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**(RE)CONSIDERANDO ÉTICA E IDEOLOGÍA  
EN SITUACIONES DE CONFLICTO**

**(RE)VISITING ETHICS AND IDEOLOGY IN  
SITUATIONS OF CONFLICT**

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# PUBLIC SERVICE INTERPRETING WITH MALE SURVIVORS AND ALLEGED PERPETRATORS OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE

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Most survivors of sexual violence are women. However, interpreters working with people coming from particularly troublesome conflict zones often encounter male survivors of sexual violence perpetrated on them by other men. The effects of such violence can be particularly painful, including rejection by spouse and peers. Due to unspoken denial, the story may unfold in an unexpected setting—in a regular encounter with the social worker, for instance. In such a situation, the other participants being unable to control their emotions, the interpreter's responsibilities may include ensuring that the encounter continues in a professional atmosphere.

In addition, male interpreters are often assigned to sex crime trials because many female interpreters refuse such assignments. In these cases, suspicions of unfairness due to linguistic insufficiencies (in *lingua franca* interpreting) often correlate with the atrocity of the accusations. Besides, due to a loaded atmosphere, the interpreter may feel that the other party treats him as the indigee's advocate.

In this paper, I will examine the limits of the interpreter's linguistic, psychological, and ethical responsibilities in such situations. The analysis is based on my experience as an interpreter and a participant observer-researcher in Finland.

**Key words:** *sexual violence, trauma interpreting, the interpreter's role, French or English as lingua franca.*

La mayoría de las víctimas de violencia sexual son mujeres. Por otro lado, los intérpretes que trabajan con clientes procedentes de zonas de conflicto particularmente problemáticas encuentran, con frecuencia, víctimas de violencia sexual que son hombres. Las consecuencias de este tipo de violencia pueden ser particularmente dolorosas, incluyendo el rechazo por la esposa y los compañeros. Debido a una denegación tácita, el recuento de esta violencia puede aparecer incluso en una situación inesperada – durante un encuentro corriente con la trabajadora social, por ejemplo. En una situación de estas características, los demás participantes siendo incapaces de controlar sus emociones, las responsabilidades del intérprete pueden incluir la de garantizar que el encuentro continúe en un ambiente profesional.

Además, los intérpretes de género masculino son a menudo asignados a juicios por crímenes sexuales, ya que muchos intérpretes mujeres no aceptan este tipo de encargos. En estos casos, las sospechas de injusticia vinculadas con insuficiencias lingüísticas (en casos en los que se utiliza una *lingua franca* que no es la lengua materna del cliente) suelen correlacionarse con la atrocidad de las acusaciones. Igualmente debido a un ambiente cargado, el intérprete puede sentir que se le trate como si fuera el defensor del acusado.

En este artículo, examinaré los límites de las responsabilidades lingüísticas, psicológicas y éticas del intérprete en este tipo de situaciones. El análisis se basa en mi experiencia como intérprete y participante-observador e investigador en Finlandia.

**Palabras clave:** *violencia sexual, interpretación del trauma, función del intérprete, francés o inglés como lingua franca.*

## 1. Introduction

In Finland and many other European countries, public service interpreters work as freelancers for an interpreting agency and have to accept assignments in a variety of domains including educational settings, the asylum procedure, social work, health care and mental health care, police interviews, and courtroom trials. Trauma related to sexual violence experienced or perpetrated by the interpreter's client (the immigrant or the refugee

whose level of the language spoken in the host country is not sufficient for interaction with the authorities) may become the topic of conversation in all these settings.

My focus in this paper is on English and French-speaking clients of public service interpreters in Finland. First, I will present some of the most salient features of situations in which the interpreter has to face the discourse of sexual violence in terms of the geographical, linguistic, and cultural background of the clients. Second, I will discuss examples of interpreting for survivors of sexual violence and sex offenders. To conclude, I will examine the particularities of the discourse of sexual violence in an attempt to explain why trauma is present even in situations in which it is not explicitly stated.

## 2. Linguistic, geographical, and cultural considerations

Most French-speaking clients of public service interpreters in Finland today come from West African countries, more than half of them from the Democratic Republic of Congo. Typically, they have arrived in Finland as asylum seekers. While most English clients come from Western Africa as well, their geographical backgrounds are more diverse, although Nigeria is the most common country of origin. Quite a few of them are asylum seekers as well. The number of underage asylum seekers is particularly high among French speakers. Many of them have experienced sexual abuse also during their trip to Europe.

While most French-speaking clients claim to be native speakers of French or have been registered as native speakers in official records, a minority (1 to 5 percent) of them are native speakers in European or traditional sociolinguistic terms. In fact, it is often difficult for clients to determine their native language(s) and the European concept of mother tongue appears to be foreign to them. There is considerable variation as to the resources these clients have in French. As for English, similar observations can be made; between 5 and 15 percent of the clients are native speakers in traditional sociolinguistic terms.

The question of mother tongue is of crucial importance because it is linked to unequal power relations. In fact, these clients come from highly diverse multilingual situations in which it may be normal to use different languages in daily life. Such situations are characteristically diglossic in a complex way, so that the official language, French or English, carries more prestige and symbolic capital (see e.g. Bourdieu 1977: 651-652) and is used in the interaction between the citizens and the authorities. But while the language repertoire may be perfectly valid and prestigious in the country of origin, this repertoire is often not adequate in Europe (Blommaert 2001, see also Albl-Mikasa 2013). This is often related to the high prestige of the written code in European societies, reflected in the fact the all interaction between the citizens and the authorities is permeated by text types, texts, and discourses that are written or based on written texts (Määttä 2014).

Public servants are often unaware of the fact that the interpreter and the client may have difficulties in understanding each other because their language skills are not equally distributed across different domains of language use. In fact, public servants rarely know how complex multilingualism and diglossia can be and their assumptions about language, different languages, and the relationships between languages reflect static, monolingual, and monolithic language ideologies that have been widely discussed in sociolinguistics in general (e.g. Blommaert 2006: 169) and interpreting studies in particular (see e.g. Määttä 2014, Eades 2012).

The number of individual living languages is estimated at 522 in Nigeria and at 212 in the Democratic Republic of Congo (Lewis et al. 2013). The prestige of the colonial language and problems related to the definition of the mother tongue are among factors explaining why interpreting is not provided in a language the client masters better. In addition, while there are a few interpreters for certain African *lingua francas*, there are only

a few or no interpreters at all for many other African languages. Privacy concerns also affect language choice: clients often prefer to have a Finnish interpreter of a world-wide lingua franca rather than an interpreter of a less-widely spoken language, for otherwise the risk of their knowing the interpreter personally is too high because these languages have such a reduced number of speakers in Finland. The preference for an interpreter not belonging to the same community is particularly clear in cases in which the person needing an interpreter has experienced sexual aggression or is accused of having been a perpetrator of an act of sexual violence.

Therefore, while some interpreters of languages such as Pashto, Kurdish, or Somali, often born in areas in which these languages are spoken, may encounter traumatic experience similar to their own when working with survivors of sexual violence, interpreters of *lingua francas* such as French or English, who tend to be Finnish, have only second-hand knowledge of the atrocities some of their clients have experienced. On the other hand, any interpreter can be a survivor of a traumatic experience.

### **3. Interpreting for male survivors of sexual violence and alleged sex offenders**

While a female survivor of sexual violence or gender-based violence usually prefers a female interpreter (see e.g. Dublin Rape Crisis Centre 2008: 11), there is no information as to the gender preference of male survivors of sexual violence. In fact, unspoken taboos related to rape committed on a man by another man or other men are so strong that gathering systematic information would be practically impossible. However, the high number of situations in which accounts of sexual violence emerge in other than therapeutic situations or asylum interviews would suggest that male survivors prefer to address their traumatic past in the presence of a male interpreter and a male service provider who are not members of their own community. As for alleged sex offenders in police interviews, encounters between the inmate and the lawyer in prisons, and in courtroom trials, male interpreters do these assignments more because many female interpreters refuse to accept them.

The most typical situations in which interpreters encounter male survivors of sexual violence are related to the asylum process, including the initial interview with the police, the actual asylum interview at the Immigration Service, meetings between the asylum seeker and the lawyer, and appointments for assessment and psychiatric treatment at centers for torture survivors. While the stories told by the client in these situations frequently contain detailed accounts of acts of sexual violence they have experienced, the presence of professional service providers trained to handle such situations makes it easier for the interpreter to maintain a professional distance.

If the decision on the asylum application is negative, most asylum seekers lodge an appeal with an administrative court. Interpreters' working conditions are not always adequate in these courts: for example, the interpreter is not allowed any background material on the grounds that this would jeopardize his or her neutrality. In addition, the somewhat hostile attitude of the court towards claims that are not based on any concrete proofs by a medical doctor may cause feelings of frustration and helplessness.

Psychological counselling and supervision is offered systematically only at centers for torture survivors. But there have been cases in which accounts of particularly atrocious experiences come up unexpectedly during the initial meeting with the psychiatrist although the goal of that meeting is to assess the patient's general eligibility to the rehabilitation program. In such cases it can happen that the service provider is too exhausted to provide counselling for the interpreter.

In addition, accounts of sexual violence experienced in the past are often told in meetings between psychologists and psychiatrists and a client in regular mental health care settings. The fact that mental health professionals tend to prefer to use the same interpreter for the entire duration of the treatment is emotionally exhausting to the interpreter. Mental health urgencies such as suicide attempts or acute episodes of psychosis related to post-traumatic syndrome are particularly strenuous. Self-destructive speech is also typical of situations in which the lawyer informs the client of a negative decision made by the Immigration Service.

From the interpreter's point of view, the worst situations are those in which the account of traumatic experiences occurs in the presence of service providers who are not trained to process such information. This may happen for example in the social worker's office. In such a situation, the interpreter is the only person able to control his or her emotions and capable of acting professionally. Feelings of frustration and even anger often accompany these situations: in addition to interpreting and controlling his or her own emotions, the interpreter has to control the emotions of the service provider and still maintain an objective yet emotionally engaged contact with the client in order to assure smooth communication. In such unexpected accounts of sexual violence the client's behavior is often psychotic.

While interpreting for survivors of sexual violence is challenging because the interpreter has to control exaggerated, inadequate compassion, interpreting for alleged perpetrators of sexual violence is challenging for other reasons. On the one hand, the client is accused of a very serious gender-based crime, on the other hand it is usually quite clear that the alleged offender is himself in a marginalized position. Thus, the client's language skills are typically barely sufficient to attend a courtroom trial—in fact, deficient language skills are a distinctive feature of these trials. The affective factor determining language choice is particularly important in these trials: since the client is accused of a particularly shameful crime, he is very reluctant to request an interpreter of a vernacular language of his country of origin.

The fact that the defendant's support team is invariably very small, usually consisting only of his lawyer, may explain the fact that the plaintiff's team sometimes treats the interpreter as the defendant's ally. In fact, lack of support and deficient language skills go hand in hand in these cases, which often generates contradictory feelings and frustration to the interpreter. And while it would be wiser to stop interpreting in the most blatant cases injustice related to the language barrier—paradoxically created by a *lingua franca*—the code of conduct of Finnish public service interpreters leaves that decision at the discretion of the court (SKTL 2013).

#### **4. Ethical considerations**

Previous research has widely shown how monolingual, monolithic language ideologies dominate public service interpreting and courtroom interpreting in particular (see e.g. Angermeyer 2006, Eades 2012, Määttä 2014). Examples of such ideologies include the conduit metaphor according to which the interpreter is a totally neutral translation device, the failure to acknowledge the difference between the written and the oral code, including the belief that oral language use can be transcribed in a neutral way, and the idea that meanings reside in individual words and can therefore be transferred as such from one language to another (see e.g. Mikkelsen 2008). In addition, there are powerful language ideologies related to *lingua franca* according to which individual multilingualism is regarded as being always “stable” across different domains of language use, including the distribution between oral and written language use, and presents similar characteristics in

all linguistic cultures. Such ideologies constitute one of the most important hindrances to a successful performance by the interpreter.

In fact, these language ideologies are closely linked to psychological and ethical dimensions. Thus, the idea of the interpreter being a neutral translating machine includes the idea that the interpreter is emotionless. This is also reflected in the Finnish public service interpreters' code of conduct which states that interpreters should not let their emotions have an impact on their work (SKTL 2013). However, experienced interpreters of trauma know that some kind of emotional involvement is necessary for a successful interpretation (see also Bancroft et al. 2012). One colleague referred to this subtle empathy as *objective compassion*. While it is practically impossible to describe this form of compassion in scientific or empirical terms, interpreters themselves can assess its efficiency by the outcome of the interpreter-mediated communicative event.

Therefore, while empathy has been identified as a major source of burnout (Miller et al. 1988, quoted in Shlesinger 2007), it can also be used as a valuable working tool when used correctly. In her study, Shlesinger (*ibid.*) concluded that interpreters who had experienced trauma in the past showed a higher incidence of burnout. As the time spent with torture survivors increased, so did the risk of burnout. Shlesinger argues these interpreters may have less emotional resources to tackle job stressors. She also mentions the interpreters' role ambiguity as a stress-accumulating factor possibly generating burnout (see also Angelelli 2004 and 2008, Valero-Garcés and Martin 2008, Morris 2011, Pöchhacker 2000).

As for vicarious trauma, Shlesinger's (2007) study showed that the risk is not significantly higher among interpreters compared to the general population. Even interpreters who had themselves experienced trauma in the past did not show higher levels of vicarious trauma. Supervision did not have an impact on the incidence of vicarious trauma.

While each interpreter is an individual and has different levels of tolerance of trauma, all interpreters interpreting trauma, whether they have experienced trauma themselves or not, have to develop personal tools to prevent vicarious trauma and burnout. Intuitively, many interpreters actually think that personally experienced trauma or exposure to the trauma of others is an essential learning experience in the path towards adequate coping and distancing techniques. Indeed, this is part of the ethical responsibilities of the interpreter: a highly ethical interpreter has to learn to take care of him or herself in order to be an interpreter enabling others to take care of themselves.

Many of us think that the interpreter should not be more than a link between two languages and cultures. However, interpreters who take care of themselves are automatically able to empower their clients as well and capable of offering them tools to access subject positions from which power relations can be negotiated. Therefore, learning and developing techniques for preventing burnout and vicarious trauma and access to supervision and counselling services should be not only a right but an obligation. The ethical responsibility of service providers working in multicultural settings, on the other hand, is to learn more about multilingualism and multilingual communication.

## 5. Concluding remarks

From a critical discourse studies perspective, public service or community interpreting can be regarded as a nexus (Scollon and Scollon 2004: 19) in which diverse discourses intersect. Discourse in this sense is defined as a relatively stable way of formation, maintenance, and contestation of meanings from a particular point of view. Typically, discourse in this sense is related to a type of activity. Examples of discourses within public

service interpreting would therefore include legal discourse, educational discourse, health care discourse, therapeutic discourse, and the discourse of social work.

One way of identifying discourses is to identify the source of linguistic authority from which the formation of meanings emerges. Discursive power would thus be the power to materialize meanings and have a material effect in the world. In this sense, sexual violence could also be regarded as a type of discourse. The specific features of this discourse include taboos related to emotional and affective dimensions: that which cannot be said aloud is expressed in part through visible, tangible emotions. Indeed, as Foucault (1994: 123) notes, discourse is also that which is not said—that which is visible in gestures, attitudes, ways of being, and spatial arrangements. Thus, when a large proportion of an interpreter's clients have experienced sexual violence, these interpreters are likely to be exposed to the discourse of sexual violence every day, even in situations in which accounts of violence are not explicitly present. More research is needed on the characteristics of this unspoken discourse which manifests itself in features such as sadness, fear, and the difficulty of establishing contact with the client.

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