“linguistic profile card”) and share with anyone who is requesting your interpreting services.



3. What criteria shall I use to revise my questionnaire?

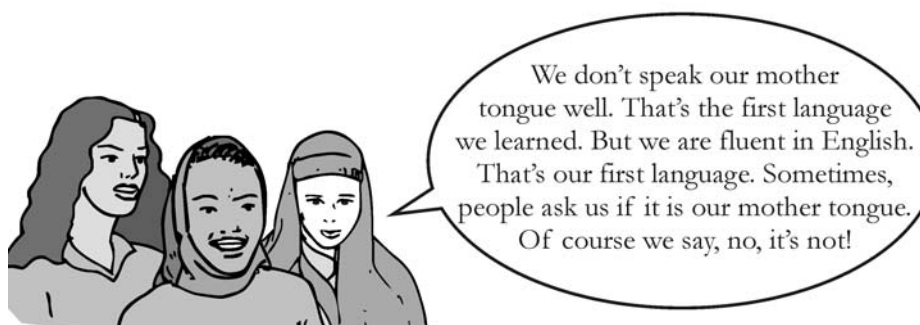
First of all, look at the following examples and see if any of them applies to you. After that, compare them with your case and notice the way you speak. Finally, take the test we have prepared for you.

Chapter I

CASE I



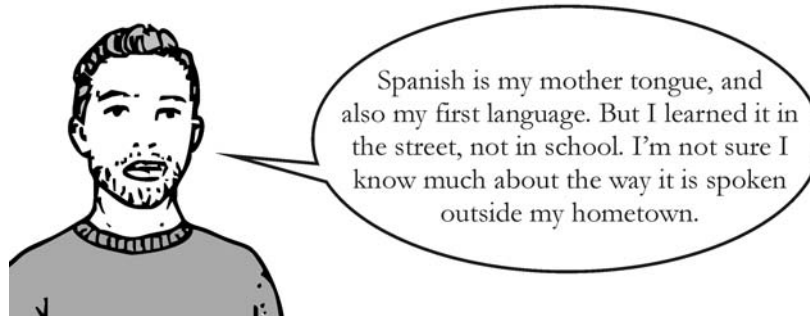
CASE II



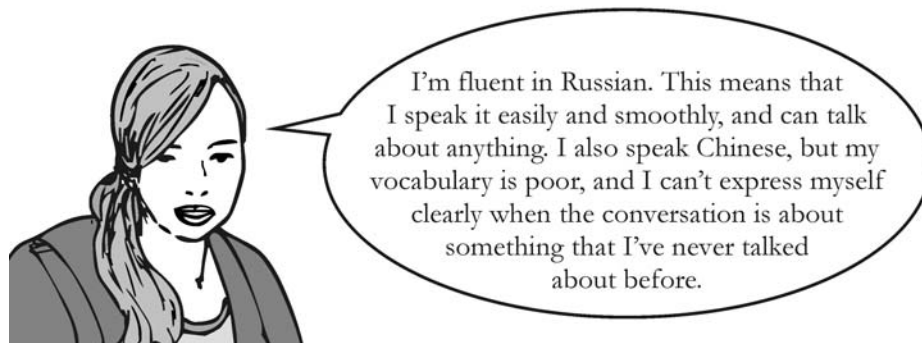
MODULE II

Chapter I

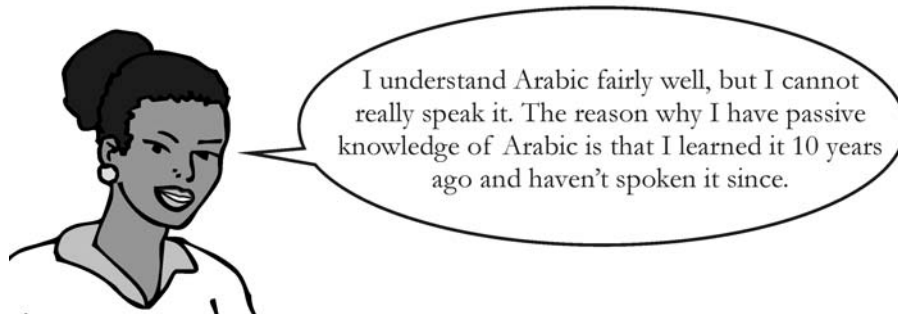
CASE III



CASE IV



CASE V



Note!

There is nothing wrong with saying that you belong to a certain group, like an ethnic group, or that you were born in a certain region and admit that you do not speak the related language. This is perfectly acceptable and you should never hide it. It is also possible that you learned your parents' language outside your and their country of origin.

4. Might there be something peculiar about the way I speak?

It is important to take another look at your linguistic profile before going ahead in this section. Do you think that you could provide more information? What kind of information would be useful to insert there? Take a look at what our friends say about linking their life experiences to the way they speak:

Language Issues

CASE I



I was born and spent most of my life in a remote village in the mountains. I moved to town only recently. Although I'm well educated, it is very natural to me to speak my dialect, and I find it difficult to switch to the way people in town speak. I guess my pronunciation is also a problem, and I feel a bit shy.

CASE II



Since we were born, we have been moving from place to place. Sometimes, we are not sure what language we speak. We seem to have picked up words and expressions from the different languages spoken in every place we've lived, and we just use them, no matter to whom we are talking.

CASE III



I only had the chance to attend primary school. I did a lot of reading on my own, but I often have the feeling that there are many things I can't speak about. Every time I learn a new word, the world opens up in front of me.

CASE IV



I'm young and successful. I'm also a woman, and a lot of people in my society don't like it when I'm outspoken. With time, I've grown to be quite reserved, and when I speak I tend to be vague and understate a lot. My friends tell me they always need to read between the lines when they listen to me.



CASE V



I'm very religious, and I am passionate when I speak about religious values. I wish everyone thought the way I do about things in life. I also love politics. I can't trust men; they never listen to women who have strong opinions, so I can only be sarcastic and sometimes harsh with them.

CASE VI



I have a passion for football, and I'm coaching for a local team. I spend most of my time on football pitches and clubs. My children and wife say I drive them insane, since whatever I speak about sounds like football. Too much jargon, I guess.

This list of cases is incomplete, and we are sure that you can turn it into a much more detailed one. **What's important now is to see if any of these cases reminds you of yourself.** Do you think the way you speak is special in anyway? Did you ever happen to listen to other people and conclude that *their* way of speaking was somewhat peculiar? Well, we would encourage you to investigate this more *scientifically*, based on what we will be discussing in the next chapter.

Note!

A language is not easily definable. *As an interpreter*, you should consider that there are at least three different variations of the same language:

- i Standard form. Some languages lack a standard form. Some languages have more than one. Usually, some kind of authority (political and/or linguistic) decides what the standard form of a language is.
- ii Spoken forms. These include regional, town, countryside, group or area-based variations.
- iii The way each of its speakers uses it in the communities or groups of which they are part, sometimes in relation to the place(s) where they have lived, and often according to their life experiences.

Note!

A *language* is a system of words used by a community, a people, a nation. A *dialect* is simply a variation of a language (different words, grammar, pronunciation).

Questions!

What did you conclude in analyzing the way you speak in relation to the cases presented on page 25?

- Take a good look at the questionnaire you were filling out. It asks things like: *What is the first language you learned?* Do you think you answered correctly? Take a careful look at the definition of *language* and *dialect* (called *variation* in the questionnaire) before answering, and double-check what you have written on your questionnaire.

5. Can I test the way I speak?

The test you are about to take is related to the linguistic profile you have just drafted. You and your supervisor can work together to assess your language abilities. It will give you both the opportunity to verify your command of each of the languages you speak.

It will also be a great opportunity to become aware of what are called *areas of language weakness*. For instance, you thought you were fluent in language C, and after going through your test you realize that all you can really do have a basic conversation with someone. When the conversation gets slightly complicated, you are lost. For now, you cannot include language C in the list of your *working languages*, but you might be able to in the future if you study and become fluent in it.

6. Testing the way I speak

- ⊗ Get a tape recorder, and speak into the microphone for 10-15 minutes, **in your first language**, about the following topics:
 - your surroundings (this can be the place where you happen to be right now)
 - someone you know, their physical appearance, character, etc.
 - your country's political system, who is in charge, their way of ruling, etc.
 - your religion, its beliefs, practices, rules, etc.
- ⊗ Listen to your recording once and, without taking notes, give a short account of what you heard, including its main points, **in your second language**.
- ⊗ Once you are done, listen to the tape again, and translate **into your second language** sentence by sentence, by using PLAY and PAUSE. Take note of every difficulty/obstacle you come across, such as memory, vocabulary, fluency, etc. Draft a list of words that you were unable to translate and make a note of anything you could not speak about fluently.
- ⊗ Repeat the exercise by recording your voice **in your second language**. First, give a short account of what you heard **in your first language**, including its main points, and then translate the tape's contents TWO sentences at a time **into your first language**. Again, take note of any difficulty/obstacle encountered.

- ☒ As a variation, try to record the evening news or a lecture you are attending. Remember, at this stage you should rely on your memory only and avoid writing things down. It is a good idea to ask someone to help you and give you his/her opinion.

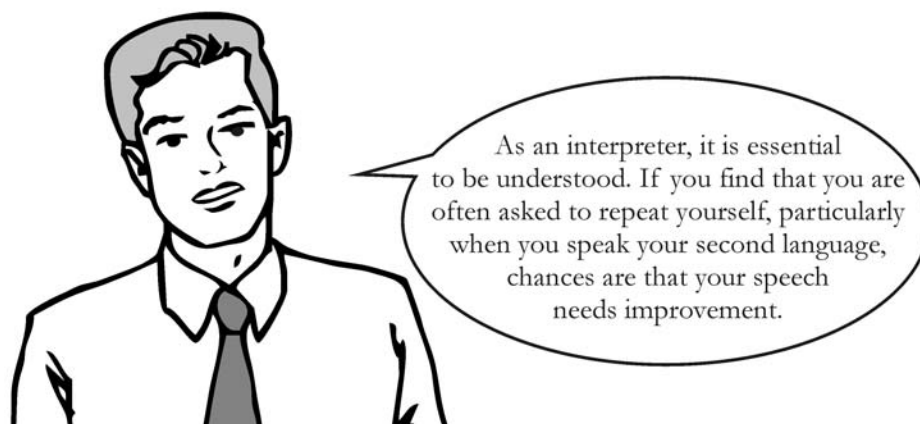
Did you discover any area of language weakness? What do you need to improve on: vocabulary, grammar, memory, knowledge of the topics? Did something stop you from talking about any of the topics? Do you feel you need to revise your linguistic profile card after doing this test? Why?

Note!

There are many things you can do to improve the command of your working languages: read newspapers, articles and books on forced migration issues extensively and watch or listen to the news regularly. If this is not possible, ask someone to help you. If you conclude that your fluency in one language is limited to certain areas and that there is very little you can do to improve, update your card and share it with your supervisor.

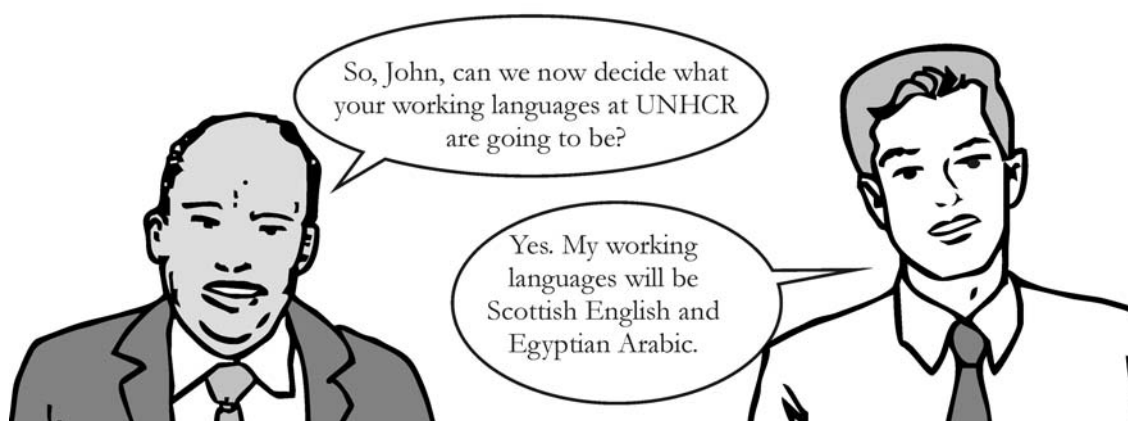
7. Is there anything else I should do to be an interpreter?

In addition to the above, follow the advice of our professional interpreter and do the exercises he suggests:



- Practice your vowels and consonants. If a particular vowel, consonant, or vowel+consonant combination is difficult for you to pronounce clearly, find out which part of your mouth and throat you need to use.
- Study your pronunciation. Be particularly careful where the accent falls in the word. If you have any doubt, ask a native speaker or look it up in a dictionary.
- Learn to phrase and to emphasize. Adjust your speech by groups of words that flow naturally, and modulate your voice in order to avoid monotony. This will make your interpretation both easier and more pleasant to listen to.
- Improve your voice. As we have already seen, understanding the mechanics of your voice can help you work on your articulation. The same also applies to the quality of your voice. Learning to relax and breathe correctly is also important, as the quality of your voice matters to anyone who is listening to you. Singing is a good exercise.

Language Issues



Chapter II

MODULE II

Chapter II

Language in a Social Context

In this chapter you will learn

- how meaning relates to words and expressions
- how to remain linguistically neutral while interpreting
- how an interpreter could respond emotionally to meaning
- how to overcome common language obstacles to interpreting
- what the difference between word-for-word and idiomatic
- interpretation is how to build a personal glossary

A. Understanding meaning

1. How many meanings can a word have?

Chapter II

Having shown the connection among language, thinking, and life experience in the previous chapter, we can now examine the different levels of meaning expressed in one's way of speaking. Look at what the interviewee says at the beginning of her interview, analyze it, and try to translate it. It would be best to find an English dictionary before starting.



Questions!

- What kind of place did she get out of? Describe it in detail.
- Who is “*sister*”?
- What means of transport did she use?

Language Issues

If you looked up in a dictionary the words the interviewee used, you would see that almost every one of them either has a different meaning or can be replaced by another word whose meaning is almost the same. This is important to know, both as we listen and as we translate, since **we translate what we understand**. If what we understand is different from what is meant, our translation will be faulty. Take a look at a possible interpretation of the same sentence:

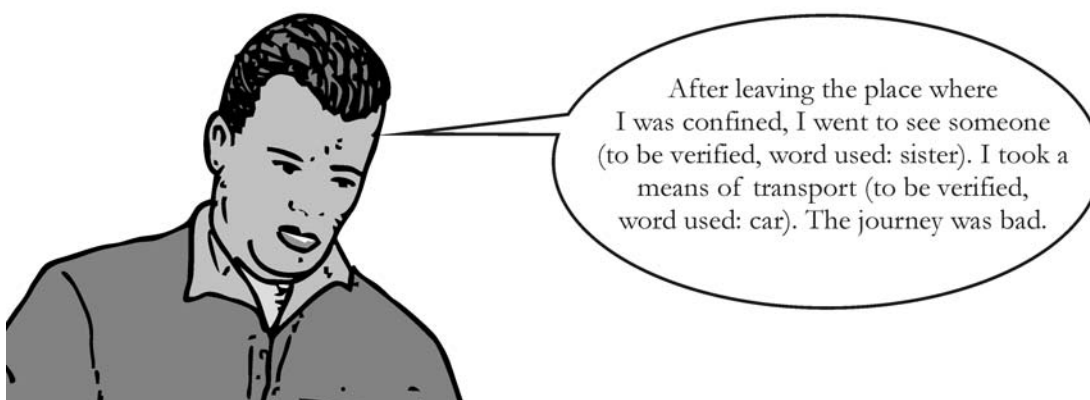


As we noted, this a possible *interpretation*. This is what you do as an interpreter: You do not only *translate*, but you also *interpret*, that is, you decide on the intended meaning of the speaker's words. You might make these decisions based on your own knowledge and experience. For example, in your mind, there is only one kind of prison: a *penitentiary*. You concluded that *after guessing where the interviewee comes from* she must have travelled by *bus*, as no other means of transport is found there. She also looks and sounds Christian and nuns in that area are known to help displaced people. Finally, according to your knowledge of the local road network, you felt inclined to turn her *bad* journey into a *nasty* one.

Chapter II

Note!

As hinted in the previous chapter, we should constantly remind ourselves that meaning can be changed if it is only related to our own way of seeing reality. Let's compare the version of the interpreter above with a more *neutral* version:



MODULE II



A professional interpreter strives to be neutral. She/he does not interfere with what she/he hears. Is a prison just a place where criminals are legally locked up? Take a look at your English dictionary and list all the possible meanings for some of the words the interviewee and the first interpreter used:

prison: a) _____; b) _____; c) _____;

d) (metaphorical) *He hated studying. It was a prison to him.*

sister: a) _____; b) a female nurse; c) _____;

d) _____.

car: a) an automobile; b) _____; c) _____.

to get out: _____ **.to escape:** _____

bad: _____ **.nasty:** _____

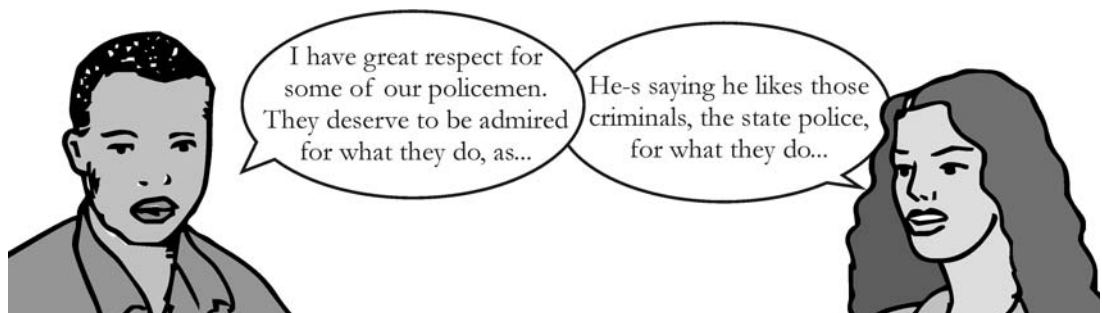
Note!

Neutral interpretation is the best way of coping with the fact that many words in all languages have at least three levels of meaning. These vary according to one’s personal way of thinking about and understanding reality, and how that thinking and understanding is expressed through language. The three levels of meaning are:

- The basic meaning, which can be obtained by reducing the word to its naked form, as in *prison* > a place of confinement.
- The meaning a word evokes in the mind of the person who listens, which might be different from the original meaning. This often happens between dialects of the same language.
- The meaning a word expresses. *Bad* and *terrible*, for instance, share the same meaning, except that *terrible* indicates that the speaker really hated the journey.

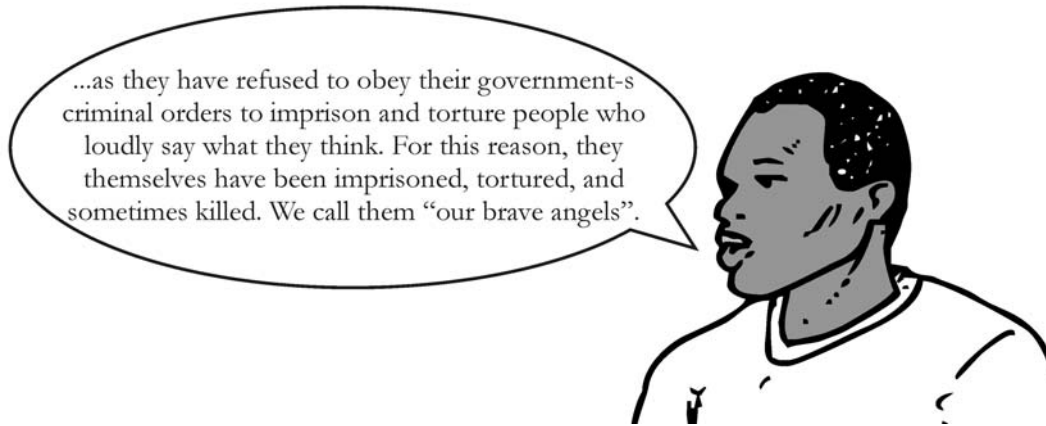
2. What is the most *dangerous* level of meaning?

For another view of how meaning matters greatly when interpreting, we will examine your possible response to the words and concepts you hear, and the impact of such a response on the quality of your interpretation. Notice the interpreter’s behaviour:



Language Issues

Why do you think the interpreter reacted that way? Can you see her shaking her head in disbelief with a disgusted expression on her face? The interviewer sees that, but doesn't understand why she is doing so. The interviewee continues to speak:



The interpreter in the example is also a refugee, and her interpretation is the result of her opposition to the government in her country of origin during many years spent as a political activist. She is also a pacifist and refused to be enlisted in the army. For this reason, she was arrested, imprisoned, and eventually tortured. Since she managed to escape her country, she has been tirelessly denouncing the brutalities committed by its military junta.

Note!

One of the most common causes of weak interpreting is the unconscious tendency of the interpreter to allow her/his personal feelings about the narration, and sometimes about the narrator, to take over. When this happens, the interpreter might not be able to analyze the meaning of the speaker's words, neutrally translate them, and point out those that might be problematic.

As a result, a new level of meaning finds its way through the interpreter's rendition of the speaker's words. The interpretation may reflect the interpreter's own opinion, feelings, and judgement towards the narration. This is called an *emotional response to meaning*.

Questions!

- With what level of meaning would you associate the interpreter's emotional response?
- What do you think happened to the interpreter while she was listening to the interviewee?
- What do you think would have prevented her from responding emotionally and consequently mistranslating?

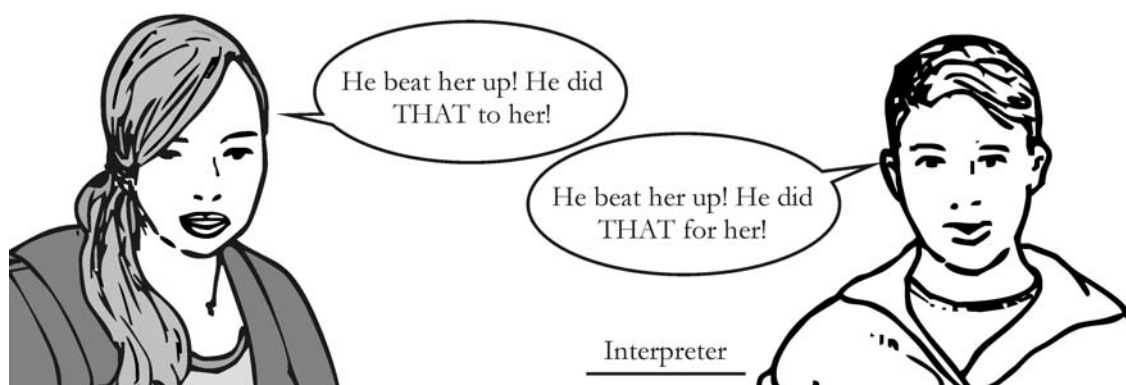
3. Do all languages express meaning in the same way?

So far, we have briefly examined how language can be an expression of culture, that is, one's understanding of the world as a result of upbringing, personal experience, and past and present social context. Such understanding may be turned into words, that is, into meanings, and it is your task to correctly interpret them.

Now we come to a crucial question: How do we specifically express such understanding? In other words, what are the characteristics of the language(s) we speak that show how we see and organize the world?

Common beliefs

- all languages behave the same
- what works in one language works for all languages
- translation is just about replacing words



Questions!

- What is the difference between the two sentences?
- Do you think that the interpreter is aware of such a difference?
- What might have caused him to change the speaker's meaning?

Languages present differences in the way they combine and order words into sentences to express specific meanings. Unless the interpreter in the example really meant what he said in translation, chances are that he either came up with the wrong combination or that is the way he expresses *he did that to me* in his dialect.

4. What are the main differences?

If the interpreter in the example above had used the right preposition to translate the interviewee's words into English, he would have reached equivalence in the two languages.

Note!

Equivalence means *correspondence in meaning between two languages*. At times, it is quite hard to achieve it. This usually happens when you cannot find an equivalent word or expression in the target language. It is possible that no equivalent word or expression exists. Yet even if this is the case, you are supposed to translate the original meaning into the target language.

Often, you cannot find an equivalent because the word you are translating is *culture related*. This means that **it describes an object, a religious tradition, a kind of behaviour, a type of**

Language Issues

food, etc., which is found only or mainly in the area where the language you are working with is spoken. You know what it is, but there is no word into which you can translate it. This happens because people in that specific area need to give the thing or concept a name, because they need to talk about it every day. The concept may be known in other areas, but since it is not relevant to people's lives, there is no corresponding word for it in that language.

Often, you cannot find an equivalent because the word you are translating is *culture related*. This means that **it describes an object, a religious tradition, a kind of behaviour, a type of food, etc., which is found only or mainly in the area where the language you are working with is spoken**. You know what it is, but there is no word into which you can translate it. This happens because people in that specific area need to give the thing or concept a name, because they need to talk about it every day. The concept may be known in other areas, but since it is not relevant to people's lives, there is no corresponding word for it in that language.

Other times, an equivalent word does exist, and you might know it, but it might be too risky to use. This usually happens when you are confronted with idioms and idiomatic expressions. Take a look at the following conversation:



Questions!

- How would you translate the dialogue above into any of your working languages?
- What would you think would happen if you translated it literally?
- Think of a *culture-related word* you know and translate it.

Note!

We use idioms all the time, and much more than you might think. Idioms, especially idiomatic expressions, provide the best examples of how languages express a certain understanding of reality, as they are often related to the way people perceive and give a meaning to colours (for example, *red*) or make use of traditions in a particular area (for example, *hat*).



Languages regularly combine certain words with others, and these combinations are often difficult to understand. We call such combinations *collocations*. For example:



Questions!

- What does *dry voice* mean? Do you have a similar collocation in any of your working languages? How do you say *dry voice* in any of the languages you speak?

B. Translating meanings

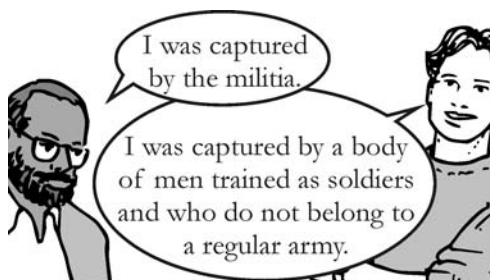
1. What is the most useful technique for translating meanings?

Chapter II

When you analyze the languages you speak in terms of meaning, you must practice *paraphrasing*, as this strategy will enable you to translate correctly most of the time.

Note!

Paraphrasing can be defined as the ability to re-express something that has been said or written in words that are both easier to understand and do not change the original meaning.



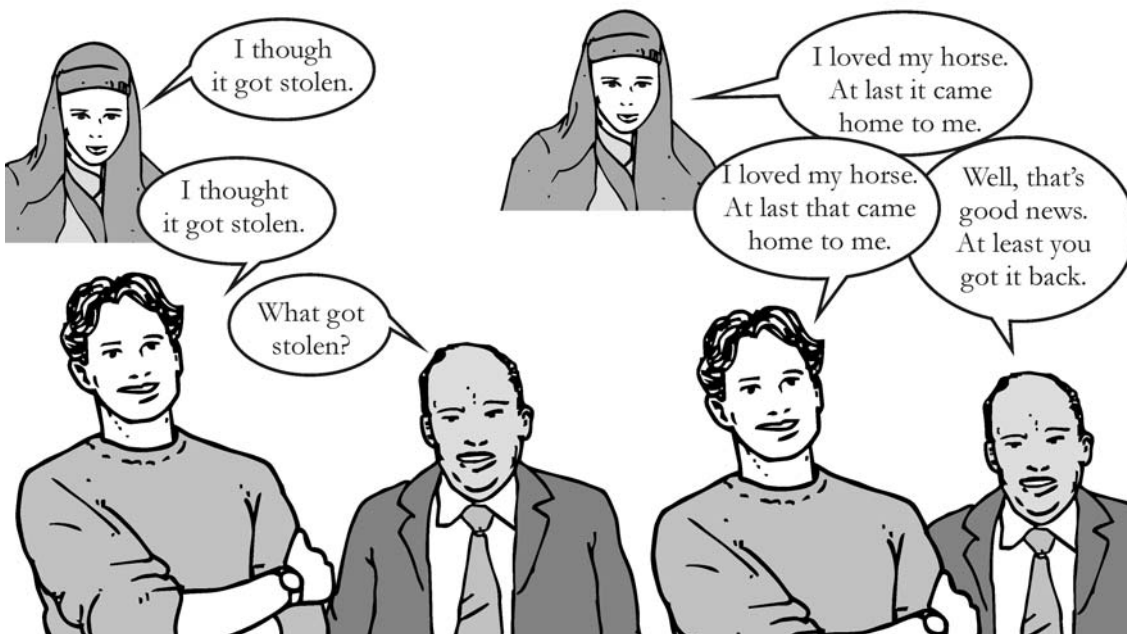
Once you have become fluent at paraphrasing, creating simple sentences that do not contain complex words, you can begin to move on to more complex sentences that include a lot of idioms and culture-related words and expressions. This process is going to take some time, so you must be patient. Remember: always proceed step-by-step while interpreting.

Questions!

- In what situations do you think it would be necessary to paraphrase the word *militia*?
- At what stage of the interview do you think you should paraphrase more?
- Can you paraphrase the idiomatic expressions and collocations given on page 36?
- What about the *culture-related word* you have just thought of and tried to translate? Can you paraphrase it?
- Why do you think we believe that paraphrasing is the most useful technique for translating meanings?

2. What if I am asked to translate everything *word-for-word*?

If the UNHCR official in charge of the meeting requires that you apply this technique, you could suggest that it should be used only to convey simplified explanations of legal procedures and/or simple factual statements. If this is not acceptable, you should point out that idiomatic language might be overlooked if the speaker is not regularly asked to say exactly what she/he means or if the interpreter does not indicate that the speaker is using idioms. That is, for each sentence she/he utters, the speaker is asked to confirm what he/she means. For example:



Questions!

- What went wrong in the situation above?
- How would you have proceeded if you had been the interpreter?
- What's the difference between *word-for-word* and *idiomatic* interpretation?

Note!

Word-for-word interpretation should be applied with care. Although it is usually preferred in a legal context, such as a courtroom or a refugee status determination interview, it can be extremely misleading, particularly if the two people you are interpreting for know nothing about each other's language and use a lot of idioms, as people normally do when they speak. If you were to translate the sentence *he took me for a ride* using exactly the same words that were originally used, you would probably cause quite a mess.



3. Is word-for-word back-translation of any use?

You should bear in mind that it is never a good idea to apply the technique known as *word-for-word back-translation*, whereby the interviewer reads back your translation from her/his notes, asks you to back-translate it verbatim into the interviewee's language, and then asks the interviewee to confirm its meaning. This does not guarantee accuracy of translation, as the idiomatic meaning can hardly be detected. See the following example:

word-for-word translation		word-for-word back-translation	
i.	(interviewer) <i>And what did she do?</i>	iv.	(interviewer) <i>She took you for a ride?</i>
ii.	(interviewee) <i>She took me for a ride</i>	v.	(interpreter) <i>She took you for a ride?</i>
iii.	(interpreter) <i>She took me for a ride</i>	vi.	(interviewee) <i>That's right.</i>

Note!

These examples should not lead you to believe that idiomatic translation is the ideal solution in a refugee-interview context. In fact, unless you went through specific interpreting and translation training, you are quite fluent in two languages (that is, at the native-speaker level), and have been working in the field for at least a couple of years, it is not a good idea to translate idiomatically all that you hear during an interview with a refugee.

Idiomatic translation not only requires an excellent command of both of your working languages, it also demands considerable knowledge of the cultural aspects expressed by each language. In other words, it demands the ability to think in and switch back and forth between both languages at any time. If you cannot do this, you should use a balanced combination of word-for-word and idiomatic translation, shifting the weight to either according to your linguistic capacity.

You must proceed step-by-step in deciding how to strike such a balance. At first, disregard both word-for-word and idiomatic translation in favour of paraphrasing. Once you have mastered this technique, you can gradually move on to idiomatic translation, but only when you feel absolutely certain that you have acquired the experience and knowledge to do so.

C. Glossary-building

1. What is a glossary?

It is now time to buy a notebook and call it *Glossary*. It is going to be your personal dictionary. You will eventually have to buy a second and a third one, once you realize that you are running out of space in the first.

2. How does a glossary work?

Your glossary will be based on three basic principles:

- i. No word that can be found in a dictionary should be listed, unless no dictionary in any of your working languages is available, in which case you will enter only vocabulary that is new to you.
- ii. The words or expressions you record will not be listed alphabetically but under their appropriate *area of meaning*.
- iii. Alongside each word or expression you record you will note its equivalent in the target language, if it exists, a suitable paraphrasing, an example showing how it is used, and the translation of this example into the target language.

3. What will the glossary look like?

To illustrate the structure of an area-of-meaning-based glossary, we will list a number of words and assign a *head-word* to each of these lists. A head-word can be seen both as an abstract concept and a generic term for a class of items or an area of meaning:

VEHICLE	TIME	RELIGION	POLITICS	EMOTION
car	hour	Islam	party	anger
bicycle	minute	Mass	elections	happiness

VEHICLE, TIME, RELIGION, POLITICS, and EMOTION can be seen as areas of meanings or word families. To test the validity of a word family, you can use any of the following sentences as a model: *A car is a vehicle, but a vehicle may not be a car. Islam is a religion, but his religion may not be Islam. Happiness is the only emotion she usually shows.*

Note!

In addition to representing areas of meaning, word families can also be used in translation when you are not too sure that there is an equivalent to the word X, which, for example, describes that special feeling some people experience after climbing a very high mountain. Your paraphrasing will therefore be preceded by the term EMOTION, followed by a description of the feeling and its translation into a target language. It will also be useful to include a sentence to show how word X is used.

As you build your glossary, keep in mind that you can create a sub-section in which you list all the idiomatic expressions that have to do with, say, EMOTIONS or VEHICLES. It is up to you to decide where to list such expressions, that is, either under their actual meaning or according to a key word they contain.

4. Why is glossary-building important?

Building a glossary is a great way to expand your vocabulary, refine your translation skills, gain greater awareness of how the languages you speak work, create lists of specific terminology, such as legal, medical, and political words and phrases, and acquire an invaluable interpreting tool that you can carry with you and use whenever you need it.

SELF-STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Please answer the following question and explain the reasons for your answer:

Was the African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa an organization of terrorists or freedom-fighters?

After you have answered, analyze any level of meaning you can identify in the two words, and whether or not their meanings differ in any way.

2. Read the short story below. Analyze the possible levels of meaning of as many words as possible and paraphrase them. Neutrally interpret them into any of your working languages.

For three years in the early '70s, I was a trolley-bus driver for the San Francisco Municipal Railway on the no. 8 Market. Market Street is a major thoroughfare, and a cross section of society travels up and down it every day. I drove at night, coming to work at the beginning of rush hour. My first few trips consisted of carrying office workers from the financial district to the residential area just west of downtown. Later in the evening, the riders were less diverse: night workers, pleasure seekers, and the Market Street "regulars." The regulars were people who lived on or near Market Street, almost without exception in residential or transient hotels. The largest of the welfare hotels was a colossal building known as the Lincoln. It was situated near the foot of Market Street, a block from the waterfront.¹

¹ Van Kooy, R.C. "The Iceman of Market Street" in *I thought my Father was God*, ed. Paul Auster (New York: Picador USA, 2001), pp. 168-70.

Language Issues

3. Interpreters deal with spoken language. Translators deal with written language.

True False

4. If I do not understand something, I can guess it from the context.

True False

5. Any language I speak can be my working language.

True False

6. A dialect is just a language of non-importance spoken by a minority group.

True False

7. If someone has not gone through education, she/he cannot be an interpreter.

Write down your thoughts and discuss them with your supervisor.

8. My emotions cannot take over my thoughts while I am interpreting.

Write down your thoughts and discuss them with your supervisor.

9. My own way of thinking could influence the way I translate.

Write down your thoughts and discuss them with your supervisor.

10. Only word-for-word guarantees accuracy in translation.

Write down your thoughts and discuss them with your supervisor.

Chapter II

MODULE II



Module III: The Interpreter's Toolkit

Analyzing the meaning of what someone is saying is a subjective act, as meaning is at least partially related to the group of people, community, area, or country to which the speaker belongs or feels attached.

This module focuses on the details of interpreting in a refugee-interview context. In particular, it aims to assist you in creating your own interpreter's toolkit, which you can bring with you wherever and whenever you are asked to interpret.

Inside your toolkit you will find the techniques, or working tools, that you should use to provide high-quality interpretation.

Chapter I

The Process of Interpreting

In this chapter you will learn

- the technique known as consecutive interpreting
- what you have to do to apply this technique effectively
- how active listening is a gateway to understanding
- how to handle different kinds of speech

A. Consecutive interpreting

1. What is consecutive interpreting?

In consecutive interpreting, you listen to a speaker for a relatively short time, that is, one or two sentences, understand what she/he means, interpret the meaning in your mind, and translate it into words in the target language. Once you are done with your interpretation, you then allow the speaker to continue for another sentence or two and then repeat the process.

Consecutive interpreting

- widely used in a refugee-context
- bi-directional (language A from/into B)
- may not require special equipment
- applied to dialogues

Simultaneous interpreting

- widely used in conferences
- mono-directional (language A into B)
- may require special equipment
- applied to speeches

You may occasionally be asked to consecutively translate documents, papers, certificates, letters, statements, etc. You will then translate *at sight*.

Questions!

- What does *simultaneous* mean? How would you describe the technique known as simultaneous interpreting as opposed to consecutive interpreting?
- What does *summary* mean? How would you describe the technique known as summary interpreting as opposed to consecutive interpreting? In what situations could summary interpreting be applied?

The Interpreter's Toolkit

- In your opinion, why is consecutive interpreting normally preferred to other techniques, such as simultaneous or summary interpreting, in a refugee context?

Note!

One of the reasons consecutive interpreting is preferred in a refugee-interview context is that it adds a *humane* element to the meeting, in that the two speakers have the opportunity to look at, listen to, and speak to each other, rather than automatically giving all their attention to the interpreter. In addition, the interpreter's continuous translating would probably eventually disrupt, rather than facilitate, communication between the two.

2. What do I have to do to be good at consecutive interpreting?

Take a look at the interpreter's behaviour in the following example:



Questions!

- Are you a good listener? Do you often miss things because you do not listen?
- How can you develop your own personal strategies to maintain your concentration when listening to someone else?

Note!

It's important to be aware of what may prevent you from actively listening. We would advise you to acknowledge it as soon as you feel it, stop for a minute, and decide whether or not you can go on interpreting. If you believe you can, try your best to focus only on the speaker's words.

3. What is active listening?

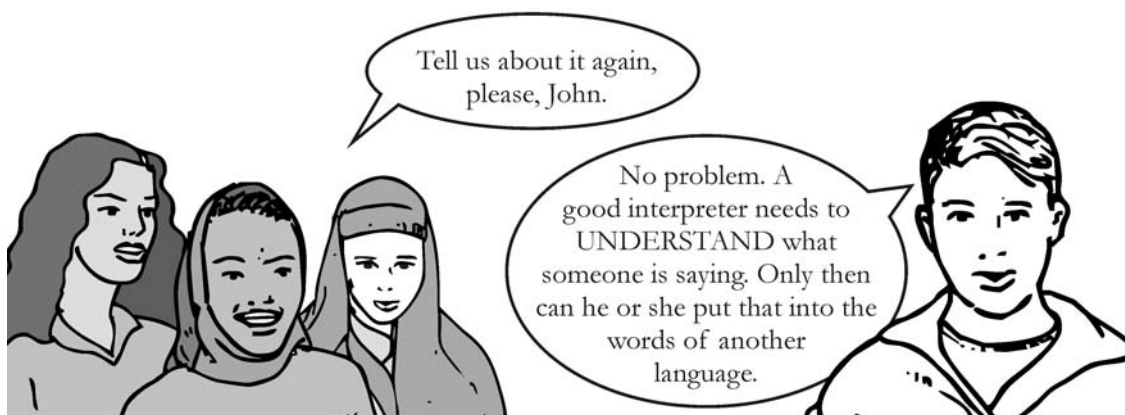
Often, when people talk to each other, they do not always listen. Sometimes, they are thinking about their own thoughts, feeling, problems, etc. Sometimes, they are thinking about saying something that will make them look good. This often happens when there is some kind of debate, discussion or argument going on.

Interpreters, *particularly those with some experience*, may unconsciously assume that they have already heard many times what the interviewee is saying. As a result, they may end up not listening carefully, and thinking about things unrelated to the interview.

You can test and improve on your active listening capacity by asking a friend to speak to you for two or three minutes, or even longer if your memory is good. After that, you should repeat exactly what she/he said. Your friend will be able to confirm if you have succeeded; she/he will be able to tell you if you have *misinterpreted* her/his words.

4. Why is active listening so important to interpreters?

Active listening is the gateway to understanding. Do you remember what John said about good interpreters?



Active listening leads you to:

- I listen. The speaker's words have my undivided attention.
- I listen. The speaker's words have a meaning, on which I focus all my attention.
- I listen. I understand the meaning of the speaker's words.
- I translate. The meaning of the speaker's words is put into another language.

The Interpreter's Toolkit

5. What else should I know about listening and understanding?

During the process of *understanding* you will also have to be prepared to translate different kinds of speech. Listen carefully to each of our friends:



Questions!

- Which one of them is being vague? Which one is simply describing? One of them is slightly incoherent! One is drawing conclusions. Did you spot the one who is being rhetorical?
- What do you think may cause vagueness and/or incoherence of speech?
- Why would reasoning and/or rhetorical speeches be a problem for interpreters?

Note!

Bear in mind that the time frame can be important in any kind of narration. The speaker may tell her/his story more or less chronologically and also go back and forth in time.

Spoken language can be much less organized than written language. People often stop half-way through a sentence and start talking about something seemingly unrelated. However, that new subject probably *is* related, but you will understand that only later in the narration.

6. How can I best understand what people are saying?

Your first step in analyzing what people are saying is to identify the main and secondary ideas in the narration. The second step is to work out how the main and secondary ideas are linked to one another. You should practice applying these two steps until it becomes natural to do so.

Read through the following text:

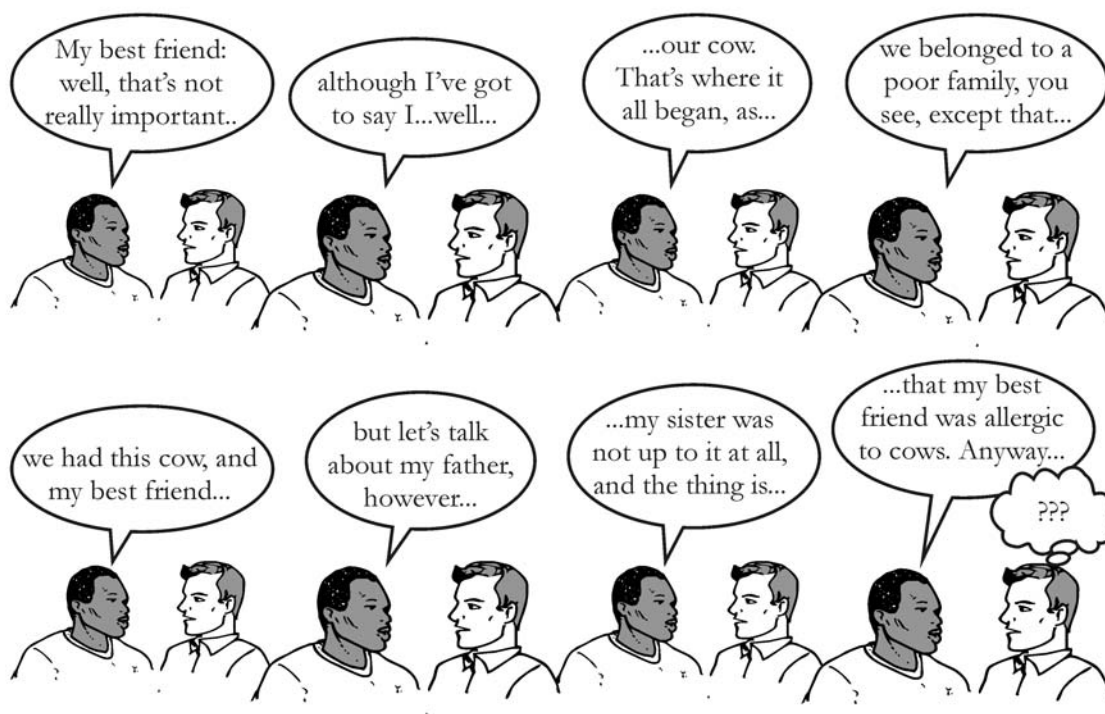
He didn't let me go and, as a result, I was furious about it, because I hate it when people tell me what to do. However, I've got to say I always enjoyed being in his company, although he made me suffer. Besides, he was always kind of violent, whereas he wouldn't ever touch his first wife. Anyway, this is another story, and yes, I was furious with him also because he had accused me of cheating on him, whereas it's not me, it's his first wife, and what right does he have to tell me so? You tell me, since I've got no idea, and I'm lost. However, I did go out that day, and I thought to myself, "to hell with him and his first wife."

Questions!

- What ideas or concepts can be seen as more relevant than others in the text?
- What ideas are less relevant?
- How are these ideas linked to one another?
- Can you completely re-organize the text without changing its message?
- Do you remember the example with the interpreter on page 33 who became emotional while listening to the interviewee praise his country's policemen? Take another look at it. When does the interpreter stop the speaker in the example? Can you relate this to consecutive interpreting and to what you have concluded after looking at the text above?

7. Listening, understanding, and translating ... at the same time?

That's right: the three processes of listening, understanding, and translating in your mind happen almost at the same time. Since you do not have the chance to hear the whole story, but only bits and pieces of it, what we call *narration fragments*, you might find it harder to connect main and secondary ideas at the beginning of the meeting, as you probably would if you were to consecutively interpret the text above. Look at the following interpreting situation:



Questions!

- When would you have stopped the interviewee and begun to interpret?
- What do you think the interviewee had been asked about?

The Interpreter's Toolkit

Chapter II Memory Issues

In this chapter you will learn

- how to gain awareness of your memory capacity
- how you can use note-taking as a technique to support your memory capacity

A. Memory capacity

1. Is memory important to an interpreter?

While looking at the last cartoon, you probably thought about memory, and the fact that it would have helped the interpreter to make connections among the narration fragments he listened to.

Note!

No phase of consecutive interpreting can be completed without resorting to the interpreter's ability to expand her/his memory through training, a high level of concentration, association of ideas, images, and note-taking.

The better your memory works, the more successful you will be in consecutively interpreting. For this reason, it is fundamental that you learn how your memory works, and train yourself to improve it. Your memory is the place where you temporarily store and retrieve every bit of information you need to reconstruct the speaker's meaning into the target language.



Questions!

- How would you describe your memory?
- Do you feel you have control over your memory?
- What do you normally do if you want to remember something?
- Read the monologue on page 43 (“What do I have to do to be good at consecutive interpreting”) once again and see if you can repeat it word-for-word.

2. Why do we remember?

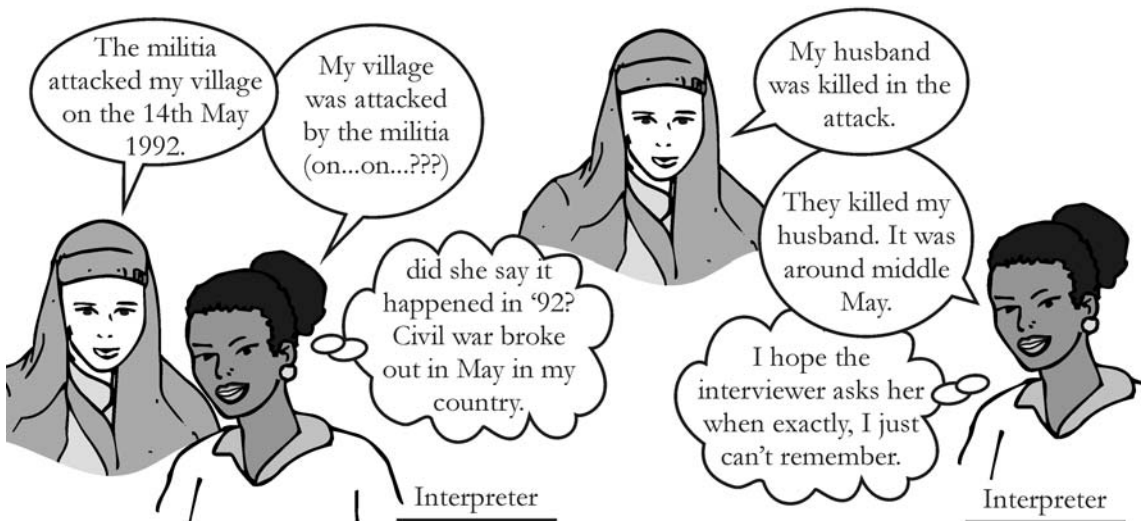


You may consider the difference between being *aware* and being *conscious* of something. We are aware of a great many things all the time, but we don't become conscious of them unless they are interesting, peculiar or unusual to us. Often we become conscious of something because it makes us look at it in a special way and understand it in our own way. Awareness lasts a fraction of a second or maybe a little longer, but consciousness has a long-lasting effect on our memory. We may be only briefly aware of having dropped our mobile phone somewhere, but we may never forget the first time we fell in love. It has become part of our consciousness.

- Awareness is about having knowledge, even temporary, or understanding of things.
- Consciousness is the condition of being able to think, feel, understand, and acquire knowledge of what is happening.

3. How do awareness and consciousness affect my work?

Let's imagine that you are interpreting for a refugee and her interviewer. At the beginning of the interview, the refugee mentions a date:



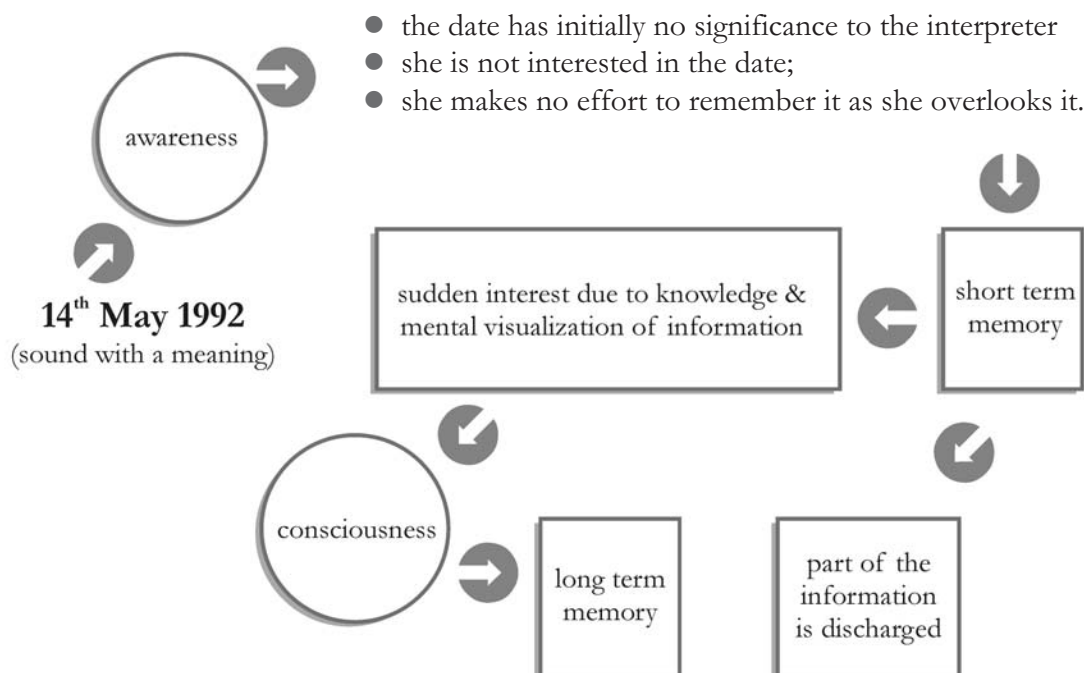
The Interpreter's Toolkit

Question!

- What would you have done in a similar situation?

The following graph sums up the interpreter's response in terms of awareness, consciousness, and memory:

Interpreter's response



Note!

You have to be able to remember what you heard within the time necessary to understand it, interpret at least part of it, and put it into context. In other words, you should be able to link all the narration fragments with each other so that they become a single story.

The first step is to be aware: to perceive a word as a word, an expression as an expression, a figure as a figure, recognize them as such, and process them in your mind. Then you must think about their relevance beyond the narration fragment, develop an interest in their meaning, and analyze them to learn from and acquire consciousness of them.

Questions!

- On the basis of the diagram above, define both short- and long-term memory
- List the possible factors that make it possible for the interpreter to retain part of the information in her/his long-term memory.
- Develop strategies to encourage yourself to remember data even when you think it might not be important to the interviewer.

4. Can I train my memory?

By training your memory you will better understand and control it. Although it is probably difficult to have complete control over information storage in short-term and long-term memory, and movement between the two, it is nevertheless possible to improve your memory by practising the following:

- Listen actively to someone, preferably recorded on tape, for a maximum of 20 minutes. Focus on his/her voice, its intonations, and vocal characteristics. Do not take notes.
- Visualize what he/she is saying, that is, turn his/her descriptions into images, smells, colours, space, emotions.
- Retell what he/she said, not in the same words, focusing on meanings, concepts, and notions.
- Replay the tape and see what you have remembered and forgotten. Analyze why this has happened.

Then, repeat the same exercise using a different tape. Visualize what is being said (see above), and apply the following techniques while listening:

- Group items that have something in common, for example, tigers and elephants belong to the animal group.
- Notice differences and similarities between events, people, objects, etc.
- Ask yourself in what way events, people, objects, etc. are related to one another.

Once you have done this, get a tape with a different narrative on it and listen. Interpret its content consecutively into any of your working languages by using PLAY and PAUSE. Use the same techniques as in the preceding two exercises, remembering the techniques described in the **Consecutive Interpreting** chapter above, and apply all the linguistic skills you have acquired from Module II. Do not take notes.

B. Note-taking

1. Why should I take notes?

As we have just seen, consecutive interpreting is the technique you are likely to use most often when working with refugees. It is useful for any formal exchange between two parties, particularly an interview. To perform efficiently, you will need to support your memory capacity by taking notes.

Your notes are intended for immediate use, and will be made up of words, signs, and symbols that your mind can immediately connect with an idea, without thinking about what language that idea is to be expressed in.

The Interpreter's Toolkit

2. Why is note-taking important?

An effective system of taking notes during an interview will

- increase your self-confidence. Relying on memory may be risky, especially when you are tired;
- help you to focus on the meaning of what is being said, rather than just individual words, expressions, dates, and figures;
- allow each speaker to talk more freely without constantly stopping them to interpret. Frequent interruption and switching between languages can upset the flow of each speaker's thoughts and may diminish the logic and clarity of their ideas, particularly when emotions are involved during particularly sensitive conversations;
- help you to accurately report all the factual information provided, such as dates, figures, colours, sizes, etc., in the same order as in the original statement;
- assist the interviewer, who is, in turn, taking notes from your interpretation. As you interpret, you may point to the names and figures you are rendering in the target language so that the interviewer may see, in writing, a name that is difficult to spell or understand;
- increase your credibility with the speaker, who may recognize the logic and structure of his/her statement as he/she watches you follow your notes while interpreting;
- be used during or immediately after the interview as a means of verification, should the interviewer wish to check on a piece of information.

3. How is note-taking related to memory?

As we mentioned in the preceding section, visualization is useful to memory, and notes are a visual representation of the speaker's words. Since, ideally, the two speakers should forget that they are speaking through an interpreter, the interpreter must therefore be able to deliver the message as naturally as possible, with the least amount of effort in decoding the meanings of words. Your notes must contain *at least* the following:

- i. names, dates, figures
- ii. facts, descriptions, and other detailed information that may not get stored in your short-term, let alone long-term, memory

For example:

In the year 1999, 245 members of my group migrated to five different countries. Most of them were between 20 and 25 years old, although there were some 30 elderly people in their seventies among them.

99
245 ----->20-25yr< (30 = 70yr)
★
5 ctrs



4. Is there an ideal note-taking system?

The following guidelines and practical tips will help you to acquire a good, consecutive note-taking technique. However, there is no universal note-taking system. Just as we each have a different way of thinking and learning, we each develop a different note-taking system. Note-taking in consecutive interpreting is thus highly subjective. The end result, however, must be the same for all of us: the message we communicate must correspond in every way to the message expressed by the speaker.

Note!

You should never use *shorthand* with consecutive interpreting because

- i. several lines of shorthand cannot be read at one glance
- ii. reading back shorthand takes longer since it is a word-for-word reproduction of the speaker's statements
- iii. shorthand does not allow you the flexibility to insert phrases or ideas added by the speaker as an after-thought

5. Can I see another example of note-taking?

You must be able to recognize the words, signs, and symbols that you are using and remember what they mean. Make sure you write clearly, use large characters, and leave enough space between words and signs so that you can re-imagine the picture at a glance.

For example:

TIME				additional info
	SUBJECT			adjective
		VERB		additional info
			OBJECT	adjective

At the beginning of the year 2003, I moved to the capital of my country, where I lived for two years in a small flat.

03 beg

I

----> d

capital

sm. flat / 2yrs

home

Such logical analysis will give you all the required information at a glance, while giving you the flexibility of using your own words in the first language that comes to mind. It is best to take notes in the target language so that any obstacle to translation is solved in advance. If you cannot think of the exact translation, note the words you hear and, when interpreting, paraphrase the idea in your own words.



The Interpreter's Toolkit

6. What symbols can I choose for note-taking?

Choosing your symbols is important. You need to work out a system that is adapted to your own logical way of thinking. In developing your system, you will need to create signs and symbols, each representing an *area of meaning* and that can be reproduced for any language you are hearing and working into.

For example:

ppl > people

ctr > country

wrld > world

pce > peace

spch > speech

cnv > conversation

mny > money

pol > politics

econ > economy

inter > international

On the basis of these and other areas of meaning, you can work out your own more specific concepts, in order to get reliable, immediately recognizable *associations*. This can be done, for example, by adding an extra letter to the area of meaning:

r-ppl > refugee

d-ctr > developing country

g-wrld > globalization

a-pce > peace agreement

c-spch > conversation

m-cn v > meeting

bk-mny > bank account

el-pol > elections

fin-econ > financial situation

rel-inter > international relations

Chapter II

MODULE III



7. How can I describe a chronology of events through symbols?

The time frame in narrations can be important. Work out your own precise system for signalling the tense of the verb or time of the action.

For example:

he works > wk n he will work > wk ll he worked > wk ed,
 he doesn't work > X wk n he won't work > X wk ll, he likes to work >

8. What about measures, sizes, and the like?

Expressing quantity and intensity may occur often in spoken language, sometimes through comparisons. You might use mathematical signs to show the size of things/people, ups and downs, movements, distance, and increasing or decreasing amounts.

For example:

<i>He is very tall</i>	♂ ↑↑
<i>She is growing faster than her brother</i>	♀ ↗ > bthr
<i>Cuba is smaller than Mexico</i>	Cuba < Mexico
<i>The value of the Egyptian pound has dropped but that of the American dollar has increased</i>	value LE ↘ \$ ↗

Note!

You should have a list of abbreviations for country names, major organizations and groups that are likely to be mentioned during your interpreting sessions.

9. Can I also indicate links between main and secondary ideas?

Linking words can also be replaced with mathematical signs, arrows, etc. Arrows are useful for indicating associations between elements of the narration. Additional information, often randomly inserted in spoken language, can be noted on the left side of the page. The end of a sentence can be indicated by three slashes. The Spanish-style upside-down question mark is useful to remind you that a question is being asked. A double horizontal line can signal your translation doubts.

The Interpreter's Toolkit

For example:

“During his year in jail, John was insulted, severely beaten, and often deprived of food. He now lives with his sister-in-law. However, he incredibly managed to come out alive. Can you believe it?”

now > ▲ str in law /// yr | ins |
↓ ↓ John | beat | ed ??? alive
===== in Arabic ??? jail | X food | often
¿ blv

Both your memory and your notes help you to re-organize the narration fragment into the following interpretation:

John was in jail over a year. There he was insulted, badly beaten, and often left without food. He survived this experience. He now lives with his sister in law.

10. Any extra tips?

- Try to make the best possible use of punctuation marks, such as commas and parentheses. They do not have to correspond to grammatical usage; what matters to you is to record spoken language, the speaker's style, register, tone of voice, cultural patterns, etc.
- Draw a long diagonal slash across the segment you have just finished interpreting. When the speaker stops talking, quickly turn back to the sheet where you started noting his last statement and begin to interpret right away **WITHOUT SPENDING MORE THAN A COUPLE OF SECONDS** on your notes.
- While glancing at your notes, keep your head up and look at the person you are addressing. Speak in a natural and convincing manner, so that you hold your listener's interest. The golden rule is to put yourself in the shoes of the person you are interpreting for, sharing their wish to communicate and be thoroughly understood.

Chapter II

MODULE III



SELF-STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Consecutive interpreting is about summarizing what the speaker has said.

 True False
2. In consecutive interpreting, the interpreter can stop the speakers whenever she/he wants to.

 True False
3. When analyzing speeches, it is up to the interpreter to decide what the main and secondary ideas are.

 True False
4. Having a short-term memory means that I have difficulty remembering things.

 True False
5. Ask a colleague to read out a text from an article. Practice consecutive interpreting (practice *interrupting* the speaker at the right time). Focus on identifying main and secondary ideas and re-organizing the narration in the target language. Do not take notes.

6. Pick up a short article from a magazine, preferably one that addresses sensitive and/or emotional matters. Read it out loud in front of a mirror or a colleague. Practice adopting the right tone of voice, clear pronunciation, and pace of reading, neither too fast nor too slow. Try to make eye contact with yourself or your colleague as frequently as you can while reading. This will force you to read one whole sentence or part of it quickly, memorize it, and *recite* it. Practice consecutive interpreting on the same article. Do not take notes.

The Interpreter's Toolkit

7. Working with a colleague, slowly read out loud the text on page 49 (“What if I am asked to translate everything *word-for-word*?”) and allow your colleague to take turns and consecutively interpret it into a target language. Change roles. Paraphrase as many words as you can rather than search for their equivalent. Do not take notes.

8. Find a different text (half a page, maximum) and ask your colleague to read it out loud at a normal speed, without stopping. Practice consecutive note-taking. When your colleague is done, use your memory and your notes to summarize what you heard, as close as possible to the original. Repeat the exercise in any of the other languages you speak, preferably your second or third language.

9. Ask a colleague to read aloud an article, preferably one on a sensitive or emotional matter, and consecutively interpret it into a target language. Tape-record the session. Practice taking turns, finding equivalents, paraphrasing, and taking notes. At the end of the session, use **PLAY** and **PAUSE** and ask your colleague to consecutively back-translate your interpretation into the original language. Compare the two versions and discuss any differences.

Chapter II

MODULE III



Module IV: It's Interpreting Time!

The focus in this module is on the moment in which you will sit or stand between two, sometimes more, people, and will assist them in communicating with each other.

Comprehensive information on the interpreting procedure is presented in the form of questions on ethical interpreting behaviour, since correct and transparent behaviour is expected from you during an interpreting session.

This module also describes common and practical interpreting issues that do not fall into the category of interpreting procedure, such as the seating arrangement and the relevance of intercultural communication.

The interpreting procedures described here should not be mechanically applied to all situations. For this reason, legal and non-legal encounters between refugees and UNHCR officials are compared.

Interpreters and interviewers are encouraged to cooperate to determine the most appropriate interpreting approach to use in a given situation.

Chapter I

Basic Interpreting Procedures

In this chapter you will learn

- how cultural differences matter in an interpreting session
- how to behave professionally while interpreting
- how to overcome common obstacles you may face while interpreting

A. Correct and transparent interpreting behaviour

1. What is my primary task in an interview?

Interpreting in a refugee-interview context involves understanding that UNHCR's officials offer their legal expertise, knowledge, and skills, which the refugee needs in her/his quest for protection and assistance. Through interviews and meetings, the refugee offers information on her/his situation, worries, fears, expectations, problems, history, etc. The interpreter's job is *to enable the two parties to put what they have to offer at each other's disposal, without manipulating, controlling, modifying, improving, demeaning, or reducing its substance*. The interpreter does so by establishing a relationship of trust with both interviewer and interviewee.

2. Am I expected to deal with cultural differences?

You are not expected to act as an expert on culture or as a source of country-of-origin information. Your role is to intervene when you feel that interviewer and interviewee do not understand each other or whenever any of the speakers feels he/she is not being understood or is not understanding. In doing so, you focus on the language that is being used by both parties, and analyze its meaning and potential for cultural misunderstandings. Your task is therefore to assist both parties in exploring the meaning behind each other's words. To do so, you try hard to accurately *reflect, not replace*, the meaning behind the speaker's words.

Example 1:



It's Interpreting Time!

More questions!

- Interpreters are not supposed to replace meanings. Their task is to assist in exploring meanings. What would you have done to fulfil that task?
- Is there anything you would have done to alert the interviewer to the possible risks of using culturally inappropriate language?
- To what extent does confidentiality matter in these kinds of situations?

3. What are the details of an interpreting procedure?

- Accepting the task on the basis of your linguistic profile
- Punctuality, manners, respect, and self-respect
- The preliminary phase of an interview (introducing participants, initial statements)
- The interview proper (dos and don'ts)
- The end of the interview (debriefing, glossary, interpreter's log, break)

4. What is the relevance of my linguistic profile?

The languages you speak, the degree of your fluency, your knowledge of dialects, your ability to handle specific terminology (legal, medical, etc.) might have been made available to the UNHCR official who asks you to interpret. Nevertheless, it is your duty to verify your qualifications and, if necessary, discuss any element in your profile that might prevent you from doing your job effectively.

Note!

You might be given the opportunity to be briefed on the refugee(s) who will take part in the meeting. Although such a briefing should not include any information on their case, it should allow you to know whether it is a male or a female applicant, or a group, or a child or group of children. You are likely to perform more efficiently if you are briefed on the purpose and context of your work.

Questions!

- Why should you not be briefed on the interviewee's case?
- Why are you likely to do a better job if you know what the aim of the interview is?
- Do you think it is always possible to know in advance what language the interviewee speaks?
- What can be done if it turns out that you are not the right interpreter for the job?

5. What is meant by good manners and respect?

After agreeing to interpret, make sure that you arrive to the right place on time. Punctuality is fundamental in your profession. It is your business card, a sign of professional behaviour, and is useful in establishing a relationship of trust with the parties involved.



Question!

- Why does the interviewee have negative feelings about what's going on?

Note!

Throughout the interview, you will be attentive and focused. You will not use your cell phone, which you will set to silent mode. You should also avoid yawning and looking uninterested or bored. Pay attention to your body language: It is professional if you sit up straight, rather than slouch as though you were at home.

6. Shall I introduce myself?

If the circumstances allow, you should be given the chance to introduce yourself and explain who you are, what you are going to do, and what you are not going to do, through the interpreter's opening statement.

Note!

The UNHCR official is in charge of conducting the meeting and will do so according to the procedure required by the kind of meeting. The interpreter's statement is legal in nature and should contain elements that create the necessary boundaries within which you can operate. The statement should be recited in both the interviewer's and interviewee's language. The following items should be included in your opening statement:

- You will strive to correctly interpret everything each of the parties says.
- If you do not understand one of the parties, and therefore cannot interpret, you will ask the party to repeat herself/himself.

It's Interpreting Time!

- You are not allowed to give your opinion on any statement made by any of the parties.
- You are not allowed to provide information and/or explain cultural, political, religious, social, anthropological matters on behalf of any of the parties.
- Your task is indeed to provide, at length, if necessary, the meaning of any word, expression, and sentence, particularly culture-related words.
- You encourage the parties to speak to each other, not *to* you, but *through* you.
- You encourage the parties to direct questions, of any nature that they might see as relevant, to each other and not to you.
- The parties should inform each other before speaking to you.
- Throughout the interview, you will use the same pronoun as the speaker. You will speak of yourself in the third person (for example, “The interpreter needs a break.”).
- If any of the parties has troubles in understanding you or does not feel comfortable with you interpreting for him/her, he/she should make it known at the earliest opportunity.

Questions!

- What are *metaphors*? What are *euphemisms*?
- Do you have an example of *emotionally loaded language*?

7. Am I likely to confront obstacles while interpreting?

The following are the most common among obstacles to interpreting:

- the *pronominal reversal*
- you misunderstand the speaker and realize it after translating what she/he has said
- you do not understand what the speaker has said
- you understand the speaker, but have no idea of what she/he means
- the interviewee and/or interviewer address you instead of each other
- the speaker's words express culturally inappropriate or even insulting language
- the speaker expresses a notion that is typical of her/his culture
- the speaker's language appears to be primitive, unsophisticated, and grammatically incorrect
- the speaker makes use of metaphors and euphemisms to describe concepts that are, at least to her/him, sensitive and/or emotionally-loaded
- the speaker's language sounds incoherent
- the speaker bursts out crying while she/he is trying to tell a story and cannot stop speaking

8. What is *pronominal reversal*?

If the interviewee says *I went home*, you would translate *I went home*. There are cases in which you may psychologically find it quite difficult to stick to this rule, and you will reverse pronouns, that is, switch to *she/he* when the speaker says *I*.

For example:



Questions!

- What is the main reason for the interpreter to “refuse” to use the same pronoun as the speaker?
- What would you do if you unconsciously reversed pronouns and later realized it?

9. What should I do when I realize that I have made a mistake?

If you misunderstand the speaker and realize it later, you must inform the parties for the record, in both languages, as soon as the opportunity arises.

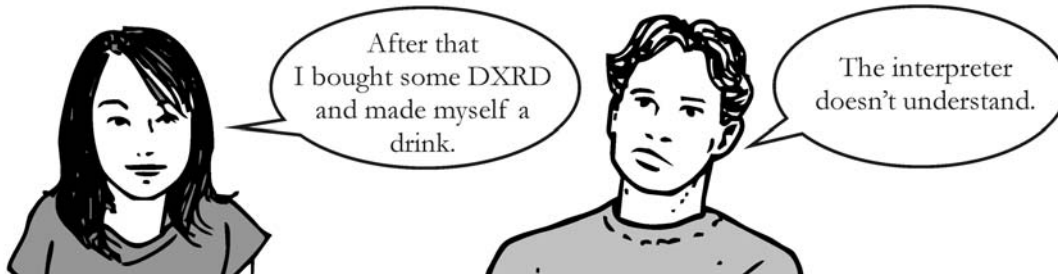
Question!

- When would you inform the parties of a mistake you have made?

It's Interpreting Time!

10. What should I do if I do not understand the speaker?

When you do not understand the speaker, you must not continue interpreting; you must tell the parties.



Note!

Guessing implies that you judge and/or have an opinion on the case without knowing all the facts.

Questions!

- In what language would you say, "*The interpreter doesn't understand*"?
- Why should you use the third person when speaking about yourself?
- Why would you sometimes feel inclined to guess while interpreting?
- Why is guessing highly risky, besides being unethical?

11. What if I do not know what the speaker means?

Even if you believe that you could continue interpreting, you should stop and say, *The interpreter does not know the meaning of word X and Y* (in both languages). The interviewer will ask the interviewee to explain the meaning, and you will interpret it.

12. The interviewer and interviewee do not talk to each other.

This is a common occurrence and is difficult to handle, since someone is going to feel excluded when someone else speaks directly to you.

For example:



Question!

- What would you do in these kinds of situations?

13. The interviewee and interviewer insult each other.

It can be difficult if their speech contains culturally inappropriate or even insulting language. On the one hand, you have promised that you will interpret everything the speakers say. On the other hand, you are aware that what sounds perfectly appropriate in one language might sound rude in another.

Question!

- Is it up to you to decide to turn potentially rude language into flowery language?

Try to contain your emotions, do not panic, focus on translating meaning rather than words, and ask for permission to have a word with the speaker when

- potential rudeness is the result of sarcasm or irony
- potential rudeness is the result of anger, disappointment, sadness, etc.
- potential rudeness is the result of poor choice of vocabulary when speaking about sensitive or emotionally-loaded matters, such as sexual issues
- potential rudeness simply expresses disagreement
- potential rudeness indicates that the speaker may suffer from some form of social uneasiness, mental disorder, trauma, etc.
- potential rudeness may simply be the speaker's way of expressing herself/himself

For example:**Questions!**

- What do you think of the interpreter's translation in the example?
- Do you think it would have been preferable to translate word-for-word?
- Can you give a few examples of ironic, sarcastic, and angry language that contain double meanings that are difficult to translate?

It's Interpreting Time!

Note!

One of your tasks as an interpreter is to prevent people from misunderstanding each other as they communicate. Pointing out that anger, sarcasm, disappointment or poor vocabulary choice may be behind the speaker's words could be a solution. At the same time, it's probably a good idea first to double-check that the speaker really intends to use insulting language before giving a word-for-word translation.

14. My role as a cultural mediator is still not clear.

Let's assume that the speaker has used the word *brother*, and that, according to the sentence construction, you have assigned a certain level of meaning to it, although she/he has not yet given any more details. You must take the time to explain, rather than allow a misunderstanding to arise. Simple words, such as brother, family, etc. *may* convey very different notions from one culture to another. The following two types of interpreting behaviour exemplify where your professional boundaries lie in this situation:

Example 1:



Example 2:



Questions!

- Which translation is correct?
- Do you agree that the kind of information given in the first example should have come from the interviewee and not the interpreter?

Note!

Never assume the role of anthropologist, sociologist or historian. You must draw a line between explaining the cultural value of a word and providing information or an explanation about cultural, political or religious issues.

Another question!

- Do you know of any exceptions to this guideline?

15. Can I polish *poor language*?

It is understandable that you might feel tempted to do this. Your ultimate goal is accuracy, however, and accuracy must be based solely on the speaker's words and their meaning.

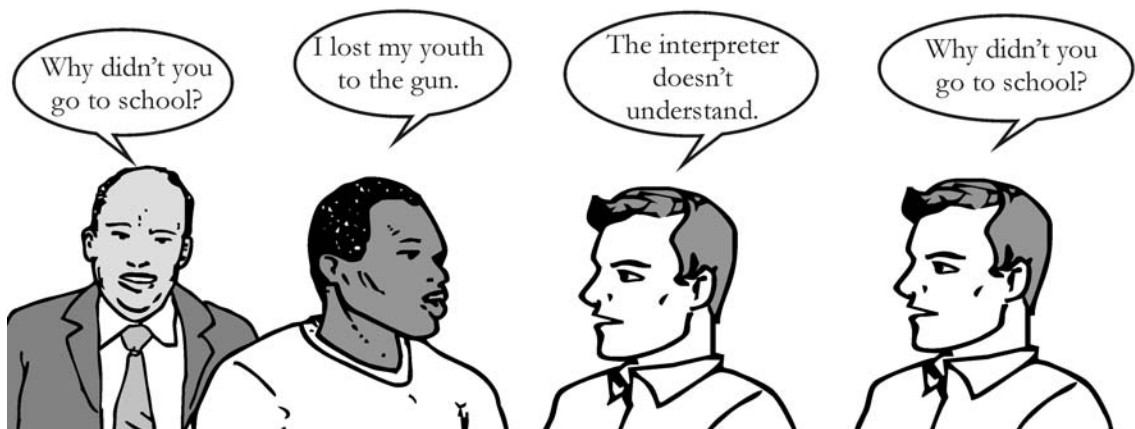
Question!

- Why would you embellish or polish the speaker's language?

16. The speaker seems to use *euphemisms* and *metaphors*.

Such words or expressions may not have matching referents in the target language. You should avoid translating them into what you think they mean.

For example:



Questions!

- In your opinion, what did the interviewee mean to say?
- Was the interpreter's attitude correct? Is there anything else she could have done?

It's Interpreting Time!

Note!

Metaphors and *euphemisms* can be difficult to understand and imply a multitude of meanings that you may not be aware of. They are often used when the topic of conversation is particularly sensitive, at least to the speaker.

17. The speaker sounds like she/he is not making any sense.

If this occurs at the beginning of the interview, you might consider giving the speaker the chance to go on for a few minutes, and then decide what to do. If it occurs, in the middle of an interview, it might be a sign that the speaker needs to take a break or cannot talk about certain things. Just say you are unable to translate because of the speaker's incoherence.

Note!

Incoherence may occur because of fatigue or strong feelings, or because of poor command of language or mental confusion/disorder. Incoherent language cannot be translated, and you should point this out without hesitation. Never try to make sense out of it or provide an explanation. At this time, you should act in your capacity as an interpreter, not a neurologist or a psychologist.

18. The speaker goes on crying and talking. What shall I do?

Experience suggests that you should not stop her/him; apply summary interpreting when she/he pauses. Note-taking is useful in these kinds of situations.

Questions!

- By now, you know enough about interpreting to come up with a personal strategy for such situations. What would your strategy be?
- Do you think you should discuss a strategy in advance with your supervisor?

19. What do I need to do at the end of the interview?

This is an important phase of the meeting, as specific information on the outcome of the interview might be given. You should not relax now! Even if you are tired, try to maintain your concentration and show that you are willing to translate any important question they might still have.

A short debriefing session is advisable at this stage. Also, take a short break and make a few notes in your log.

Chapter II Practicalities

In this chapter you will learn

- how to share space with other people and manage the cultural elements
- where you should sit while interpreting
- how to deal with some common interpreting situations
- how to carry out specific kinds of interviews
- how to interpret for children
- the basics of interpreting at a meeting

A. Sitting together with interviewee and interviewer

1. How does the cultural element matter?

Being sensitive to a refugee's culture and background is very important. For example, a female refugee may feel more comfortable speaking to a female interviewer through a female interpreter, although this is not always the case. Many women refugees, in fact, are unwilling to speak to male interpreters and interviewers, and vice versa.

Example 1:



Example 2:



It's Interpreting Time!

Questions!

- A female refugee needs to be interviewed and you are the only interpreter available. You are male. During the interview, you sense that she does not trust you, perhaps because of her experience with men in general. How would you proceed?
- Why is the male interviewee in the example above afraid that the interpreter does not know anything about politics?
- Did you ever hear the opinion that women should not be allowed to assume important roles, such as that of interpreter?

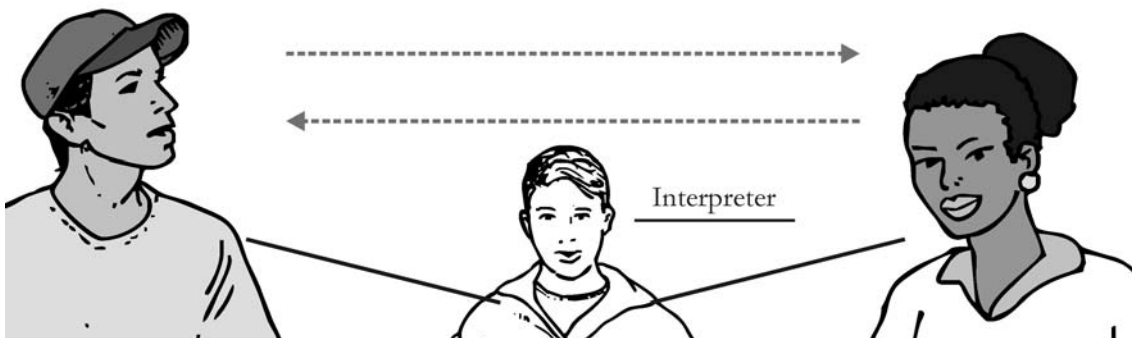
Note!

Interpreters are often perceived as having a great deal of power. This is understandable, as applicants may feel that they have no control over the interpretation into a language they do not understand.

2. What about the seating arrangement?

Where you sit may affect the outcome of the interview. Although there are no strict rules as to where you should position yourself, you should sit to the side of both the interviewer and the interviewee, and slightly apart from both.

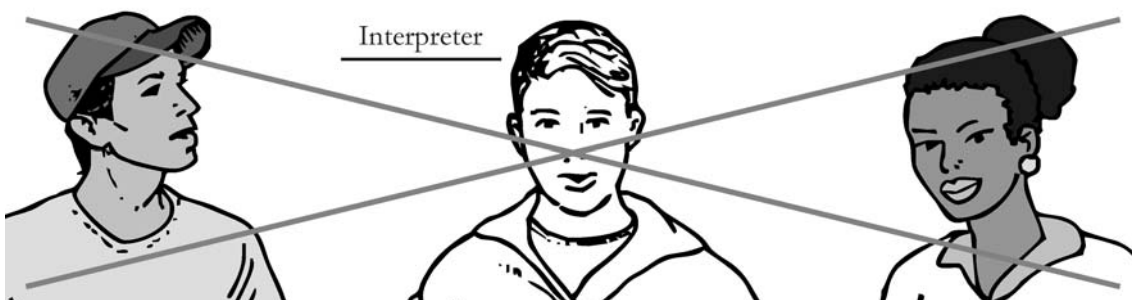
For example:



3. Where should the interpreter not sit?

The interpreter must never sit between the interviewee and the interviewer.

For example:



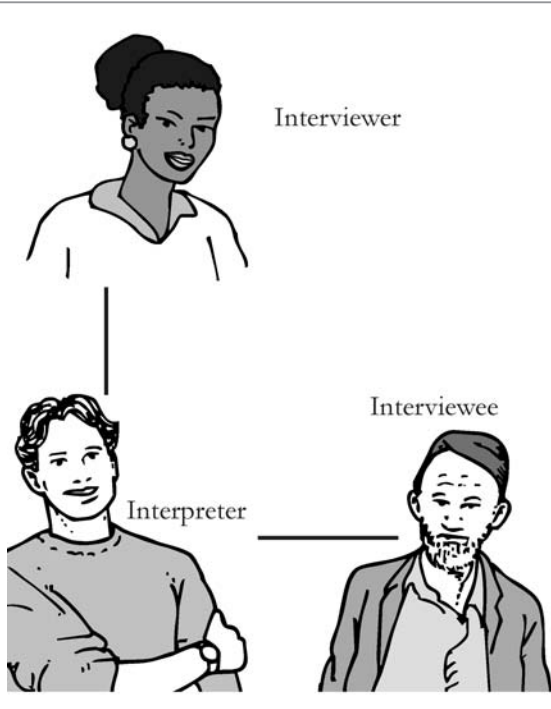
Question!

- The practice of having the interviewer and the interviewee face each other with the interpreter seated behind the interviewee is not unknown. Those who use this arrangement claim that it forces the interpreter to be neutral. What is your opinion?

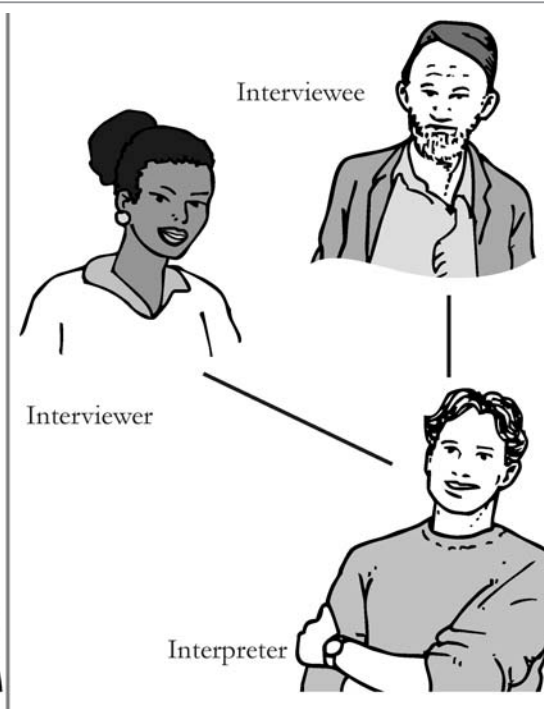
4. Are there arrangements that might prove to be problematic?

Often, the environment where the interview takes place does not allow for the ideal seating arrangement as described above. There might not be enough room or the office furniture is arranged in such a way that people sit where they can. Sometimes, the interviewer decides where the interviewee and the interpreter should sit. Other times, the seating arrangement is overlooked entirely. In any case, the following two arrangements should be adopted with care:

Example 1:



Example 2:



Question!

- What are the pros and cons of these two arrangements?

5. Do I have to translate absolutely everything?

You should avoid conversations with either the interviewee or the interviewer **unless otherwise directed by the circumstances, and in full agreement with both parties**. Any kind of question, including those that are not specifically relevant to the interview, should be translated.

It's Interpreting Time!

For example:



6. What if one of the parties engages me in a conversation?

In this case, you should always strive not to let anyone feel excluded or marginalized. You should give a summary of such a conversation if it arises.

7. How long should I let the speaker talk?

It is important to set a standard length of narration fragment with which you are comfortable. This will vary according to the complexity of the subject, the clarity of the speaker, and your experience as an interpreter. Although it is up to you to stop the speaker before the segment gets too long, be aware of linking words and the limitations of your memory capacity.

For example



Chapter II

MODULE IV



Questions!

- What would you do to signal that you intend to interrupt the speaker?
- Can you complete what the interpreter was about to say to the interviewer?
- How long do you think you could listen to someone with the help of your notes?

Note!

It is widely believed that, *under ideal circumstances*, your interpretation should be a bit shorter than the speaker's statement. Although this may apply to consecutive bi-directional interpretations of languages that are very similar (such as French and Spanish, for example), it might not be possible if the source and target languages differ considerably in structure and expressed meaning. In addition, using paraphrasing will undoubtedly make you sound wordy—as if you were adding your own words to the speaker's.

8. What kind of tone of voice should I use?

Some professionals believe that the interpreter must remain entirely neutral, seeking only to translate what is being said as accurately as possible. Others believe that the interpreter must *put expression* into her/his speech in order to convey the speaker's emotions.

Although we believe that mimicking the speaker is wrong, it is not a particularly good idea to use a monotonous, neutral tone of voice. On the contrary, you should be aware of the cultural implications that might be linked to differences in tone between the two languages you are interpreting, and adjust them accordingly.

Always be aware of the difference in tone between questions and statements, doubts and sarcastic or ironic remarks.

B. Specific kinds of interviews

1. Is it possible to foresee what an interview will be like?

Although it is impossible to foresee and describe every single interpreting scenario, obstacle, or speaker's personality in this module, you can complete the picture according to what you notice and experience during each interpreting session in which you participate. We encourage you to take notes regularly and keep them in a notebook that you can call My Interpreter's Log.

Between interpreting sessions...



It's Interpreting Time!

2. How can my presence as an interpreter make the difference?

Your accuracy in translating will help to ensure an appropriate and correct decision on the interviewee's case. By enabling the interviewer and interviewee to communicate with each other, you will help the interviewee to have a better understanding of:

- the role of the interviewer/physician/counsellor
- the kind of service to which he/she can have access
- the nature of the problem/illness/screening at issue during the interview
- the reason the interviewer advises a certain course of action, whether it be a second interview, or referral to a physician or a counsellor, and the consequences of such a decision
- the fact that one of the interviewer's main objectives is to understand the interviewee's needs, feelings and opinions on the case

3. Can I play a role in building trust during interviews?

Your presence should certainly be reassuring. Problems may arise if the interviewee does not trust you, particularly if she/he has survived torture and fears that the people around her/him are government agents, for example. Analyze how you carry yourself, the way you speak, and try to identify any barrier you might create that could intimidate the interviewee in any way. Once you have gained the interviewee's trust, you will be able to build on it throughout the interview.

Note!

The interviewee has the right to express her/his doubts as to your presence as an interpreter before, during, or after the interview. The interviewee may decide to ask another interpreter to take over. You should never take this personally. On the contrary, you should understand that the interviewee may not feel comfortable in your presence because of her/his perception of you in terms of religious or political orientation, gender and/or ethnic affiliation.

There is no point in continuing to interpret if you and the interviewee cannot understand each other because of language differences. If this is the case, alert the interviewer immediately.

4. Do refugee status determination interviews present any special problems?

It is advisable not to interpret for the same applicant during both their refugee status determination and resettlement interviews. You must be able to maintain your independence to the greatest possible extent.

Refugee status determination interviews require great concentration at all times. They demand that you become aware of your responses to emotionally charged subjects. Your responses can affect the quality of your interpretation. The following examples provide some interpreters' testimonies about how the interviewee made the interpreter uncomfortable during an interpreting session:

CASE I



The interviewee fled persecution and left his family in his country of origin. If he had revealed their identity, they'd probably have had trouble. I went through a similar experience, and I found myself adding vagueness to vagueness through my choice of words while interpreting.

CASE II



The interviewee was a political activist in her country of origin. She's still involved in the activity of one opposition party in the host country, and she's being under threat by agents of the regime she's been opposing. She had strong opinions on another opposition party we are members of, and we didn't like what she was saying. As a result, we got quite annoyed.

CASE III



The interviewee went through a lot for fleeing her home country. Her story stirred a lot of memories, and I started (unconsciously, at first) helping her out. At some stage, I just wanted her to get refugee status, and I relied on my experience with similar cases to tell the interviewer what I believed he wanted to hear to express a positive opinion on the case. I stopped translating and just spoke on her behalf.

CASE IV



The interviewee was a Muslim man who was telling his opinions about Christian-dominated society. I am Christian, and also quite religious, and I didn't like at all what he was saying about the way women should be treated. I began to look at and think of him with contempt. I'm sure I didn't correctly translate what he said.

It's Interpreting Time!

This is an incomplete list of situations that we have frequently observed while studying interpreters' behaviour. We would advise you to look at these examples, see if they make sense to you and your experience as an interpreter, complete the list or modify it accordingly, and make use of the examples to analyze yourself in relation to someone who is supposed to remain cool in any interpreting situation.

Question!

- Being non-judgemental and detached from what you hear during an interview can be difficult. Refugee status determination interviews require that you remain completely neutral. Do you think you can do that?

Refugee status determination interviews also require that you are

- aware of UNHCR's refugee-protection mandate
- aware of the refugee status determination procedure as conducted by governments or in UNHCR offices
- aware of the refugee status determination terminology that is likely to be used
- aware of your obligations in terms of confidentiality and impartiality

Note!

- Speak to your supervisor if you feel you do not have this kind of awareness!
- the following is required from you in terms of impartiality and confidentiality:
- You should refuse to assess the credibility of an interviewee and/or investigate the evidence provided by the applicant
- You should never support and speak in favour or on behalf of an interviewee.
- You should not provide counselling to applicants or advise them on their case

Note!

Make a habit of reading through your Self-study Guide as well as the Code of Conduct at the beginning of your working day if you have doubts about your role as a refugee status determination interpreter. Whenever you feel you have doubts, speak to your supervisor at the earliest opportunity, and always before participating in a refugee status determination interpreting session.

5. What if I am called upon to interpret for a physician?

Knowing how to handle emotionally charged matters will enable you to interpret **also** for physicians, counsellors, and other UNHCR officials who need to speak to refugees either in relation to their claim to refugee status or because the circumstances require it, such as during Victim-of-Torture screenings.

Note!

Although conducted in a legal context, the nature of these meetings is not, strictly speaking, legal; it is more directly connected to the immediate physical and mental well-being of the interviewee. You may thus be asked to apply a more client-tailored approach to interpreting, as long as you keep in mind what is discussed in *Basic Interpreting Procedures* and apply consecutive interpreting.

During medical interviews and in emergency situations, such as during natural disasters, in refugee camps, in war zones, and in border areas where there might be mass movements of displaced people, the empathetic behavior of the interpreter is particularly relevant. For example, you should make sure that the meeting takes place in an environment that responds to the special needs of the interviewee. In these contexts, always plan ahead in cooperation with the interviewer.

6. What about interpreting for psychiatrists and counsellors?

In many communities, it is *taboo* to discuss mental illness, and those with mental illnesses can be *stigmatized* by their communities. If this is the case in the community where the interviewee comes from, she/he might feel reluctant to have an interpreter present during a discussion with a psychiatrist. The interviewee might prefer a family member to interpret. Although your training and experience in interpreting for counsellors should win you the interviewee's trust, you might be dismissed if you belong to the interviewee's community and the interviewer fails to convince her/him that you can do a professional job.

In principle, counsellors are advised not to hire an interpreter who is from the interviewee's community for discussions related to sexual and gender-based violence, except in emergency situations. In addition, counsellors are strongly encouraged to take into account the age, gender, religion, and culture of the interviewee with special needs before hiring an interpreter.

Note!

There is a tendency among interpreters to diagnose on behalf of the interviewer during medical/counselling sessions. This occurs as a result of the interpreter's willingness to be of assistance, her/his knowledge of the patient's medical history, her/his sense that the counsellor/physician doesn't understand what the patient is saying (or what the interpreter is saying), and a misunderstanding of the interpreter's role. Try to think of yourself as a translator and a cultural language mediator, and be careful not to overstep the boundaries of your profession.



It's Interpreting Time!

Questions!

- Did the interpreter do a good job or did he overstep some boundaries?
- Do you think that the doctor found the information the interpreter added useful?
- Do you sometimes project your own experience into the interviewee's words and translate accordingly?

7 What kind of specific terminology should I learn?

You should familiarize yourself with refugee status determination and medical terminology in each of your working languages. To do so, start a new section in your Glossary and divide this section into these sub-sections:

REFUGEE STATUS DETERMINATION TERMINOLOGY

- legal terms used in UNHCR offices
- names of political, military, para-military, and religious organizations
- names of countries, regions, areas, towns
- names of political, religious, military and para-military leaders
- terms related to cultural issues, habits, customs
- concepts related to time (such as calendars), space (distances), the environment (names of specific kinds of buildings, vegetation, animals, etc.)
- names of events, festivals, ceremonies (political and religious)
- concepts related to taboos of any kind, particularly if related to gender issues

MEDICAL TERMINOLOGY

- parts of the human body
- names of some of the most important organs
- names of common and less common diseases (you need to do some research here: ask a doctor in the area where you work to help you with this)
- names of medicines, including traditional remedies and treatments
- names of torture techniques and descriptions of them
- list of idioms, metaphorical expressions and euphemisms that are commonly used in any language (and language variation) when you speak to describe symptoms, complaints, diseases, etc. Sometimes, the interviewer needs to discuss matters that may be regarded as highly private and possibly shameful, or even *taboo*.

Chapter II

MODULE IV

C. Interpreting for children

1. Should children be interviewed without proper planning?

No. The welfare of children is paramount, and refugee children may suffer from psycho-social development disorders because of their experience, such as fleeing a country torn by civil war. No one should take the risk of further traumatizing children by blindly applying standard interview procedures. A psychologist should assess the child's development against the norms of his/her age, as well as the possible effects of trauma, and relate those findings to the interviewer before the interview occurs.

2. Why is it important to take special care when working with children?

Working with children and adolescents requires special care because:

- children are extremely strong and vulnerable at the same time. Knowing how to deal with children is essential, since they might be afraid of anyone who is not *family*;
- the interviewee might have been a child soldier and/or forcibly separated from her/his family. The fact that her/his relationship with adults, in general, has probably been shaped by this experience may require an interpreter who is familiar with the issue;
- children sometimes express themselves in their own way, which requires both a high level of cooperation between interpreter and interviewer and the interpreter's ability to understand children's experiences;
- children may unconsciously reject their language, and therefore their culture, if they have been prevented from experiencing affective, social, and cognitive development within a community because of displacement.

Note!

Understanding someone's experiences may imply feeling the way they do. Compare this attitude with feeling pity for other people who are suffering, especially if you are familiar with such suffering.

Questions!

- Should interpreters be *empathetic* or *sympathetic* with children? What about interviewees in general? Or neither, because of the risks involved? Look up the meaning of these two words in a dictionary.
- If the interviewee is a child, what strategies would you develop to make sure your interpreting session is successful?

It's Interpreting Time!

3. Is there any standard procedure I should follow?

Unfortunately, there is no standard procedure. What you could do, *within the pre-interview phase, during which the interviewer plans the interview with the assistant of a psychologist*, is to agree with your supervisor on letting the child speak as much as she/he wishes without interruptions, no matter how fragmented or incoherent her/his speech may be. Rely more on note-taking and summary than on consecutive interpreting.

Be much less rigid in your approach to interpreting than you would be if you were interpreting during a refugee status determination interview with an adult. Do not be afraid to give the child the impression that she/he is taking part in a conversation rather than an interview. Also, use the interview as an opportunity to build a rapport with the child in cooperation with the interviewer.

4. Should I use a certain kind of language with a child?

You will need to simplify language as much as possible when you translate. You might also have to repeat things several times. You should smile when you do this to show the child that there is nothing wrong with repeating what you have said. You may also want to organize the interviewer's comments/questions/encouragements into small units, and help to make them more understandable through body language and other aids, such as drawings.

The interviewer might have to "step aside" for longer than she/he would normally if she/he were conducting a refugee status determination interview, for an adult as you will probably have a conversation with the child. If you do, you should ask the child, "Do you mind if I tell the interviewer what we just spoke about?" and make sure that the child has something to do while you translate your conversation with the child for the interviewer.

Interviewers and interpreters should be familiar with available Guidelines on interviewing and methods of collecting evidence from children !

D. Interpreting at meetings

1. What is meeting interpreting?

If you are asked to translate for two groups of people in a (group) meeting, where each group speaks a different language, you should try to see if it is possible for the speakers of each group to stop every two sentences to allow you to consecutively interpret. If this is possible, position yourself in a corner of the room and speak into a microphone.

If this is not possible, because the people in the meeting will be taking part in a debate, and therefore cannot stop every two sentences for the sake of the interpreter, you could apply a combination of *semi-simultaneous whispering* and *summary* interpretation. You should take the following steps:

- Ask the speakers to speak as slowly as they can.
- Gather all the people for whom you are translating around a table and position yourself at the back of the table, so that the people sitting around it are looking at the speaker, not at you.
- Start translating after the speaker ends her/his first sentence.
- Use a low, regular tone (*sotto voce*) for the benefit of the person/persons for whom you are translating.
- While you are translating the speaker's first sentence, listen to the second sentence, memorize it, and get ready to translate it when she/he is done. Continue interpreting in this way.
- If the debate becomes heated and the speakers no longer talk slowly, as they promised, you will have to resort to summary interpreting.

SELF-STUDY QUESTIONS

1. I am not supposed to deal with culturally inappropriate language.

True False

2. If I am asked to interpret, I should not make sure that I am up to the job.

True False

3. Judgemental attitude:

Can you suspend judgement, no matter what you are listening to, restrain your emotions, and calmly focus on the process of listening, understanding, analyzing, and translating the speaker's meaning? Ask two colleagues to join you. One of you is going to be the interpreter. Start with the text below, then find a number of different texts, practice and discuss all the aspects of interpreting you have learned so far, including language issues, memory and note-taking, seating arrangement, and interpreting procedure.

(refugee/patient) I was hired by an NGO in the camp to help out with food distribution. My job was to administer the food storage and deliver the food rations to the refugees. As the NGO did not control food distribution, I was regularly able to take food bags from the storage. I have been providing some of them to my family and friends. I have given the remainder to some girls and women in the camp in exchange for sex. Since my last relationship, I have an uncomfortable feeling in my throat. It is not hoarse but feels like a slight fever. Could this be part of an infection? I am very worried and very unhappy about what I did; I could have ruined my future, right? Please let me know what I am in for because there are so many stories about the risks associated with unprotected sexual relations. Because of these symptoms, I am afraid that I have contracted HIV.

It's Interpreting Time!

(physician) Unfortunately, the truth is, if the refugee woman/girl you had a relationship with was/is HIV positive, then you have put yourself at risk. From the circumstances that you describe, it would be impossible to tell if she were. It is difficult to quantify the extent of the risk, but even if she were HIV positive, it is not 100% certain that you will contract the infection. One way of getting some clarity is to go and have a test for viral load (not a standard HIV test, but what is called a Ploymerase Chain Reaction [PCR] viral load test). This is quite an expensive test, but will be positive at two weeks after infection if you have been infected. If taken soon enough after a potential exposure to HIV, anti-retroviral therapy can also reduce the risk of becoming infected. Having said all that, even if you are infected, you have not necessarily ruined your future. Many people with HIV live productive and happy lives.

4. Dealing with obstacles:

In this exercise, the interviewer and/or interviewee will put as many obstacles as possible in the interpreter's way (see Module IV), and challenge the interpreter to deal with them (without telling her/him in advance!). The interpreter will take notes on what she/he can and cannot handle and will revise the relevant modules in this guide. Use the text below and any other similar text you can find.

The problems began for Betty in January 1993. Her sister-in-law was six months pregnant with her second baby. When the government discovered this "crime," they came to Betty's home, where her brother and sister-in-law usually lived. However, they were hiding from the government, so the officers arrested Betty instead. She was a hostage for two weeks, until her sister-in-law turned herself in. The officers handcuffed her sister-in-law and took her to a hospital, where she was forcibly brought to the abortion room. The room was especially designed for situations such as this, and included a strategically-placed mirror so that officials could force women to watch as their babies were aborted. However, the pain Betty's sister-in-law experienced was so extreme that the doctors finally gave her an anaesthetic to put her to sleep during the remainder of the abortion.

Not only was Betty's family emotionally devastated by this experience, but they were also faced with a huge fine for disobeying the government's policy of one child per family. This experience left an indelible impression on Betty. Little did she know that in just a few months she would be facing the same persecution. Betty looked to her boyfriend for solace during this time of suffering. In her vulnerable condition, she gave in to his advances, opening the door to more trauma.

In March 1993, Betty began to feel ill, so she went to her doctor. The doctor said, "You're pregnant." Betty's heart sank. In addition to facing the shame of unwed pregnancy, Betty knew that she was under the minimum age for marriage and childbearing. Her baby, like her sister-in-law's baby, was considered to be "illegal." Nevertheless, she refused the abortion her doctor recommended. In response, the doctor reported her to the government. In May, Betty was apprehended and brought to the hospital, where she was told that she would be given medicine to kill the baby. Two doctors held her down, forcing her to swallow a pill. Then they left, telling her that they would be back later with a shot to complete the process. Betty, still determined to save her baby, asked the nurse, who was a friend of her boyfriend, to help her escape. The nurse unlocked the window, and Betty jumped out.

MODULE IV

Chapter II

5. Before interpreting, I should be briefed on the interviewee’s case.

Write down your thoughts and discuss them with your supervisor.

6. It is better if the interviewer introduces me; if I were to do so, it would be time-consuming.

Write down your thoughts and discuss them with your supervisor.

7. If I do not understand something, I just ask the speaker to repeat what he/she said.

True False

8. If I made a mistake, I tell the interviewer when the interview is over.

True False

9. If the interviewee uses insulting language, I translate word-for-word.

Write down your thoughts and discuss them with your supervisor.

10. It is a good idea to simplify what the interviewer says when I think that the interviewee will not understand otherwise.

Write down your thoughts and discuss them with your supervisor.

11. I can interpret for children without any problems.

Write down your thoughts and discuss them with your supervisor.

12. Physicians need me if they want to diagnose the patient’s illness correctly.

Write down your thoughts and discuss them with your supervisor.

Module V: Basics of Self-care

Interpreting in a refugee-interview context can be extremely demanding. Interpreters may suffer vicarious trauma and burn-out as a result. Ideally, everyone who is involved in the interview process should be aware of these risks, understand the causes and symptoms of trauma and burn-out, and know what kinds of prevention and treatment are available.

Chapter I

Take Care of Yourself

In this chapter you will learn

- what flashbacks are
- how to deal with stress as a result of interpreting
- when to see a counsellor
- about Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Vicarious Trauma
- what to do if you do not feel well and are interpreting at that moment

A Flashbacks

1. What are flashbacks?

Flashbacks are memories, in the form of sudden images seen in the mind, that are related to a past event.

An interpreter often feels that she/he cannot continue interpreting because the stories that she/he listens to every day bring back memories of *trauma* that she/he experienced in her/his country of origin.

Note!

Trauma has been defined as “(1) the person experienced, witnessed, or was confronted with an event or events that involved actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others; (2) the person’s response involved intense fear, helplessness, or horror.” (AM, Psychiatric Association, Diagnostic Criteria from Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, PTSD 428 – Michael B. First ed., 4th ed. 1994).

If you ever feel that way, it is a good idea to stop for a moment and see whether you experience any of the following:

- recurring memories or scenes of the traumatic events while you are awake
- nightmares related to past trauma
- strong emotions (having strong responses toward the speaker can be related to the interpreter’s own past experiences and can affect the level of professionalism of her/his work)



Basics of Self-care

For example:

The interpreter might over-sympathize with the client and thus give a slightly modified interpretation without being aware of it; that is, the interpretation becomes subjective rather than objective. The interpreter might feel depressed, frequently irritable, anxious, and stressed.

- **If you feel this way, try to determine what situations trigger these feelings. Do they arise only at work or also when you are at home? Do not worry: Interpreting for refugees who have suffered a traumatic experience may elicit strong emotional reactions from you, possibly toward them, other people, and/or yourself. What is important is that you have now started to examine those feelings.**

2. What is Secondary Traumatic Stress Disorder?

The emotional reactions you are experiencing can also be described as **stress**. When you are/feel under pressure, you may sense that your surroundings are having a bad effect on you. Sometimes, these feelings are overwhelming, particularly when you feel that the people you meet and the events you live through are too demanding. You might be feeling a strong sense of responsibility to assist the interviewee. Again, this might lead to a lack of objectivity. You might feel down, depressed or even anxious due to recurrent flashbacks.

Many people who work with refugees suffer from stress. They often become subject to a psychological phenomenon called *counter-transference*. This means relating someone's experiences/feelings to your own. Although you might not have gone through exactly the same experience, it is likely that you have experienced either something similar or you have gone through the same feelings of fear and depression in similar circumstances. When you assume the interviewee's problems, interpreting can become subjective.

Note!

Transference (as opposed to the term *counter-transference*) defines what happens when, for example, psychiatrists get angry when their mobile phones keep ringing. Instead of finding a solution to the problem, they *transfer* their anger to their patients, who begin to have the same symptoms. It is as if the psychiatrists had *told* their clients that they must be angry when their mobile phones ring.

Stress can be treated, at least at an early stage. If you do not seek the advice of a professional, though, and/or you do not manage to develop a strategy that allows you eliminate it, stress can turn into *burn-out*.

3. What is burn-out?

You might be developing burn-out if you lose interest in your job, you no longer want to listen to what the interviewee says, you distance yourself from him/her, you might even begin to deny his/her existence.



You may show hostility, not only toward them, but toward every refugee you meet. You may feel you hate them. You might begin to identify yourself with one refugee, and begin to believe she/he deserves more than anyone else. You become generous to them at every opportunity.

Note!

Do you feel constantly tired? Do you have problems sleeping? Are you having bad headaches and difficulty eating? Has anyone told you that you are aggressive, pessimistic, cynical? That you drink and smoke too much? Has your supervisor reproached you for not concentrating, always arriving late at work, and not caring about what you do? If the answer is yes, and you have been working with refugees for some time, do not wait: ask your supervisor to put you in contact with a counsellor. If untreated, these symptoms can turn into *vicarious trauma*.

4. What is Vicarious Trauma?

The person who suffers from *vicarious trauma* often isolates her/himself from friends and family, and feels like spending a lot of time alone. He/She might become extremely sensitive to violence and be filled with a sense of hopelessness. The person's ability to interact with others, her/his emotional skills and perceptions are all negatively affected.

5 What is Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)?

PTSD is what a person experiences following a traumatic event. PTSD sufferers *re-live* their traumatic experience whenever they come across anything that reminds them of it. For example, someone who has been violently attacked outside a church may temporarily lose control when she/he walks by a church. She/he may also suddenly be reminded of her/his experience through flashbacks and/or nightmares. It becomes a priority, in his/her mind, to avoid places that remind him/her of the event and to separate her/his emotions from anything related to her/his traumatic experience. As a result, she/he may look at, talk about, and consider terrible abuses with a complete lack of emotional response to them.

6. Can I interpret if I suffer from any of these symptoms?

If you recognize any of these symptoms and you are interpreting for one or more refugees, it would be wise to temporarily refer the interviewees to another interpreter, preferably someone who has not gone through a similar experience, on the advice of a counsellor, who will be in a position to help you to examine how you relate to what you hear during your work.

Counselling can help an interpreter to relieve stress and become aware of his/her mental state. For some people, awareness is very important, as it allows them to carry on interpreting objectively. It may also prevent burn-out. For others, awareness is not enough, and professional help is needed.

Basics of Self-care

Note!

A significant number of refugees and other persons of concern to UNHCR have suffered a traumatic experience before fleeing their home communities. If you are a refugee, other than an interpreter, you need to be fully aware of this. Speak to your supervisor and suggest having regular meetings with a counsellor. Interpreters can also experience trauma as a result of their work. If their condition is not treated, they could further traumatize the refugees for whom they are interpreting. **Take care of yourself, for your protection and theirs.**

SELF-STUDY QUESTIONS

1. I cannot suffer trauma as a result of interpreting

True False

2. I never sympathize with the interviewee and lose my capacity to objectively translate what she/he says.

Write down your thoughts and discuss them with your supervisor.

APPENDIX I THE INTERPRETER'S CODE OF CONDUCT

a) Introduction

- i. Whenever refugees do not speak or do not have a good command of the language in which UNHCR interviews and meetings take place, the task of the interpreter is to enable them to communicate with UNHCR officials as if they spoke the same language, so that UNHCR can fulfil its mandate.
- ii. This Code of Conduct is meant to guide UNHCR interpreters in maintaining professional behaviour at work, and outside the workplace, and take ethical decisions after carefully evaluating the situation, obstacle, or dilemma they are facing. It does not and cannot include reference to every possible situation, obstacle, or dilemma interpreters may face.

b) Acceptance of assignment

- iii. Professional behaviour can be maintained only if the interpreter's level of linguistic competence, physical and mental aptitude, potential conflict of interest, and personal feelings do not represent an obstacle to its achievement.
- iv. Upon accepting an assignment, the interpreter states that she/he is capable of doing the job, although she/he is to be given the possibility to revise such statement if any of the above-mentioned obstacles arise in the course of the meeting.
- v. In the presence of any of the above-mentioned obstacles, the interpreter is expected to inform the parties and possibly suggest that she/he declines the assignment or withdraws from the meeting. This suggestion may be discussed if it is not possible to postpone the meeting and no other interpreter is available. In such case, the interpreter may agree to accept the assignment as long as the parties understand the limitations of her/his performance.

c) Linguistic accuracy and neutrality.

- vi. Typically, the interpreter shall be prepared to apply bi-directional consecutive interpretation to accurately translate the speaker's words and meanings, although she/he may be required to sight-translate the content of written documents, and to perform summary interpreting to condense the content of the speaker's words and meanings. The interpreter is to use the same grammatical person as the speaker, unless it is not readily understandable and culturally appropriate to any of the parties. She/he uses the third person when speaking for herself/himself.

- vii. The interpreter is not responsible for the content of the speaker's words. She/he is responsible for accurately translating the speaker's words and meanings into a target language without adding to or omitting from them. In doing so, the interpreter must be capable of replacing syntactic and semantic elements in the source language with equivalent patterns in the target language. Word-for-word interpretation may be applied as long as the parties are aware that it may not convey the original meaning of the speaker's words. By no means is the interpreter allowed to guess if she/he does not know or does not understand a word or the meaning of the speaker's words. The interpreter must seek clarification whenever needed, even if this turns out to be time-consuming. She/he must also report on any mistake made while interpreting. This must be done as soon as possible during the meeting.
- viii. Idiomatic or culturally/historically/sociologically/anthropologically-related language must be handled with care. The interpreter should tentatively paraphrase the language and signal that confirmation of its meaning is needed. Should any of the parties be unable to explain cultural beliefs and/or practices expressed by such language, the interpreter may tentatively provide basic *to-the-best-of-my-knowledge* information on it as long as both parties agree. This information should temporarily be put on record, double-checked at any stage, during or after the interview, with a fourth party, and be discussed again with the interviewee at any stage, during the current or next interview. In addition, the interpreter will inform the parties of any potential misunderstandings that may arise as a result of any implication in the languages used, whether stereotyping or cultural expectations.
- ix. The interpreter shall not provide any kind of sociological, anthropological or historical information based on the case she/he is involved in as an interpreter. She/he shall not act as an expert in any of these disciplines while interpreting, but will encourage the interviewer to obtain such information through the interviewee.

d) Impartiality

- x. The interpreter shall inform the UNHCR official of any involvement with the assignment and interviewee(s) prior to the beginning of the meeting.
- xi. The interpreter shall not interpret for close relations and/or personal friends, except in emergency situations, namely when no interpreter is available, and if all parties agree.
- xii. Whether the interpreter agrees or disagrees with what is being said during the meeting, she/he shall suspend judgement and strive to interpret accurately. She/he shall not speak on behalf of, advocate for, or try to influence either party.
- xiii. Under no circumstances shall the interpreter give legal advice to UNHCR's clients and/or influence their own decisions in any conceivable way.
- xiv. The interpreter shall not interpret for anyone in whose *case- or testimony-writing* she/he is directly involved.

e) Confidentiality

- xv. Under no circumstances shall the interpreter disclose or repeat oral and/or written information obtained in the course of her/his work at UNHCR for any reason, unless this is required by law enforcement. In particular, the interpreter shall not seek to derive any form of financial reward, profit, or advantage by disclosing the oral and/or written information she/he acquires in the course of her/his work at UNHCR.
- xvi. Should the interpreter be asked to speak about her/his job as part of any counselling or psychiatric therapy she/he might go through, she/he is required to omit any specific reference to people and/or cases she/he came across as part of her/his job at UNHCR.
- xvii. Under no circumstances shall the interpreter disclose any knowledge she/he might have of the interviewee, her/his case, background, position, status, etc., at the request of a UNHCR official.
- xviii. The interpreter shall not have access to individual files and/or the file storage area, unless strictly unavoidable. In this case, her/his access to individual files and/or the file storage area should be strictly limited to what is necessary to carry out authorized responsibilities, and should be closely supervised.

f) Demeanour

- xix. The interpreter who is rendering services at UNHCR is bound to the standards and protocol of the office in which she/he is working, unless such standards and protocol are in conflict with this Code of Conduct. In any respect, she/he is always punctual, prepared, and appropriately dressed.
- xx. The interpreter shall show respect towards the participants to the meeting and avoid any kind of judgemental attitude towards them and/or what they say.
- xxi. The interpreter shall neither accept any additional compensation, money, or favours for services reimbursed by UNHCR, nor make use of her/his position to secure privileges, private gain, exemptions, and use of UNHCR facilities or equipments. In particular, the interpreter shall not seek to derive any form of financial reward, profit, or advantage by disclosing the oral and/or written information she/he acquires in the course of her/his work at UNHCR.
- xxii. The interpreter shall not take on tasks that are unrelated to her/his role, unless strictly unavoidable. In this case, her/his task should be strictly limited to what is necessary to carry out authorized responsibilities, and this should be closely supervised.

g) Applicability

- xxiii. The interpreter who is rendering services at UNHCR must have read, signed, and is bound to comply with this Code of Conduct. She/he understands that she/he shall withdraw immediately from encounters that threaten her/his capacity to apply this Code of Conduct. She/he also understands that violation of this Code of Conduct may result in her/his withdrawal from the UNHCR list of approved interpreters.

APPENDIX II

A MODEL FOR AN INTERPRETERS' TRAINING WORKSHOP

The following model can be modified and developed according to the circumstances. Ideally, it should be attended by both interpreters and interviewers, and could take place over a period of four days (as many times a year as required by the interpreters' turnover). Sessions should last between one-and-a-half hours and two hours.

First day

- *Introduction:* The objectives of this workshop are to enable interpreters and interviewers to work together by gaining awareness of each other's role in the interview process.
- *UNHCR's mission and mandate:* The participants will be given specific information on how UNHCR partially fulfils its mission and mandate through the interview system (conducted by a UNHCR official).
- *The role of the interviewer:* Each type of encounter between refugees and UNHCR officials will be described, with special attention to the person in charge (the interviewer), their expertise and objectives (conducted by a senior interviewer).
- *The role of the interpreter:* The interpreter's job description will be defined. This will include a discussion related to what interviewers expect from their interpreter (conducted by a senior interpreter).

Second day

- *Language issues:* UNHCR's clients may speak a large variety of languages and their variations. Specific information on the languages of interest to the UNHCR office where the training is taking place will be given (conducted by an expert in the field).
- *Memory and note-taking in consecutive interpreting:* After a brief introduction on the subject, interpreters and interviewers will take part in a number of role-plays in which they become acquainted with the way their memory works. A brief discussion will follow each role-play, during which strategies will be elaborated through which interpreters and interviewers can relieve some of the pressure on each other's memory (conducted by a senior interpreter and a senior interviewer).
- *Community Interpreting I:* Many interpreters who work for UNHCR are also members of a refugee community. Can they have credibility as members of a community while simultaneously serving as UNHCR interpreters? Can they be really independent? (conducted by a senior interpreter and a senior interviewer).

Third day

- *Interpreting in a refugee-interview context I:* Once more, interviewers and interpreters will take part in role-plays, in which the focus will be on interpreting techniques, language and cultural issues, and interpreting procedure. A brief discussion will follow each role-play, during which comments, strategies, and ideas on how to improve the working relationship between interpreters and interviewers will be offered (conducted by an expert in consecutive interpreting).
- *The interpreter as a cultural mediator:* Is the interpreter to deal with language only? Or does she/he have other functions, such as to provide country-of-origin information? Would she/he be allowed to advocate for the client's rights if she/he believes they are not met because of cultural misunderstanding?
- *The impact of working with traumatized clients:* Many refugees have experienced trauma. Interpreters and interviewers can be adversely affected by working with refugees on a daily basis if the adequate precautions are not taken (conducted by a psychiatrist or a counsellor or an expert in psycho-social issues).

Fourth day

- *Interpreting for children, women, traumatized clients:* Both interpreters and interviewers are expected to have developed special skills and expertise to take part in these kind of encounters (conducted by a senior interpreter and a senior interviewer with expertise in the field).
- *Interpreting in a refugee-interview context II:* Interviewers and interpreters will take part in role-plays, in which the focus will be on interpreting techniques, language and cultural issues, and interpreting procedure. A brief discussion will follow each role-play, during which comments, strategies, and ideas on how to improve the working relationship between interpreters and interviewers will be offered (conducted by an expert in consecutive interpreting).
- *Community interpreting II:* Interpreters, particularly if they are from small refugee communities, may give great significance to their relationship with their fellow community members, including family relations. Are they fully capable of having a professional-personal relationship with the refugees for whom they interpret? Should they be considered as UNHCR staff members or simply as tools that UNHCR employs in carrying out its functions? (conducted by a senior UNHCR official and a senior interpreter).
- *Conclusions. End of the workshop. Comments and ideas for future workshops.*

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