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11. The impact of culture on interpreter behaviour

Helen Spencer-Oatey and Jianyu Xing

1. Introduction

This chapter explores the impact that cultural factors can have on interpreters‘ performance in intercultural interactions. Of course, all interactions that involve interpreters are inevitably intercultural interactions, but many intercultural interactions can (and very frequently do) take place without the involvement of interpreters.

In interpreter-mediated intercultural interactions, there are at least three parties: the two or more (groups of) primary interlocutors who want to communicate with each other but who cannot converse in a language that is mutually intelligible to everyone, and the interpreter(s). The interpreter is frequently regarded as a ‘non-person’, in that s/he is expected to contribute nothing to the substance of the interaction. However, as Wadensjö (1998: 67) points out, there are aspects of an interpreter’s role that do not fit that of a non-person. In formal settings where simultaneous or consecutive interpreting occurs, such as at major international conferences and diplomatic visits, the interpreter’s function is certainly constrained by the event, and the impact that the interpreter can have on the primary interlocutors (although not on the message conveyed) is limited. However, there are numerous other situations where the interpreter’s function is potentially more flexible, and it is on these less controlled settings that this chapter focuses. We argue that the interpreter is never a non-person in such contexts; on the contrary, s/he is an active participant who dynamically influences the ways in which the discourse develops.

We maintain that cultural factors have a major impact on the interpreters’ active involvement and this influences their effectiveness as mediators of meaning. In the first part of the chapter we focus on professional interpreters and in the second part we consider the use of untrained interpreters. In both cases, we explore the ways in which cultural factors influence the effectiveness of interpreters’ behaviour. The first section focuses on the various roles that an interpreter needs to play, and illustrates the (potential) impact of cultural factors on the effective performance of these various roles. The second section focuses on the use of untrained interpreters and examines some authentic intercultural data in which an interpreter’s unsatisfactory performance partly resulted in a very problematic encounter for the primary interlocutors, to a large extent because of inappropriate handling of cultural factors.

2. Culture and interpreter roles

The California Healthcare Interpreters Association (2002) identifies four main roles for interpreters: message converter, message clarifier, cultural clarifier, and patient advocate. We use this categorization as a framework for considering the impact of cultural factors on the interpreter’s task. Gulliver (1979; cited by Wadensjö 1998: 64) argues that a third party who is present at a negotiation will always exert some influence on the process, and we maintain that this applies to interpreters. In fact, we argue that in all their roles, professional interpreters are active participants who need to be consciously aware of the importance of managing cultural factors effectively (see also Thielmann in this volume and Roberts in this volume).

2.1. Interpreter as message converter

All professional interpreters are required to adhere to a code of ethics established by the regional, national or international organization to which they belong. ‘Accuracy’ is one of the ethical principles that almost all organizations identify, and the Office of Ethnic Affairs in Te Tari Matawaka, New Zealand (1995), explains it as follows: “The interpreter shall, to the best of their

ability, interpret faithfully and accurately between the parties; omitting nothing said by either party nor adding anything which the parties did not say".

Superficially, this may seem a straightforward principle to adhere to; however, in practice it can be quite complex, with cultural factors playing a role, as can be seen from the California Healthcare Interpreters Association's (2002) performance measures for this principle:

> Interpreters demonstrate accuracy and completeness by acting to:
> a. Convey verbal and non-verbal messages and speaker's tone of voice without changing the meaning of the message.
> b. Clarify the meaning of non-verbal expressions and gestures that have a specific or unique meaning within the cultural context of the speaker
> c. Maintain the tone and the message of the speaker even when it includes rudeness and obscenities. *Note:* different cultural understandings and levels of acceptance exist for the usage of obscene expressions and profanities, and we understand the resistance most interpreters have towards uttering such expressions, although interpreters need to honor the ethical principle of 'Accuracy and Completeness' by striving to render equivalent expressions.
> d. Reveal and correct interpreting errors as soon as recognized.
> e. Clarify meaning and verify understanding, particularly when there are differences in accent, dialect, register and culture.
> f. Maintain the same level of formal/informal language (register) used by the speaker, or to request permission to adjust this level in order to facilitate understanding when necessary to prevent potential communication breakdown
> g. Notify the parties of any medical terms, vocabulary words, or other expressions which may not have an equivalent either in the English or target languages, thus allowing speakers to give a simplified explanation of the terms, or to assist speakers in doing so.
>
> California Healthcare Interpreters Association (2002: 30–31)

Let us consider the case of explicit and implicit information. In low context cultures, a large proportion of the message is encoded explicitly in the words and structures, whereas in high context cultures, a smaller proportion is verbally encoded, with a greater proportion of the meaning needing to be inferred from the context. In court contexts, it is unacceptable for interpreters to change implicit language into a more explicit version, for as Wadensjö explains, "It would obviously be a challenge to the court if interpreters were … allowed to clarify an attorney's deliberately ambiguous question" (Wadensjö 1998: 75). However, in many contexts, this issue can give rise to genuine interpreting dilemmas. Suppose a Western company makes a proposal to a Chinese company and receives the response *kaolu kaolu*. This literally means 'I/we (implied) will (implied) think it over', but in this context it is generally understood as signifying polite refusal (Kondo et al. 1997). How should this be interpreted? Rendering it as, 'we'll think it over' could give the wrong impression, and lead the Western representative to expect a response later. On the other hand, saying 'I'm afraid we cannot agree at this time' might be too specific, especially if the Chinese company wanted to be deliberately ambiguous. Clearly, the interpreter's decisions on such matters can have a major impact on the interaction.

Similarly, the issue can give rise to major dilemmas in healthcare contexts, as Kaufert's (1999) research illustrates. Kaufert researched the experiences of Aboriginal health interpreters in Canada, and one of the examples he reports is as follows. A 72-year-old Aboriginal man was admitted to hospital for diagnostic evaluation of urinary tract problems. He spoke only Ojibway, and on his admission, his son acted as interpreter. The next day he was scheduled for a cystoscopic examination, and so arrangements were made for a male interpreter to come to help explain the procedure and get the patient's signature of consent. Unfortunately the male interpreter was called away, and the only interpreter available was a 28-year-old woman. The urologist started his explanation, but soon became frustrated because he felt the interpreter was hesitating too much and seemed unable to get his message across. After several unsatisfactory

exchanges, he drew a sketch of the male urinary system, and eventually the patient agreed to the procedure, saying that although he didn't understand everything, he would sign because he trusted them to do the best for him. Why was the interpreter so hesitant and seemingly incompetent? Kaufert explains it as follows:

> After the consent agreement was signed, the interpreter returned to her office and discussed the encounter with her supervisor. She explained how the direct translation of the physician's explanation of the procedure would have forced her to violate fundamental cultural prohibitions against references to urinary and reproductive anatomy in cross-gender communication. She added that her reluctance in this case was strongly influenced by the patient's age and by his status as a respected elder. The Director of the Aboriginal Services Program told her that professional medical interpreters must translate stigmatized concepts objectively and accurately. The interpreter agreed, but said that the elder would not have understood that her role as an interpreter had given her the privilege of using words which he saw as disrespectful in a conversation between a male elder and a young woman. The program Director conceded the validity of her point and agreed that the interview should have been delayed until a male interpreter was available.
>
> Kaufert (1999: 415–417)

2.2. Interpreter as message clarifier

An interpreter may need to intervene during an interpreting session in order to clarify a message. This can arise in the following ways:

- the interpreter has not fully understood the concept she/he is being asked to interpret and needs to ask for clarification;
- the interpreter realizes that the client or practitioner has misunderstood (or failed to understand) the message, even though the interpreter was correct;
- the interpreter needs to alert one of the principal interlocutors that a missed inference has occurred, or that a different inference has been drawn.

Cultural factors can often play a major role in such circumstances, as the following examples given by the Northern Ireland Health and Social Services Interpreting Service (2004) illustrate:

> *Different meaning inferred:*
> A Health Visitor in attempting to determine a date of birth may ask to see a passport. Yet such a request to some clients could imply that their status was being questioned, so an interpreter may intervene by explaining to the client why the request is being made and suggesting that any form containing a date of birth will do, this can then be reported back to the Health Visitor.
>
> *Inferred but not stated and knowledge assumed:*
> A GP may offer a hospital referral to a patient for minor surgery. The patient may be resistant as they are not sure if they can afford to pay for this yet may not say so from embarrassment. The GP may have assumed that the patient is aware such treatment is free. An Interpreter could prompt this by stating there may be confusion over the issue and asking for clarification.
>
> Northern Ireland Health and Social Services Interpreting Service (2004)

Interpreters need to be actively on the look-out for such clarification needs, and whether they (decide to) intervene or not clearly impacts on the way in which the discourse develops.

2.3. Interpreter as cultural clarifier/informant/mediator

The California Healthcare Interpreters Association (2002) explains this third role of the interpreter as cultural clarifier/informant/mediator as follows:

> The cultural clarifier role goes beyond word clarification to include a range of actions that typically relate to an interpreter's ultimate purpose of facilitating communication between parties not sharing a common culture. Interpreters are alert to cultural words or concepts that might lead to a misunderstanding, triggering a shift to the cultural clarifier role.
>
> California Healthcare Interpreters Association (2002: 43–44)

Sometimes the interpreter may need to explain what lies behind the behaviour of one of the primary interlocutors, as the following two examples from the healthcare sector illustrate:

> *Chinese birth traditions:*
> A Chinese mother who has recently given birth may be resistant to coming into an appointment until a month after childbirth, due to a traditional cultural practice of the mother and baby remaining in the home for this period.
>
> Northern Ireland Health and Social Services Interpreting Service (2004)

> *A Spanish–English interpreter who is called to the 'Well-Baby Nursery'*
> Interpreting for the physician, I ask her whether she wants her baby boy circumcised. She nods, but then pauses and very seriously adds, "But my friend had a baby circumcised here, and they did it too much. I don't like how he looks. Can they just cut off a little bit?" To me, the woman clearly wants to decline the procedure but is having difficulty refusing what she considers an instruction from the physician. In general, Latinos feel they should agree with physicians out of politeness and respect, even when they really disagree or do not understand the issues involved. They expect physicians to make the decisions for them and do not understand why they are asked to make choices. They are used to, and seem to prefer, deferring to experts. These patients do not understand the American medical system and its notion of informed consent. Only when more acculturated do they start taking the level of responsibility for their own health that Americans routinely assume. Language and cultural issues once again are intermixed.
>
> Haffner (1992)

The latter example illustrates how interpreters may feel the need not only act as cultural clarifiers but also as cultural informants. In fact, this is how they are increasingly used in the business sector. A guide to Business Interpreting produced by the Regional Language Network (no date, 2001) in the UK says that the interpreter is often a business person's best source of information and advice. Similarly, Edwards (2002), discussing the role of interpreters in peace and relief mission negotiations, maintains that "The interpreter is your local specialist in public relations. An interpreter can give you suggestions on the best way to proceed with a person from a different cultural background, and may notice nuances that would otherwise be overlooked". Katan (cited by Kondo et al. 1997) takes this a step further and asserts that the interpreter should become a cultural mediator. He argues that many business people are turning away from using professional interpreters, partly because they are seen as intruders, and partly because they are perceived as not having enough understanding of corporate culture. So Katan suggests that interpreters should adjust their roles and become cultural mediators in business contexts: 1) working with business parties before events and preparing them for any intercultural problems that might emerge; 2) gaining permission to stop events if a misunderstanding is causing difficulty; 3) preparing materials on intercultural meetings to brief clients and to raise awareness of the cultural factors in communication. This, in effect, turns interpreters into intercultural trainers, and in fact this is an increasing trend. A growing number of universities provide training in both elements, and many agencies nowadays provide both interpreting and cultural briefing services.

However, acting as a cultural informant can also bring its problems. Kaufert (1999), who interviewed Aboriginal interpreters in Canada, reports that many complained they were inappropriately expected to provide various types of 'instant information', such as a summary of Aboriginal beliefs affecting individual and community responses to death and dying:

> Other dilemmas for the interpreters included being asked for information about the community care environment of a patient being considered for a home based palliative care option. ... Interpreters complained that they experienced difficulty in providing information about environmental barriers to care when they did not know the community. They also emphasized that it was inappropriate to attempt to describe an individual or community's 'beliefs' in terms of both ethical considerations and their level of knowledge of the client. Two of the interpreters taking part in the study explained how these demands forced them into developing reductionist, decontextualized accounts of Aboriginal communities and descriptions of the ways in which Aboriginal people interpreted illness and death. Interpreters also stated that they recognized that the environment of communities was diverse and that responses to the experience of palliative care varied from individual to individual. One interpreter stated that it was dangerous to ask cultural mediators to provide "cultural formulas" characterising the perspectives of individuals or to develop generalisations about more inclusive cultural or linguistic groups.
>
> Kaufert (1999: 407–408)

2.4. Interpreter as client advocate

The California Healthcare Interpreters Association (2002) identifies a fourth possible role for interpreters – that of client advocate. Their rationale for this is as follows:

> Many immigrants may be unfamiliar with US healthcare system services available and their healthcare rights. Individuals with limited English proficiency find it difficult to advocate for their own right to the same level of care as English-speaking patients. Given the backdrop of such disparities, interpreters are often the only individuals in a position to recognize a problem and advocate on behalf of an individual patient. **However, the Patient Advocate role must remain an optional role for each individual healthcare interpreter in light of the high skill level required and the potential risk to both patient and interpreter.** [bold in original]
>
> California Healthcare Interpreters Association (2002: 45)

Kaufert (1999) reports that Aboriginal language interpretation programmes in Canada vary in their official commitment to interpreters acting as advocates. However, he maintains that the interpreters in his study frequently worked informally as mediators, using their power as gatekeepers over the exact content of the message conveyed, and that sometimes they adopted a clear advocacy role. For example, he reports that many health professionals showed discomfort with the extended process of family decision-making that Aboriginal patients typically prefer, and thus tended to offer only a limited range of palliative care options. In these situations, the interpreters stepped into an advocacy role, telling patients that they had the right to make informed choices about the type of care they wanted to receive and explaining that they could refuse or delay treatment. The interpreters' involvement in mediation under these conditions was regulated, however, by their own professional code of ethics, which demanded objectivity and neutrality in the translation of messages.

3. Using untrained interpreters

Many guidelines on the use of interpreters (e.g. the guidelines produced by The Office of Ethnic Affairs, Te Tari Matawaka, New Zealand) recommend strongly that only trained interpreters should be used, and warn of the risks of using untrained interpreters. Nevertheless, in practice,

and especially in less formal situations of intercultural contact, people who are more or less bilingual in the languages involved frequently take up the role of interpreter. This section explores some of the hazards (as well as some of the advantages) associated with this practice that relate to cultural factors.

3.1. Relatives as interpreters

In much public service or community interpreting, a family member takes on the role of interpreter. Sometimes this can work well, and it is what the family wants. For example, in the case (reported in section 1.1) of the 72-year-old Aboriginal man with urinary tract problems, Kaufert (1999: 418) reports that after he was found to have cancer, the man's son insisted on acting as the interpreter. When the official interpreter started to convey the diagnosis to the patient, the son immediately interrupted and would not allow him to continue. He explained that it was his responsibility to protect his father "from the 'bad news' of his cancer and his impending mortality" and insisted that he should act as interpreter.

In other circumstances, however, the use of a relative as an interpreter is highly problematic for cultural reasons, as Linda Haffner's (1992) personal experience as an interpreter illustrates:

> My next summons is from the Internal Medicine Clinic. The patient, a 50-year-old female peasant from Mexico, is accompanied by her 35-year-old son. Although the patient has been coming to the clinic for some time, she is new to me. Her son usually interprets, as he is reasonably fluent in both languages. This time I am called because the son has to leave to go to work.
>
> Before going into the room, the physician expresses to me his concern about whether the health problems claimed by this woman are real or imagined. She has been in the clinic three times before, each time with different vague and diffuse complaints, none of which make medical sense. As we learn, the poor woman has a fistula in her rectum. In her previous visits, she could not bring herself to reveal her symptoms in the presence of, and therefore to, her son as he interprets for her. She tells me that she has been so embarrassed about her condition that she has invented other symptoms to justify her visits to the physician. She confesses that she has been eager to have a hospital staff interpreter from the first visit, but her hope had not materialized until now.
>
> Haffner (1992: 256)

The problems of using relatives as interpreters are even more acute in the case of children. Haffner (1992) reports one situation where a pregnant woman was found to be having a stillbirth, and her 7-year-old daughter was used to tell her mother that the baby was dead. She then recounts the following incident, and reflects on culturally-related factors:

> I am reminded of the time when I was required for a family conference for a patient about to be discharged. When I arrive at the conference, present are a physician, a nurse, a physical therapist, a social worker, and several family members. The patient, the father, is absent. Everyone is sitting around a table except one. Standing by the physician is the patient's 9-year-old son, who is acting as the interpreter. The child looks frightened. The physician rather abruptly says to me, "We don't need you, the boy is doing fine". The boy, however, pleads with me to stay and take over, saying, "Please, *Señora*, can you help me? I don't know if I am doing it right". ... Being an interpreter is a heavy burden for a child, whose English is frequently marginal and certainly is not sophisticated. Disregard for these factors is hurtful to both the child and the family and threatens the effectiveness of the communication. The trauma to the unfortunate little girl (whose mother has a stillborn) is easily seen. I doubt anyone would consider using a child in this way if there were no language barrier. The situation in which the boy was used as an interpreter is similarly difficult, but the difficulty is perhaps a little more subtle.

> In rural Hispanic culture, the hierarchy is strict, with authority running from older to younger and from male to female. These relationships are for life, with parents in control of adult children and older adults in control of their younger adult siblings. Traditionally in Latino culture, the head of the family is expected to make the decisions regarding any family member. The whole family looks to this person for support and advice. By using a young family member as an interpreter, the physician puts the child in control, with a much higher status than the child would otherwise have. This disrupts the family's social order.
>
> Haffner (1992)

3.2. 'At hand' interpreters

In many situations, untrained interpreters are used because they are 'at hand' when an interpreter is needed. Knapp-Potthoff and Knapp (1987a, 1987b), in their research into 'non-professional' interpreting, found that the interpreters in their studies frequently functioned as independent individuals participating actively in the interactions. This quite often resulted in two problems: failure to interpret parts of what the primary interlocutors said, and the insertion of additional elements. In Knapp-Potthofff and Knapp's studies, some of this seemed to be due to personal concerns about face.

In our study of Chinese–British business meetings (Spencer-Oatey and Xing 2000, 2003, 2004, 2005) we found a similar situation during one (but not all) of the delegation visits. In this section we present some of the critical interactions that took place during this one particular trip. They illustrate the impact that intercultural factors can have on an (untrained) interpreter's performance and the problems that this can lead to.

In the trip concerned, six Chinese businessmen visited the headquarters of a British engineering company. They had already signed a contract with the British company in China to buy some engineering equipment, and the official purpose of the visit was to inspect the goods prior to shipping and to receive some end-user training. The British company concerned had previously hosted many Chinese delegations before, and on these previous occasions had nearly always used a PhD student (a native Chinese speaker) from a local university. This student was familiar with the technological aspects of the company's products, and the British company was very happy with his performance as an interpreter. However, at the time of this visit, this student was busy preparing for his PhD viva, and he recommended another Chinese PhD student from the same department to take his place. However, a number of problems arose as a result of his interpreting.

3.2.1. A problematic intervention

The first meeting between the British staff and the Chinese visitors was an introductory welcome meeting. The British chairman welcomed the visitors and shortly afterwards he asked the British staff to introduce themselves. When they had done this, he invited each of the Chinese visitors to introduce themselves. This immediately caused confusion among the visitors. The delegation leader turned to consult the others, and one of them requested in Chinese that he do it on their behalf. It was almost a minute before the delegation leader responded to the chairman's request, and at this point he began reading out a speech. Immediately the interpreter interrupted him saying, in Chinese, that they should first introduce themselves. This resulted in further worried faces and discussion in Chinese, before the visitors started introducing themselves individually. This can be seen from the following extract. (All names of the participants have been changed in all the extracts.)

(1) Welcome Meeting, just after the British participants have finished introducing themselves.
Int = Interpreter.

Jack: could could I now ask if if the members (.) could each introduce themselves so that we can learn (.) um (.) who they are and what their interests are.

Int: ta shuo jiushi rang nimen jiushi ziwo jieshao yixia jiushi yixie xingqu huozhe jiushi yixie er danwei ya yixie er zhege ziji de yixie xingqu aihao jieshao yixia??? [*he says that is he wants you that is to introduce yourselves that is your interests or that is something about your work unit or introduce some of your interests and hobbies.*]
Sun: [turns to colleagues and discusses with them and the interpreter in Chinese]
Sun: *we each introduce ourselves*
Shen: *it's best if you do it on our behalf*
Sun: [reading from a script] *first of all, to [X] Company=*
Int: bu shi bu shi. ta shuo xian jieshao yixia (.) wo shi jiushishuo shi jiushishuo wo shi gongsi de, wo shi danwei ?? [*no no. he said first you introduce yourself (.) I am that is I am that is I am from such and such a company, I am from such and such an organization*]
Sun: *I am [surname] from Company [name]*
Int: He is from [name of Company]
Chen: *say what you do*
Sun: *I'm involved in design*
Xu: *give your full name (.) full name (.) full name (.) say you're a design engineer*
Sun: *design engineer*
Int: His name is [name] and he is a design engineer.
Ma: *I am from [name of Company], and manager of the [product] Department*
Int: He is the manager of the [name of Department] of [name of Company]
[Chinese delegation members continue to introduce themselves.]

The meeting was video-recorded, and afterwards we played the recording back to both the British and Chinese participants (separately), asking them to stop the tape when they wanted to comment on something significant to them. Both the Chinese and British participants commented on this part of the interaction. The Chinese visitors all pointed out that it was normal and polite for the head of the delegation to 'say a few words of appreciation' on behalf of the whole group, and then to introduce himself and each member of the delegation. They were clearly offended that he had not been given this opportunity:

(2) Interview and video playback with Chinese delegation
Sun: *According to our home customs and protocol, speech is delivered on the basis of reciprocity. He has made his speech and I am expected to say something. ... In fact I was reluctant to speak, and I had nothing to say. But I had to, to say a few words. Right for the occasion, right? But he had finished his speech, and he didn't give me the opportunity, and they each introduced themselves, wasn't this clearly implied that they do look down upon us Chinese*.

The delegation members then started discussing the extent to which the interpreter was responsible for the problem:

(3) Interview and video playback with Chinese delegation
Ma: *at moments like this [interpreter's name] shouldn't have interrupted*
Lin: *that's right*
Xu: *from the Chinese point of view, it's normal to say a few words*
Sun: *to say something out of courtesy*
Ma: *in fact, let me say something not so pleasant, [interpreter] was just a translator, nothing more. ... he shouldn't have taken part in anything else. whatever I said, he shouldn't have butted in, he should have just translated it, this was a formal occasion. …*
Lin: *that's right, that's right. the key is to function as an interpreter …*
Sun: *on the other hand, maybe they didn't want me to speak*
Ma: *it's true that they didn't ask you to speak*
Lin: *you could speak and you did (??)*
Ma: *you had the right to*

Sun: *I was speaking but if they* [i.e. the British] *didn't want me to he wasn't wrong. you and I are not familiar with things here, isn't it that the British look down on us Chinese? ... from this point of view, this was implied. in fact I was reluctant to speak, and I had nothing to speak about. but I had to, to say a few words. right for the occasion, right? but you had finished your speech and you didn't give me the opportunity, and you each introduced yourself, wasn't this clearly implied that we do look down upon you Chinese?*

Ma: *no, no, in this whole thing I felt* [interpreter's name] *... played a very important role at this moment. ...*

Chen: *As far as [interpreter's name] is concerned, he went beyond his responsibility didn't he*

Lin: *this is the point* [several chorus agreement]

Chen: *[interpreter's name]'s interpreting is too brief, and sometimes he puts his own opinions into his interpreting, that won't do. this is not the way of interpreting.*

Presumably the interpreter felt that he needed to convey accurately the chairman's request for self-introductions, and that is why he interrupted the delegation leader when he started giving a brief speech. He ignored Chinese conventions regarding formal speeches in business meetings of this type, and insisted on accurate adherence to what the British chairman had asked for. From the British point of view, however, this was completely unnecessary. In the follow-up interview and video playback with the British chairman, he picked out this 'chaotic' situation prior to the Chinese introductions and commented:

(4) Interview and video playback with Jack, the British chairman

Jack: this was particularly funny this now. this is where I asked them to introduce themselves, and this is where they went into total chaos, and it just didn't work out. … I thought, well, you know, and that's where you wonder well what did the translator say.

Res: he was trying to give a return speech, he was expressing their thanks to [British company name], then he was cut short by the interpreter. the interpreter actually told them just to introduce themselves, just tell their names, their position, their interests…

Jack: and that's interesting, so it goes back to the point of our concern about interpretation, because if the interpreter said to me that they are just making a return speech, then it would have been fine.

So from the Chinese visitors' point of view, it was both appropriate and polite to make a return speech before the introductions. From the British chairman's comments, it is clear that he would have been quite happy with this. However, from the interpreter's perspective, he wanted the British chairman's initial request to be carried out exactly, and he intervened to ensure that it was. His concern for accuracy, and his disregard for Chinese conventions regarding formal speeches in business meetings of this type, not only caused unnecessary disruption to the natural flow of the event, but also caused some hard feelings on the Chinese side.

3.2.2. Zero renditions of 'sensitive' requests

The day before the end of the visit, the British company were planning to take the visitors to London for some shopping and sightseeing, and wanted to know if there was anywhere in particular in London that they would like to visit. The Chinese visitors, however, wanted to be given their 'pocket money' so that they could use it during the shopping trip. On this and previous occasions, when the British company signed a contract in China, they would add the cost of the delegation visit to the contract price, and there was an unofficial understanding that any balance remaining at the end of the visit would be given to the visitors as personal 'pocket money'. The Chinese wanted to receive this money now, so that they could spend it in London. They were concerned that they would have no opportunity to use it if they did not receive it until just before they left for the airport. However, despite repeated requests by the Chinese visitors, the interpreter

failed to interpret it on each occasion, until Xing (the researcher who was present) intervened. This is illustrated in the following extract:

(5) Meeting on the penultimate day of the visit. Int = Interpreter; Res = Researcher

Sajid: could you please ask them is there anything specific that they want to do in London because obviously we don't have much time left (gesturing to look at watch) (.) we must make plans (???)

Int: ta shuo nimen shi bu shi you teshu de yaoqiu zai Lundun [*he asked if you have anything specific to do in London*]

Shen: tamen yao ba women de feiyong suan yi suan dei (.) yaoburan mingtian meiyou shijian le. [*they should work out our expenses otherwise there will be no time for it tomorrow.*]

[not interpreted]

Sajid: (???) where do they want to go specifically? to Oxford Street (.) (???)

Int: Lundun de hua tamen bijiao da yidian, Niujin Jie, yitiao shangyejie, [*well, London is a big city. Oxford Street, a shopping street*]

Sajid: because we want to make this visit as fruitful as possible for them. (???) but for now (.) what do they want to do specifically? they want to go to the Bank of China to change money? can you ask them?

Int: ta de hua jiushishuo Lundun de hua, ye jiu shuo, yao zoulu de hua, cong zhe bian zou na bian de hua jiu shaowei yuan yidian, zheyang, ni ruguo xiang zai zhe er jiushishuo yige defang gouwu jiushishuo shi ba, zuo wan le zhi hou ta keyi kaiche, zai huan yige di'r [*in London, that is, if you walk, from this side to that side, it is a bit far. So if you decide to go shopping in one place, after you have finished, they can pick you up, and take you to another place.*]

[Chinese visitors discuss among themselves]

Sun: jiu zheyang ba. tamen yao jiesuan, jiesuan wanle yihou ba qian na chulai tamen hao gouwu [*it's like this. they want to settle the expenses, after they've settled the expenses they can get the spending money so that they can go shopping*]

[not interpreted]

Xu: zou ba [*let's go*]

Chen: nimen buyao zou ta [pointing to Sajid] hai you hua shuo ne. hai dei suanzhang [*no wait a minute he* [pointing to Sajid] *hasn't finished yet. And we have to settle the expenses.*]

[not interpreted]

Sajid: so where do they want to go? what do they want to do? they want to go to the Bank of China (.) to change your money (.) yes? can you ask them?

Int: shi bu shi xian xiang dao Zhongguo Yinhang na'r? [*do you want to first go to the Bank of China?*]

[Chinese visitors discuss among themselves. Some say: suan le, *no, forget it*]

Sun: bu shi (.) tamen de yisi shi xianzai keyi suanzhang. (turning to other members) wo de yisi shi bu shi zhe ge yisi ya? jie le zhang zhi hou neng bu neng gou ba qian na chulai name tamen hao gouwu. shi bu shi zhe ge yisi? [*no (.) they want to settle the expenses now.* (turning to other members) *is this what you want to say? After the settlement could they have the money so they can go shopping with it. Isn't it what you wanted to say?*]

[Visitors chorus: shi ya, *yes*]

[not interpreted]

Res: [to interpreter] na ni jiu wenwen ta shi bu shi keyi xian na nage spending money. ni keyi wen ta (2) ruguo huan bu liao qian de hua. [*you could ask him if they could have their spending money. You can ask him that. (2) if they can't change their money.*]

Sajid: so they want to go to the Bank of China?

Int: no (.) they don't think they can change their money there.

Sajid: so what do they want to do?

Res: well actually they said if they can get eh (.) for example (.) the spending money now (.) today (.) so that they can do some shopping in London they don't need to change money.

As can be seen from this extract, the Chinese visitors asked four times if their 'expenses could be settled', which was an indirect way of asking to be given their spending money. However, the interpreter did not interpret any of these requests into English, and only translated the British host's question about which part of London they wanted to visit. Needless to say, Sajid, the British host, was extremely confused by the interaction and Xing, the on-the-spot researcher, felt so uncomfortable that he spoke directly to the interpreter, recommending that he translate the Chinese visitors' request. However, the interpreter still did not do so, and when Sajid asked again whether they would like to go to the Bank of China, he gave an unhelpful reply. Eventually the researcher stepped in to convey the Chinese visitors' request.

Why then did the interpreter fail to interpret the Chinese request? The visitors themselves clearly regarded it as an embarrassing request, partly perhaps because it involved money, and partly because their entitlement to the 'pocket money' was an informal, unofficial one. So they referred to it as 'settling expenses' rather than 'getting their pocket money', and Sun (the delegation leader) distanced himself further by using the pronouns 'they' and 'you' rather than 'we'. The interpreter's handling of these interchanges suggests that he too found it embarrassing, and in fact too face-threatening to interpret. However, the British host was not concerned by the request, and did not seem offended when it was finally conveyed. He commented that it might be difficult to get the money at short notice, but left instantly to see to the matter, and returned soon after with some cash.

The next day, in the close-out meeting before the delegation left for the airport, the problem of money surfaced again. When the visitors were handed the balance of cash, the Chinese visitors felt they were entitled to more and asked to see the full list of costs that the British had incurred. Once again, the interpreter failed to interpret their request. Over a period of 50 minutes, the visitors repeated their request fourteen times, using the following terms and phrases: list of costs, proof, proof of cost, the basis of the expense calculations, how they worked out the figure. Yet the interpreter did not convey this to the British until Sun, the delegation leader, lost his temper with the interpreter saying, "*this is not your business, you just translate what I say, translate what he says, don't worry about us, don't be afraid*". Only then did he interpret what the Chinese were asking for.

A little later, when the interpreter again hesitated to interpret something, another of the Chinese visitors became extremely angry. He started blaming the British for cheating them out of the money that they felt they were due:

(6) Close-out meeting

Shen: *you just tell him. is it so easy to bully us Chinese (.) so easy to fool us around? this money is what we have been saving out of our mouth. we have had instant noodles every day just to save some money (.) and now they have grabbed it. how mean of them to do such a thing.*

Once again the interpreter failed to interpret this, and there was total silence for five seconds.

Needless to say, neither the Chinese nor the British were happy with the interpreter's performance. The visitors complained that his interpreting was too brief and that he interfered too much with the proceedings. They were unsure whether he was getting their message across clearly, either because of his language skills or else because he was afraid of offending the British company who was employing him and so did not speak clearly. The British staff were equally dissatisfied with the interpreter and had similar types of complaints. They commented that many of the interpretations were shorter than the original utterances, that he failed to interpret when they expected him to do so (and when their body language signalled that an interpretation was

needed and expected), and that he seemed to act as an active participant rather than as a mediator between the primary interlocutors. The visit as a whole was highly problematic for everyone, and both the British and the Chinese felt that the interpreter's behaviour and performance contributed significantly to these problems. He ignored Chinese conventions when he had no need to (when he stopped the Chinese delegation leader from giving a return speech), and he avoided conveying sensitive information (perhaps in an attempt to maintain harmony – supposedly a highly valued Chinese principle) when both British and Chinese primary interlocutors wanted him to convey the visitors' request clearly.

4. Concluding comments

The examples in this paper illustrate the very close interconnections between language and culture. They demonstrate the ways in which interpreters are active participants of an interaction, and how they exert influence on the development of the discourse. Interpreters have an extremely difficult task balancing accuracy and completeness on the one hand, with a range of cultural considerations on the other. We do not attempt to offer 'solutions' or practical advice for dealing with these matters; that would be too simplistic. However, we do call for more research and analysis to be carried out into this complex area, and we highlight the risk of using untrained interpreters for such a challenging task.

Transcription conventions

(.)	Pauses of less than one second
(3)	Pauses of the length indicated
=	Latching
(??)	Unintelligible speech
Word word	Words originally spoken in Chinese and translated into English by the authors

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