

Reflecting on Issues of Translation and Interpretation

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▼ Abstract

Community organizations are increasingly called on to provide services to newcomer families who speak a wide variety of languages. Practitioners and administrators may be dealing with issues of translation (written language) and interpretation (oral language) for which they are unprepared. Based on her experience as a family educator and editor at FRP Canada, Betsy Mann outlines some of these issues and also suggests ways of handling them to minimize the potential for miscommunication. Converting one language to another is more complicated than the simple translation exercises in a high school language course would lead one to believe. Anything more complex than a few sentences requires the services of a qualified translator. Some aspects to discuss with a translator are the level and tone of language used, which should mirror the original; the possibility that the language has a number of regional variants or dialects; the contextual nuances, which should convey concepts in line with family support values; and the appropriateness of cultural references. For quality assurance, review by a second translator and by community reviewers who are familiar with family support practice is recommended. The complexity of this review will depend on the importance and the projected lifespan of the document in question. It is important to plan for the time that good translation will take. In addition to all these issues related to written translation, oral interpretation raises problems because of the immediacy of the process and the likelihood that the interpreter is a volunteer or family member. Questions may arise concerning the accuracy of interpretation, since there is no time to check or review the choice of words; the fidelity of the interpretation to the speakers' intentions, without filtering or additions from the interpreter; the influence of any relationship with the interpreter, whether personal or through cultural factors such as gender, class, ethnic group, etc.; questions of confidentiality with a third party present (the interpreter); and accountability when the interpreter is not a member of a professional association. There are no simple solutions to these potential obstacles to good communication between practitioners and newcomers who do not speak the same language. However, becoming aware of the pitfalls is the first step to setting standards for good practice and achieving clearer mutual understanding.

Given the realities of immigration to Canada in the last thirty years, many community organizations are now called on to respond to participants who speak a wide variety of languages. To do this, they are attempting to offer services, or at least documents, in the languages of the families that come to them. When they don't have staff members who speak the required language, administrators and program directors have often been thrown into the business of supervising translation and interpretation¹. Too often, they are unprepared for the complications that this work involves. In this article, we will present some of the language issues encountered by community organizations that work with newcomer families who speak languages other than English or French. We will also suggest some ways of handling these issues to minimize the potential of miscommunication that can lead to problems². In the end, it is awareness of the pitfalls and careful attention to the details of the process that will produce better results for both practitioners and the families they serve.

More complicated than you might think

Maybe the only time you have had to think about how to say something in another language was when you were doing homework for a course in high school. If so, you may well think that translation and interpretation are pretty simple. Back then, all you had to do to complete the exercise at the end of the lesson was to look up each word in the dictionary at the back of the textbook. Then you might have to change the tense and the case to make it correspond to the original. No one ever asked the question, "Is this how a native speaker would express the same idea?" Or "If I actually said this to a native speaker, what would they understand and what would they think of me?" In the real world, these are key questions that make the processes of translation and interpretation considerably more complicated than they were in that high school language class.

If you have more immediate and more practical experience with moving from one language to another, you know that all kinds of roadblocks to clear communication can insert themselves in between speakers of different languages. Some of the roadblocks (and their solutions) apply to both written translation and oral interpretation. We will deal first with the challenges of producing documents in different languages, and then go on to the special issues of oral interpretation when dealing with families.

Who is qualified to do translation?

The fact that someone can speak more than one language does not make them a good translator, any more than the fact that someone has a valid driver's licence makes them a competent driving instructor. People study for years to learn how to take a document and express the same ideas in another language. They strive to do this in a way that is faithful to the author's original intention without sounding stilted to a native speaker. They learn to avoid the common pitfalls of translation. We have all had a laugh at instructions that come with imported appliances; we understand what they mean (sometimes) but that is not how we would say it. Online translation tools often produce the same effect. These are extreme illustrations of what can happen when translation is done without a real understanding of what the task requires. Maybe some of the translations that emerged

Translation is an activity based on written communication. The translator acts as an intermediary between speakers of different languages and cultures. A translator's work consists of transposing the content of a written document from one language to another while remaining faithful to the message and meaning of the original document. Translators also take into account the kind of text, the target audience and the degree of specialization of the text. Translators possess not only a very good knowledge of the language of the "source" text but also an excellent knowledge of the target language, which ideally is their mother tongue. Translators also have writing and research skills, as well as knowledge in specialized areas.

Some translators work with texts of a general nature while others specialize. Some translators are employed by organizations or companies, while others freelance. Certified translators abide by the code of ethics of their professional association.

Interpretation is an activity based on spoken communication. Interpreters facilitate oral communication among people of different languages and cultures.

— definitions from the Website of the Association of Translators, Terminologists and Interpreters of Manitoba, www.atim.mb.ca/en/languageprofessions.htm.

1. The term "interpretation" generally refers to spoken language and "translation" to written language.
2. Some of the suggestions in this article are based on the experience of FRP Canada's project coordinators for the *Welcome Here* project. As part of this project, many documents aimed at families with children were translated into 14 different languages. This involved working with numerous translators and community reviewers to ensure acceptable and useful products. The ten parent resource sheets are available in multiple languages at www.welcomehere.ca.

from your high school homework exercises would have given a native speaker a few laughs!

For anything more complicated than signs that point to the washrooms or say “no smoking,” you need to pay for the services of a professional translator. Perhaps most importantly, ask for references and samples of previous work that would be similar in subject and tone to your assignment. Translation is expensive; if you are very lucky, you may find a professional who is willing to do some work for you on a volunteer basis. You still need to be sure that they are qualified to do the kind of translation that you require.

Level of language

When you write material for program participants in English, you probably use a friendly tone and conversational language. Translators who usually work with academic and official documents may find it challenging to adapt their level of language to a style that suits children and families. They may feel that an informal style sounds “unprofessional” and would diminish the quality of their work. In addition, English tends to allow a quite informal style in writing; however, many other languages make a big distinction between what is acceptable in the spoken language and what is correct in the written language.

You will need to discuss these issues with your translator. Make it clear that you are aiming at a tone and a level of language that will be easy to read for a wide audience and that will make people feel welcome. Your translator may have a wide vocabulary and an elegant style, but ask them to adopt your tone. Emphasize that you do not want to drive away participants who may be intimidated by erudite language. Most of all, you want to make your documents easy to understand for all participants. If you are making the effort to write in clear, plain language, your translator should be mirroring your level of language, and not just translating the words.

Variants of the same language

A further challenge for translators is the dialect or variant of the language that your participants use. Both vocabulary and style may be different. Brazilian Portuguese is not the same as that spoken in Portugal. Some languages vary significantly

The website of the Corporation of Translators, Terminologists and Interpreters of New Brunswick lists links to the websites of provincial, national and international associations of professional translators and interpreters. www.ctinb.nb.ca/english/other_associations.php

from region to region inside the same country. English has regional variants too, though we might not be aware of them until our British friend says he is going to put the picnic basket in the boot. We may have to think a bit before we realize that he is going to put the basket into the trunk of the car, not try to squeeze it into his footwear.

You will help your translator by finding out which variant of a language your participants speak. In some cases, this question may be complicated. For instance, your participants could include speakers of several variants of Arabic. In this case, your translator should aim at a standard that can be understood by people from a variety of Arabic-speaking countries. You might have to sacrifice some of your informal tone in order to reach this common level of comprehension.

Some languages have variants that indicate not only the region that people come from but also their social class and level of education. We may think that two families come from the same country and, to our ears, speak the same language, when in fact they themselves are acutely aware of the class differences that separate them. These differences in class and education often manifest themselves in the level of language spoken. A professional translator will likely use the level of language of the higher social class. It is important to be aware that these differences exist and may influence the way documents are interpreted by your participants.

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An understanding of context

Unlike those translation exercises in your high school language course, any documents your organization wants to get translated take their meaning from a particular context. The context may include many assumptions that are probably not spelled out in the document in question, but that are crucial for a real understanding of its meaning. The translator may

be faced with many words in the other language that could translate an English word in your document. To be able to choose the appropriate one that conveys all the nuances of the original, he or she must understand something about the context. For instance, the idea of “discipline” might be expressed by different words depending on whether the context is within the military or within a family. If the translator makes the wrong choice, your suggestions about guiding children’s behaviour in the family might come out sounding as if you expect parents to impose military regimentation.

Ideally, you will find a translator who understands the nature and nuances of your work with families. If you are concerned about misinterpretations, take some time to discuss the assumptions that underlie your document with the translator. It will make their work easier and the product more useful. If you have had similar material translated before, supply the translator with a list of equivalent terms that you have already approved. It is also preferable to have the translator’s work read by a community reviewer, as discussed below.

An understanding of the culture

It is important for translators to have a good understanding of the culture of the participants whose language they are translating your material into. For instance, to take again the example of “discipline,” the most commonly used word in a particular culture may necessarily carry overtones of corporal punishment. The translator may have to adapt the text to make it clear that this is not what is being referred to.

In addition, some practices and objects that are common in Canada may be unfamiliar to newcomers and may require more explanation or adaptation. For example, recipes in Canada often measure ingredients in teaspoons and cups that would be confusing to people used to metric measures. Your translator will need to convert them. If you are describing a craft that uses popsicle sticks to someone whose language doesn’t have a word for popsicle, your translator may need to add a definition, or you may need to include a drawing. Another solution is to also include the English word in square brackets, since many people simply borrow words for things they don’t have names for in their own language. A drawing would also help if you are talking about teddy bears, which are not a common toy in all countries. Probably though it would not take long in Canada for a parent to learn where these toys fit into child culture in this country.

High school students and online translators tend to translate word by word, substituting a word in the second language for the original word. Qualified translators use their knowledge of the intended audience’s cultural references to help them

convey the author’s underlying idea. When you are choosing a translator, ask about his or her knowledge of the culture of the newcomer families who use your services. One area is worthy of particular mention here. Many documents produced by family support organizations refer to elements of children’s culture. Resource sheets on language development and early literacy may refer to songs and finger plays that parents are encouraged to use with children. Be sure to tell translators that you do not want anything of this nature translated word for word; these sections should not be included in the word count for calculating the bill. If the translator happens to know an equivalent song or game, he or she might suggest it, but it is probably better to call on a native speaker, either a participant or a practitioner, to supply this material.

A second (and third) opinion

Even if you have hired a well qualified translator and have coached this person in your requirements, it is always wise to have the translation read by a native speaker before posting it on a bulletin board or printing hundreds of copies. If it is a one-page invitation to a community breakfast next week, the review can be informal and brief. However, if this is a more complex document that you will be publishing in large quantities and using for awhile, you should give the review process more attention.

Depending on your budget and the importance of the document, the review process can include a number of different steps. One approach is to ask a second professional translator to review the work of the first. Be aware that because translation is not an exact science, professionals can have honest disagreements about how best to express your ideas. You may end up with two translations and no way to decide which is better. Ask each to explain the reasoning behind any divergent choices. You might also get another translator to take the text in the second language and translate it back into English. This process (sometimes called round-trip or reverse translation) may alert you to places where your intention was not understood and needs to be clarified.

Another approach to the review process is to have your translator’s work read by a native speaker who is familiar not only with the language, but also with the cultural context and the subject matter. Someone who has experience in the field will be sensitive to how your material will sound to the people they work with. In addition, practitioners who can imagine themselves using your translated material with families will be motivated to produce a truly practical and useful product.

The job of a practitioner/reviewer or community reader is not to translate, but he or she may be able to suggest some

changes that will make your material more accessible and user friendly. In particular, if your translator is short on child culture, a practitioner may be able to suggest equivalent nursery rhymes, songs and games that would be appropriate. Honing the final document through this process of back and forth between the community reader and the translator may take some time and effort. The more complex the language and cultural variants among your participants, the longer it will take. You should be prepared to pay a reasonable fee for the community reader's service, as for any proof reader, but their personal commitment will probably be what motivates them to persevere.

If you intend to use a community reader, let your translators know this right from the beginning. Professional translators might find it hard to accept the involvement of a "non-professional" in the process. Make it clear that you are not questioning their competence at their job; you are just asking someone in the field for an opinion on how the material will be received. You may yourself ask colleagues to reread your work for the same reasons when you write the English version of your material.

More time and money than you might think

It is obvious from this description that if you are planning to have a fairly lengthy and complex document translated, one that will be widely distributed and that you want to use for a long time, you should be prepared to go through many steps before your text is ready to publish. Plan for the time this will take and beware of short cuts. Even if your readers can more or less understand your message, you don't want the translation to be of such poor quality that it throws into doubt your professionalism and the credibility of your information.

The investment of time is reflected in the cost. Typically, translators are paid by the number of words. Prices range from 25 cents to 40 cents per word, depending on the complexity of the text and the language being translated. Knowing that translation costs will mount quickly may motivate you to be concise and eliminate all unnecessary words from the original. The more clearly an idea is expressed in the original, the easier it will be for a translator to express it in another language.

Interpretation

Interpretation—converting a spoken message from one language to another to facilitate an exchange between two or more people—raises many of the same issues as translation of written documents: level of language, variants of the same language, and an understanding of culture and context. It opens even more possibilities for miscommunication, however, since by its nature, it is immediate. The interpreter cannot research a term or reflect long on which of the possible words will best convey the speaker's meaning. There is, of course, no way to ask for a quality review to check the interpreter's work. Using a professional interpreter provides some assurance of quality; however, the kind of spoken communication that needs to be interpreted in a community setting does not generally warrant the expense of hiring a professional.

Most often, when practitioners speak with newcomer families, they call on whoever is available—family members, friends, other staff members, whoever can speak both languages at least a little. This may be sufficient when the information being conveyed is the hours of opening and the list of services provided. However, if practitioners need to have a more in-depth conversation with families, the use of informal interpreters can give rise to serious challenges, including questions of accuracy, fidelity, the interpreter-participant relationship, confidentiality and accountability.

In the remainder of this article, we will enumerate some of the possible pitfalls of informal interpretation, above and beyond the already-mentioned difficulties relating to translation. We will also draw from the medical literature to suggest how to make two-way communication as clear as possible when there is a third person in the middle³. Medical personnel have long had to deal with the complex issues surrounding informal interpretation relating to sensitive matters, issues that typically arise in family support practice as well.

Accuracy

As we have seen in the discussion of translation, accuracy is not a simple question of substituting one word for another.

You don't want the translation to be of such poor quality that it throws into doubt your professionalism and the credibility of your information.

3. For example, see "The Providers' Guide to Quality and Culture," an electronic resource published by Management Sciences for Health, a non-profit international health organization based in the U.S. <http://erc.msh.org/mainpage.cfm?file=4.5.0.htm&module=provider&language=English>

Before you start your conversation with a participant, try to get a sense of how fluent your interpreter is in both your language and the language of the person you wish to talk with. Let the interpreter know that he or she can interrupt you at any time to ask for clarification or explanation of any nuances. You can help by explaining beforehand any terms and background information that might be unfamiliar. Choose the simplest words you can to get the point across and avoid jargon, idioms and technical terms. The interpreter might understand them but find them difficult to render in the other language. Remember, you are probably not dealing with a professional who is trained to move quickly between languages.

You don't need to speak more slowly (and certainly not any more loudly!) than you usually do. People will generally find it easier to grasp the meaning of your sentences if you speak at a normal speed, but do encourage your interpreter to ask you to slow down if he or she is having trouble following you. When you are asking questions, ask one at a time and wait for an answer before continuing. If the response you get makes you feel that there has been a misunderstanding, try using different words to express the same idea.

Even if you want to supplement your words with gestures to increase understanding, this may not be the best approach. When the person you are talking to sees your gestures, they will not be connected to words in his or her own language and they may be confusing. Be aware that you may misinterpret the other person's gestures and facial expressions for the same reason. Don't jump to conclusions about what is meant by non-verbal language; ask the interpreter to explain if you are in doubt.

Leave enough time for the interview process so no one will feel rushed. Remember that everything that is said in an interpreted exchange will be said at least twice, and maybe even more times if clarifications are required. In addition, what can be said briefly in one language may take quite a few words to express in another.

Fidelity

Professional interpreters are trained to facilitate communication between speakers of different languages without distorting the speakers' intentions. They do not judge the content of the message, insert their own opinions, add personal comments, give advice, suggest answers, soften the tone, or filter out controversial or embarrassing information. Informal interpreters may be inclined to do all of these things. Sometimes they have the best of motives: a desire to please or a genuine wish to be helpful. Sometimes, they may themselves be embarrassed to have to repeat what has been said. They

may disagree with something you or the other person has expressed or feel that it is inappropriate or offensive. When this happens, the message goes through their filter and comes out somewhat changed. Instead of being a clear window between you and the person you are speaking with, interpreters like this put up a curtain of their own making.

To maximize the fidelity of the messages, make sure that the person who is interpreting understands your expectations. You want to hear *all* of what the other person is saying to you, and you want that person to hear *all* that you have said. You will not be offended by anything and will not judge the interpreter personally for reporting a message accurately. If the interpreter feels that more explanation is required for proper understanding, he or she should ask the person concerned to do the explaining, whether it is you or the participant. The job is then to translate those words, not supply his or her own explanation.

Context of the relationship

When you call on someone to act as an informal interpreter for a participant, you should be aware that the exchange could well be coloured by the relationship that already exists between those people. A particularly common case is children who have learned English at school and who translate for their newcomer parents. They are a convenient choice, but not always the best one. Apart from all the other problems arising from putting children in this role (limited vocabulary in both languages, limited knowledge of adult subjects, insufficient knowledge of the socio-cultural background in either the new or the old culture), it is clear that parents may hesitate to be frank because they wish to keep certain matters from their own children. This desire for privacy may also be true in the case of other family members and even of friends. Sometimes it is better to look for an informal interpreter who has no personal relationship with the participant family.

Even if there is no personal relationship, cultural factors may create a context that will influence the accuracy and fidelity of the interpretation. It may appear to us that two people speak the same language and come from the same country and should therefore have a lot in common. To the people involved, however, their relationship might be defined by the differences—in class, in education and in age—that divide them. Relationships of power, invisible to us, may lead to a failure in communication across the language barrier. For instance, an interpreter with higher status may seem intimidating to a family of lower status so that the family hesitates to express its real needs. If an interpreter with a lower class

accent is acting as intermediary for a highly educated family, that family may be offended at being dependent on someone whom they feel is unqualified. The story in the sidebar on this page illustrates how cultural values about relating to elders can lead to misunderstanding.

Gender is another variable that may affect the success of interpretation. Even where gender equality is the cultural norm, many women would be reluctant to have a man sitting in on intimate conversations, and the reverse is true too. Finally, historical factors may influence the relationship between participants and potential interpreters who speak the same language. Ethnic, regional and religious divisions carrying over from the country of origin may make the relationship so uncomfortable as to interfere with the success of communication.

It is clearly impossible for practitioners in community organizations to be aware of all the cultural and historical factors that might create a negative context for interpretation among the newcomer participants in their programs. Nonetheless, it is important to realize that these factors do exist and that their impact is significant. If you get the feeling that biases and stereotypes may be interfering with clear communication, try to bring them into the light. You might be able to remove obstacles by discussing them with the people involved. On the other hand, you might have to change interpreters.

Confidentiality

Professional interpreters are trained to respect confidentiality. They are under an obligation not to discuss anything that they may have heard during a private interview. Participants may rightfully be concerned that informal interpreters will not be held to the same standards. Many cultural communities are quite small and closely knit. It is entirely possible that the interpreter and the participant have acquaintances in common, even if they have never met before. Participants may be reluctant to speak if they think that their private family matters will become the subject of gossip in their cultural community.

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Deference to Age: A Hidden Cultural Factor

One morning a week, a family resource centre offered a drop-in program for grandparents who had come to Canada to help look after their grandchildren. The centre had hired a coordinator (call her Sue) who spoke the grandparents' language. Sue had succeeded in attracting quite a few participants to this program. The centre's director (call her Mary) was pleased, but when the cold weather came, she noticed that the grandparents were not using the cloakroom. Instead, they were draping their coats on the chairs and sofas. Mary thought this made the drop-in room look untidy, and it took up places that were supposed to be used to sit with the children. Mary asked Sue to pass the message to participants in their language, asking them to hang up coats in the cloakroom. Sue put up a sign in their language, but after a couple of weeks, Mary couldn't see any change. She asked Sue to repeat the message, and Sue agreed to do so. The following week, still no action, so Mary asked Sue what was happening. Was this a case of participants refusing to follow the rules of the centre? Was Sue not doing her job? Where was the communication breakdown?

Sue supplied the cultural piece that Mary was missing. She explained that since all these people were her elders, the rules of her culture dictated that it would be very impolite for her to give them an order. Because any request beyond the sign in the cloakroom would be viewed as impertinent, she had not in fact passed on the message. She had decided that to do a good job with these participants, it was more important that she keep their respect. If she interpreted Mary's request exactly, she might lose credibility and they might stop coming to the program.

Mary understood Sue's position, but she still felt that it was important that the coats be hung up in the cloakroom. If this group could leave their coats lying around, other participants might follow suit and this would be undesirable. Mary decided that, because she was an outsider, the participants would not expect her to be governed by the same cultural rules. Moreover, their attendance did not depend on their relationship with her. The next week, she went over to the sofa with the coats, smiled at the grandparents, pointed to the cloakroom, and quietly took all the coats there to hang them up. They got the message, no interpretation necessary.

Maintaining the family's reputation can seem more important than solving a problem. For instance, in some cultures, mental health issues are seen as the fault of the family and a cause for shame. It may be hard for people to seek help if they cannot count on secrecy. Although as a practitioner, your goal would be to eventually destigmatize mental illness, you have to acknowledge cultural norms and concentrate on providing immediate support based on families' current beliefs.

Before any private interview with a participant where an interpreter will be present, explain the obligation of confidentiality to the interpreter. Then, when the interview begins, repeat this obligation and ask the interpreter to explain it to the participant in the other language.

Accountability

Professional interpreters have extensive training in their field. They follow standards, back up their work and may belong to a professional association. When you use informal interpreters, you have no mechanism to ensure professional accountability. Your only assurance of quality is the informal interpreter's good will and desire to do a good job facilitating communication for families.

You can increase the good will by acknowledging the effort and time that your informal interpreters put into their work. You probably don't pay them, but they should receive abun-

dant thanks and recognition. Tell them you understand what a complicated process interpretation is. Acknowledge the difficulties and stress of the job. Look for training opportunities to assist them to improve their interpretation skills. Honour them along with your other volunteers for their contribution to the success of your organization and the well-being of families who need their help.

Conclusion

This article has outlined some of the challenges related to translation and interpretation in community organizations, particularly those that support newcomer families. Communicating with people in their own language is a powerful way to say "Welcome Here!". As this article makes clear, it is not always a simple matter. Becoming aware of the pitfalls is the first step to setting standards for good practice and achieving clearer mutual understanding.

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