

Interpretation as Part of the Rehabilitation

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The use of interpreters in the rehabilitation of people who have been subjected to torture is a relatively new idea and there is practically no literature on the subject.

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Our knowledge of interpretation work has been accumulated through many years of work for Amnesty International and the RCT (Rehabilitation and Research Centre for Torture Victims) in Copenhagen, where we are now working as interpreters for Latin American torture victims and their families. In this connection the RCT's own training of interpreters has enabled us to exchange useful views and experience with professional medical staff, social workers and interpreters from other parts of the world whose languages and cultures are far more alien to a Northern European than those of Spanish-speaking countries.

For clarity 'he' is used for the client, and 'she' for the interpreter in this article, which has been divided into two main parts.

In this issue of TORTURE we'll bring the first part, the second part will appear in the next TORTURE.

In later issues of TORTURE some of the problems concerning interpretation in other cultural contexts will be discussed.

Part I: Principles of interpretation for torture victims.

Interpretation in general, including competence, preparation, interpretation sessions, different interpretation methods, profes-

sional discretion and the communication of cultural differences.

Part II: Interpretation during psychotherapy and the interpreter's needs.

Part I

Competence of the Interpreter

Before accepting an assignment, the interpreter must ascertain that she is competent, i.e. has sufficient command of the necessary terminology and language usage, and must thereafter decide whether she is up to the job.

One of the first principles for an interpreter is to remain impartial.

Preparation

The interpreter should then prepare for the job by familiarising herself with who the client is, the circumstances of the case and whether or not it is necessary to brush up any relevant terminology, or perhaps to learn new. An important aspect of an interpreter's work is to keep up to date on social problems, culture and religion, both in her own country and in the countries whose language the interpreter is working with, since language undergoes a continuous process of development parallel with society as a whole.

Interpretation Sessions

The interpreter is the link enabling

two or more people to communicate as though they were speaking the same language. By interpretation is meant communication not only of language but also of cultures. In other words, all messages must be interpreted and fine shades of meaning and idiomatic expressions conveyed as far as possible. It is not for the interpreter to assess whether anything the parties have said is uninteresting or superfluous, and the interpreter should also convey emotional including hard and offending expressions in unweakened form. In terms of language, one of the results of this is that the interpreter speaks in the first person whenever the person speaking does so.

It is a fundamental principle that the interpreter never conceals, distorts, construes or infers what is said, but is loyal both to what is uttered, and to the spirit in which it is said and interprets each utterance in a language which is clear and intelligible to the recipient. We would emphasise that contrary to written translations, it is always more important to convey the message than to use a specific formulation of language. The interpreter's impartiality should thus not be mistaken for indifference: a good interpreter is not merely an empty vessel translating backwards and forwards, but a person who is actively involved in the communication by making sure that she on the one hand and the parties on the other understand the underlying message in what is actually said.

Interpreting is always a physical and mentally exacting process and the interpreter, therefore, does not undertake any other function for the duration of the assignment.

Interpretation Methods

Many professional interpreters master both consecutive interpretation (i.e. subsequent reproduction of short or long statements) and simultaneous interpretation. Normally the choice of method will depend on the concrete situation and on the parties involved. Simultaneous interpretation requires that the interpreter is familiar with the subject and that the person speaking does so articulately and at a controlled speed. For easy communication, consecutive interpretation requires the persons speaking to say only a few sentences at a time, thus avoiding two problems:

- 1) unnecessary strain on the interpreter's memory because she uses more energy on remembering what is said than on interpreting and
- 2) interruption of the direct communication between the parties when they have to sit passively and wait for the interpretation of long statements. Efficient communication also depends on the physical position of the interpreter.

Professional Discretion

All interpreting is based on a relationship of trust, and an interpreter respects a pledge of professional secrecy and discretion, a fact which should be made clear to all parties.

Interpretation in General for Torture Victims

The above is a review of general interpretation principles. We will now focus on the special aspects of interpretation when an interpreter is working with torture victims.

To satisfy the requirements of rehabilitation work the interpreter must in advance decide upon her

attitude towards torture. She must be aware that not only is torture a traumatic experience for the victim but also completely and utterly unacceptable from an ethical point of view.

It is important for the interpreter to avoid the pitfall of percei-

ent may become too dependent on the interpreter.

The interpreter should cooperate with all the staff at the centre where she works, not only with the therapists and professionals for whom she is interpreting.

Political refugees may be confron-



Interpreters are often used in the rehabilitation of torture survivors at RCT in Copenhagen (constructed session).

ving people who have been subjected to torture as patients who are to be "comforted" and "helped". We must help emphasise to the client that his sequelae are the reactions of any normal human being to an extremely abnormal situation.

Overall the interpreter must be aware of her professional and personal responsibility. It is essential that she feels empathy towards the client and his situation but this should not lead her to intervene in the treatment without the consent of the therapist and not to enter into any obligations in relation to the client without consulting one or more of the professionals. Otherwise the cli-

ent with special difficulties in the early stages of treatment. Whether consciously or unconsciously their attitude towards the recipient community and its institutions is often negative; the refugees feel guilty or embarrassed at being suspicious of and in opposition to the person they have asked for help.

A relationship of trust and confidence between the people involved in the treatment is absolutely vital for the client to feel so safe that he dare voice and analyse his problems.

Spending time with the client, therapist and other staff before and after interviews will help create a positive atmosphere.

Professional Skills

In rehabilitation work the interpreter should master the general terminology of the five main areas mentioned below:

a) Anatomy, physiology and pathology



b) Psychology and psychiatry. For some languages interpretation is facilitated if the doctor or therapist uses the Greek or Latin terms for diseases, organs, symptoms etc.

c) Forms of torture. A torture victim will often shrink back from relating the harrowing experiences of the past. In order not to overexert the client by asking him for detailed, elaborate explanations, it is necessary for the interpreter to be familiar with many of the most frequently applied methods of torture in her own and in the client's language and to know what they consist of. The interpreter should also be aware that new methods of torture are continu-

ally being introduced in various parts of the world.

d) Social services. As rehabilitation also comprises the client's social situation in the country of exile, the interpreter should be broadly familiar with the structure of the social services of the country and the main rules regarding benefits and procedures. In this respect, the situation will often be very different from that of the client's homeland.

It goes without saying that a mere word-for-word translation of terms, will be inadequate. Frequently a "direct", correct translation will make no sense at all to the client and may intensify his feeling of being alien and may even completely undermine his positive attitude. The interpreter must often act as a catalyst, i.e. explain the meaning of a term rather than just translate it. If a thorough explanation is required, the interpreter should point this out to the social worker. The general principle for interpreters only to translate what is said is still applicable in theory but must often be modified to suit the specific requirements of a given situation.

Preparation

New interpreters who are not familiar with torture and torture-related problems will have to study reports and literature on the subject. A wide selection of such literature is now available in several languages, and ideally such material should be at hand at the rehabilitation centre in all languages in which interpretation is carried out. Another thing which is extremely useful to new interpreters is watching films and videos about torture, the training of torturers (especially the film *Your Neighbour's Son*) and rehabilitation of torture victims. The last item should portray the treatment of a victim and include his own account of his situation and the favourable results of treatment should be

made visible through the pictures. The insight which the interpreter gains from this is important because it will confirm and further her understanding of the client's situation and reactions.

In rehabilitation work it is of immense importance for the interpreter to keep up with latest research findings, new specialised areas and methods of treatment. She must do this partly on her own initiative and partly through attending symposia and seminars etc. held by the professionals attached to the rehabilitation centre, and not least by studying relevant literature. Moreover, the relationship of trust and confidence with the clients will be encouraged if the interpreter feels "at home" at the rehabilitation centre, and keeps herself familiar with all developments, guidelines for treatment, administrative routines and so on at the centre.

Communication and Cultural Differences

As mentioned earlier it is part of the interpreter's job to possess a knowledge of the community, culture, family patterns and lifestyle of the country or countries whose language she masters.

If her knowledge is insufficient, she will not be able to perform her job satisfactorily since she is to communicate not only the purely verbal communication but also any non-verbal signals rooted in the differences of culture wherever these are neither common nor immediately intelligible. Another aspect, which the interpreter should bear in mind, is that verbal utterances which can on the face of it be translated word-for-word will, if such is attempted, often be received in a way the speaker had not intended.

Basic elements of everyday life, such as family feeling, relationships between the generations, notions of physical and mental illness and the possibility of recovery may be looked upon in completely different

ways. The sense of community, responsibility towards family members, the man-woman relationship, the relationship between young and old, concepts of disgrace, honour, religion and faith may be much more significant in other cultures than in those of our western countries and it is for the interpreter to ensure that the right importance and dimension are given to these aspects during an interview. This does not mean that the interpreter should act as a buffer for instance to soften insulting utterances, which will have to be interpreted in accordance with their face value if the parties are to get an accurate picture of each other and of the situation. Neither is it just a question of being expert in finding the precise phrase or proverb which expresses the speaker's thoughts perfectly - very few can live up to such expectations.

A direct translation of what is said supported by a more detailed explanation may very likely turn out to be the best way of conveying the meaning of what has been said.

Guidelines Before and After Interviews and Consultations

If possible, the interpreter should arrive in good time (15 minutes) before an interview. This is of particular importance if the client is new so that the interpreter and the client get a chance to tune in to each other and build up a relationship of trust. A point to remember here is that the interpreter is not a therapist and that such conversations should concentrate on "neutral" subjects. The interpreter must under no circumstances encourage the client to recount his experiences of torture etc. If the client touches upon it himself, the interpreter should listen attentively, of course, but should seek to turn the conversation away from the subject.

When a session starts the interpreter and the client should enter the room together and they should leave together. A follow-up conversation between the therapist and the interpreter should take place.

After an interview the interpreter and the client should not discuss the matters that were raised during the interview.

Interpreting outside the Centre

Even if the rehabilitation centre has professional and specially trained staff within the various areas of treatment, the client and his family may from time to time have to be sent for specialist examinations and treatment outside the physical setting of the centre, for interviews with social workers and case workers in the local municipality, to schools etc. The interpreter must be briefed beforehand and must know what to do when she accompanies a client alone to such interviews or examinations.

The interpreter's job is, as we have said before, to pass on what the professionals and the clients say to each other and not to interpolate personal comments or explanations during the assignment. However, the exceptions to this rule are the situations where the client is not accompanied by a therapist or other professional from the centre.

In connection with somatic examinations and treatments, the interpreter should be aware of things that may remind the client of his torture. The interpreter may on her own initiative draw attention to these.

On visits to the social authorities etc. the interpreter may support the client by intervening to make sure that all essential points and details are explained and understood. However, she must not take over the conversation on the client's behalf, acting as his "guardian", but just draw attention to things which may have been forgotten or inadequately explained, enabling the client himself to formulate his own questions and wishes for interpretation. This to emphasize that the very purpose of rehabilitation is to restore the client's feeling of self-respect and assurance necessary to enable him to cope with his own life. If after the interview the interpreter finds that all points have not

been attended to and emphasised appropriately, she must report back to the centre to decide what steps should be taken.

Interpretation in Practice

Some clients find it difficult to learn another language. Others learn quickly. This means that many of the clients understand and speak Danish well enough to handle many situations, but all the same many clients prefer to have an interpreter with them, perhaps because they find it difficult to express themselves clearly and precisely.

In such cases the interpreter should suggest that the professional speaks in his own language while the interpreter will translate single words or passages, when she feels that perhaps the client does not catch the full meaning of what has been said.

The professional may speak or understand some of the client's language. If so, it should be made quite clear that the professional never interferes with the interpreter's choice of word or forms of expression unless this is to avoid mistakes.

As far as the physical position of the interpreter is concerned the interpreter should be seated so that she can see the people she is interpreting for. During consultation or therapy the interpreter should preferably be seated between the client and the therapist. If she is seated next to one of them or closer to one of them this may shift the balance between the two parties.

To be continued

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