

Published at: <https://why-me.org/2023/overcoming-language-barriers-in-the-restorative-process/>

Overcoming language barriers in the restorative process

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In an exciting new collaboration, Why me? and Goldsmiths, University of London are working together to explore how research in the university sector can be used to support more equitable access to [Restorative Justice for speakers of English as an additional language](#). What training, for example, would benefit interpreters working specifically in restorative conferences where not everyone shares the same language? What support may be required by facilitators of interpreter-mediated conferences? What complexities should we all be aware of, even when participants share the same language?

Part of the challenge of language barriers in Restorative Justice is the fact that no matter who is participating in the restorative conference, what one person narrates, and another person understands, can never be transferred *wholesale*. People are bearers of culture and lived experience, and no two people – no matter what language they speak – will interpret the same statement in exactly the same way. When we speak of cultural ‘difference’, even at a very basic level, this includes the difference of all human experience. All communication is ‘translational’ in the sense that the same problems of understanding that arise when transferring meaning between one language and another also take place when there is only language being spoken. We might say that even when everyone speaks the same language, the problem of translation persists.

The multicultural makeup of the UK underlines the need to increase meaningful access and to widen participation in restorative projects. The twin aims of accessibility and widening participation may mean, depending on the circumstances, providing a language interpreter, but also, on a greater level, being sensitive to different ways of speaking and listening and on being attuned to the challenges that can be posed by the use of family-member/community-member interpreters, and to questions of partiality and power that may arise when attempting to make use of services on a par with others.

Over 4m people in England and Wales do not speak English/Welsh as their main language. To widen participation in restorative justice, it is clear that interpreters may be needed. Yet, as [research by Dr Sarah Maitland](#) has shown, interpreter-mediated restorative justice conferencing risks deprioritising participants’ needs, through the mediating role the interpreter must play. Telling one’s story, and feeling understood, is crucial. But the ‘revoicing’ of participants’ voices through the interpreter may create an imbalance of power and impact on victim satisfaction and reoffending rates. To date, no research has investigated the experience of participants in interpreter-mediated conferences who speak English as an additional language, or to what extent the revoicing of participants’ words affects conference outcomes.

Against this backdrop, Why me? and Goldsmiths will come together to address these gaps. Rather than imposing solutions, these next steps are about questioning what service provision, training resources and changes at the level of policy are necessary for developing an enhanced sensitivity towards the complexities of linguistic and cultural difference in cases not only involving interpreters, but wherever 'translation' may be a barrier to victim and offender satisfaction.