

Impartiality for the Bilingual Therapist & Interpreter

I recently spoke on the subject of impartiality for the Bilingual Therapist & Interpreter Forum at Birkbeck, University of London. My colleagues' reactions confirmed that this is something we interpreters struggle with... Why is that?

Public Service and Community Interpreters in the UK are expected to follow an impartial model and sign a Code of conduct to that effect when they embark on their career. For example, the NRPSI Code of Conduct states: "Practitioners shall at all times act impartially and shall not act in any way that might result in prejudice or preference on grounds of religion or belief, race, politics, gender, age, sexual orientation or disability..."

Yet, somehow, there will often be pressures on the interpreter to 'take sides.' The service provider may ask for the interpreter's opinion of the client, who in turn may want the interpreter to act as a 'saviour' or friend.

However, the greatest pressure actually comes from within! If we are to successfully remain impartial, we must face up to the fact that, as human beings, we are not naturally impartial: we have personal opinions, feelings, judgments, beliefs and prejudices. We must therefore learn to control our emotions and manage our prejudices.

What will help us to achieve this?

- Although it is true that we sign up to a Code of Conduct, we must **have our own strong Code of Ethics** to live up to! We must be honest with ourselves and others and be prepared to declare any conflict of interest, from the most obvious reason: we would not interpret for relatives or close friends, to the more personal: if we know we will struggle to be impartial when faced with certain situations or members of certain social groups because of our religious or political beliefs or prejudices we should have the honesty to admit it to ourselves and withdraw from the assignment.
- We must remember that **we are not responsible for the words** spoken by either party. We are not a participant in the conversation, we are the channel of communication no more, no less. Even if what is said is offensive or nonsensical, we must faithfully interpret every word without alteration.
- **Altering in any way the message** entrusted to us by the speaker is **wrong** because, by doing so, we are taking ownership of the words and making value judgments on what is being said. The speaker owns the words, the interpreter cannot decide what is or isn't relevant in what they say; if we do, we are literally stealing the person's words and substituting our own.
- **Impartiality involves more than words.** Our body language can betray what we think or feel deep inside. As we control our inner feelings and emotions, we must also control our facial expressions (no frowning, raising eyebrows, smirking, scowling etc.) and our body posture (no crossing our arms, fidgeting, clenching our fists etc.).
- Finally, we **must manage our prejudices.** To do so, we must first recognise that, like all other humans, we are prejudiced (whether we would admit it or not!). We should be honest with ourselves and acknowledge that for some reason, we have a negative gut reaction or uncomfortable feeling based on someone's ethnicity, membership of

a particular social group, how they look or dress and many other factors. We must then learn not to trust that initial feeling and put it aside and remember that, as a professional, we are responsible to treat everyone fairly in order to deliver our interpreting service.

Our aim is always to provide a professional service by sticking to our Code of Conduct, an essential part of which is impartiality.

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