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DEMANDS OF INTERPRETING

KEY CONCEPTS

Facilitating communication is more complex than the term might initially convey.

Interpreters will face demands in their work which come from four demand categories: environmental, interpersonal, paralinguistic, and intrapersonal.

An individual's *thought world* impacts their communication and therefore the work of the interpreter.

Intrapersonal demands, if unknown or unidentified, can compromise an interpreter's neutrality.

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DEMANDS OF INTERPRETING

As interpreters we often use the phrase *facilitating communication* to define our work. This definition may be perceived as simple and straightforward, but upon further exposure to the field of interpreting, it becomes obvious that facilitating communication is anything but simple and straightforward. Even without the presence of an interpreter, communication between two people is a very complex phenomenon. Part of the problem of defining what it is interpreters do is that we do not have a consistent nor complete definition of all that is involved in interpreting a communication event.

An early conceptualization of what communication means tends to focus on the spoken word.



A more advanced understanding of communication take into account body language, emotions or other affective qualities of language, and the intent behind the message.



An even more sophisticated understanding of communication will take into account the roles and other characteristics of the individuals who are communicating and what we like to describe as their “thought worlds.”



At the most advanced levels, we reach a detailed understanding of the entire communication situation, including the goals of the individuals and the influences of the environment in which the communication takes place.

Interpreters must be experts at analyzing and taking into account all these important elements that make up a given communication event. This textbook is meant to teach you how to recognize those different elements so that you can make better decisions about your translations/interpretations, your behavioral interactions with consumers, and how to handle ethical situations.

Since interpreting work involves the facilitation of communication, and since communication is more than words that are spoken or signs that are produced, it is important to have a framework for understanding and analyzing all the relevant communication elements beyond the basic building blocks of communication, such as words or signs. There is a considerable body of professional literature in the fields of linguistics, sociolinguistics, and the field of interpreting and translation *per se*, that identifies and discusses these many elements that contribute to communication. In your studies, you will likely read some of this scholarship. This textbook does not present an “approach” to interpreting work. Rather, it supplies a framework for understanding, analyzing, and talking about the work of interpreting. Our framework, or schema, will explore aspects of interpreting that reach

beyond the basic elements of language and considers the interactions of the individuals involved in communication events and the ways in which interpreters participate and shape those interactions.

When you learn about sociolinguistics and other important aspects of communication, you are learning about communication in general and can apply this knowledge to your own communication with your classmates, friends, family, and coworkers. But when communication becomes your



job, as it is with interpreters, then it is important to take what you know about communication at a personal level and begin to understand and apply it differently – at a professional level.

We use the term *demands* of interpreting to introduce you to a professional level analysis of interpreting work. Calling something a demand of your job means that it is a salient aspect of your work. It is a factor that rises to a level of significance that will, or should, impact the decision-making involved in your work. In our framework, or schema, interpreting demands fall into four categories, from the broadest impactful elements to the most specific elements. Each of these four categories

encompasses a distinct grouping of salient aspects of communication and human interaction that must be taken into account for a professional interpreter's work to be effective. The four demand categories are: (1) environmental demands, (2) interpersonal demands, (3) paralinguistic demands, and (4) intrapersonal demands. We use the abbreviation *EIPI*, the first letter from each demand category, to refer to the four categories collectively. In the paragraphs that follow, we will briefly introduce you to each of the EIPI demand categories.

The first category, *environmental demands*, addresses broad aspects of the communication setting in which the interpreter is employed. That is, a number of salient aspects of your work will be pre-defined by the work setting itself. The environmental demand category includes a range of specific demands that fall into four sub-categories: a) the goal of the

environment, b) demands related to the physical surroundings and characteristics of that work environment, c) the personnel and clientele who are present in that environment, and d) the specialized terminology that is likely to be used in that environment.

Environmental demands set the stage for what will later develop into interpersonal demands, the next category in our schema. Therefore, correctly identifying environmental demands is an important first step in preparing for what will later unfold during interpreting assignments. It is helpful to think of the distinction between environmental demands and interpersonal demands in the following way. Before the director of a movie calls, "Action!" all of the characters, the lines they've memorized, the scenery, and the props are ready and in place. These preparations are like the environmental demands. Obviously, a complete understanding of the movie must include an appreciation for these fundamental, preparatory elements. Once the word "action" is given, the interaction between all of these elements begins. If we only begin to pay attention after the action has begun, our appreciation for the complexities of the movie, especially its more fundamental elements, will be less.

Table 1.1

Demand Category	Definition	Examples
Environmental	That which is specific to the setting	Sub-categories include: goal of the environment physical surroundings personnel/clientele specialized terminology
Interpersonal	That which is specific to the interaction of the consumers and the interpreter	Power/authority dynamics Communication style Communication goals Emotional tone or mood Cultural dynamics Thought worlds
Paralinguistic	That which is specific to the quality of the consumers' expressive language	Physical limitations Cognitive limitations Physical positioning Idiosyncratic sign/speech Volume Pace Accents
Intrapersonal	That which is specific to the interpreter	Feelings/thoughts Physiological distractions Psychological responses

In essence, *interpersonal demands* pertain to what happens when “action” is called on the set of a real interpreting assignment. This means not only what happens between the consumers you are working with but what happens between the consumers and the interpreter, or significant things that happen between any other people who are present in the environment as well, provided those interactions impact, or should impact, your interpreting work. Table 1.1 provides examples of demands that fall into the interpersonal category.

There are many of these interaction-related demands. Primary among them are the individuals’ communication *objectives*. Individuals’ communication objectives are unique to their personal situation and desires and are distinct from the goal of the environment. The goal of the environment is unrelated to any specific person. It usually is a broad, unchanging goal that applies generally to all the people who are there. For example, the goal of the environment of a hospital emergency department is to determine the severity of an illness or injury, apply immediate life-saving care (if needed), and determine where any further care should be delivered (hospital, outpatient facility, or home). The communication objective of individuals present, on the other hand, might be to take a thorough medical history (nurse), determine the severity of a fracture (doctor), or obtain pain relief and return to home or work as quickly as possible (patient).



The communication objectives of individuals are specific, variable, and might not be shared by others who are present. Another aspect of interpersonal demands which is related to the communication objectives is the parties’ “thought worlds.” Before we move on to give more examples of interpersonal demands, let’s define the term “thought worlds,” since it is such an important concept in relation to the work of interpreters.

The term “thought worlds” was used by spoken language interpreter Claude Namy, who wrote, “Interpreting...is not merely transposing from one language to another. It is, rather, throwing a semantic bridge between two different cultures, and two different thought worlds.”

What does Namy mean by “thought worlds?” We think of one’s thought world as the combination of all the mental influences upon that person’s perceptions, cognitions, feelings, and behaviors at a specific moment

in time. Philosophers might call it one's "phenomenology" at that moment in time. One's thought world may be influenced by socio-cultural experiences, upbringing, values, and emotions. In relation to communication, one's thought world lies behind what a person is trying to convey when they are saying/ signing something – their intention as well as their specific word or sign choices. Bear in mind that people first experience thoughts (and sometimes feelings) before they begin to encode those thoughts into language. Thus, language is secondary to thought. You first formulate something you want to convey in your mind and, after that, you encode that thought into language. As we all know from experience, based on what we end up saying, the intent of our message can sometimes be very different in our thought world than in the thought world of the person who is receiving our communication. "The single biggest problem in communication," George Bernard Shaw has been credited as saying, "is the illusion that it has take place." Given the primacy of thought worlds in communication's origins and outcomes, when selecting the best translation, interpreters must consider not only what was *said* by a consumer but *why* it was said – which is a function of that individual's thought world.

Consider the thought world differences and the subsequent translation differences between two individuals who utter the exact same English phrase. First, a receptionist at a doctor's office who is calling upon the next patient and, second, an elementary school teacher who is correcting the mischievous behavior of two students. Suppose, despite their very different thought worlds, both these individuals encode their thoughts with the statement "Can I help you?" Would the optimal translation decision be the same in both cases, given that the English language utterance is exactly the same? Hopefully, you readily understand that what these two individuals mean is very different indeed and, moreover, the situation that gave rise to their exact same utterance matters greatly in deciding upon an optimal translation. Consider these two individuals' very different thought worlds. The thought world of the receptionist might include: "You're next. What is your name? What doctor are you here to see? What time is your appointment?" The thought world of the teacher might include: "Stop disrupting the class. I'll just give you a warning this time."



Claude Namy suggests that differing thought worlds should inform our interpretation decisions. Our consumers come to their communication interaction influenced greatly by their unique thought worlds. Of course, accurately understanding someone else's thought world is not very easy but the more you learn about people, their socio-cultural experiences, and the roles they play in various interpreting scenarios, the more adept you will become at perceiving or predicting what someone is thinking, how they might be feeling, and what and why they are communicating the things that they are.

Other examples of interpersonal demands include: emotional tone or mood factors, power and authority dynamics, relationship characteristics, communication flow (such as turn-taking), role, and cultural differences. These complex dynamics, including individuals' interactions with you as the interpreter, are what make up the interpersonal demand category. Interpersonal demands will comprise the bulk of the demands that you face as an interpreter. Many interpreting scholars, and those in related fields, rightly focus their work on what we would call interpersonal demands. You will likely read publications by such authors as you come to understand the complexity of this demand category and how best to respond to interpersonal demands – linguistically, behaviorally, and ethically.

The third demand category in our schema is the *paralinguistic demand* category. Paralinguistic demands can best be understood not as *what* is being said (or signed) but *how* it is being said (or signed). The prefix *para-* relates to the terms *around*, *surrounding*, or *approaching*. Thus, paralinguistic demands pertain to the “packaging” that surrounds a language utterance – factors that affect the *perceptual quality* of that language utterance as opposed to the *meaning* of the utterance. Table 1.1 presents a number of paralinguistic demand examples. One is the volume of speech. When a person's speech volume deviates from a range that is typical, by talking either quite loudly or quite softly, this becomes a paralinguistic demand that will affect the interpreter's work. Other examples of paralinguistic demands include atypical pace, accents, idiosyncratic manners of signing or speaking, unusual physical positions of the speaker/signer, even physical or cognitive limitations that affect language clarity.

While interpreting for someone who is talking very loudly or barely above a whisper are two common paralinguistic demands, there are many others. Imagine interpreting for a hearing person from another country who has a strong accent. Imagine interpreting for a deaf person who is lying down, or interpreting for two people who are walking and talking outside. Imagine the

challenge of interpreting for a deaf person whose arm is in a sling or who is visiting the dentist and communicating while lying in the dentist's chair with instruments in his/her mouth. Paralinguistic demands also can stem from abnormalities in the cognitive, speech, or movement processes of individuals who are under the influence of medicines, drugs, or alcohol, or who are affected by psychosis, developmental disabilities, stroke, or other conditions.

Paralinguistics involve the anatomical components that work in concert to produce language: the brain, the vocal cords, tongue, teeth, mouth, and lungs and, in the case of sign language, the fingers, hands, arms, face, neck, and upper body in general. Each of these anatomical structures, and how they are functioning, contribute to what eventually meets the eyes and ears of the interpreter. Paralinguistic demands also can include barriers – either visual or acoustic barriers – that interfere with communication between you and your consumer.



The final demand category in our schema is the *intrapersonal demand* category. Intrapersonal demands are best defined as that which is specific to the cognitive, physiological, and psychological experiences of the interpreter. Some examples include fatigue, hunger, physical pain, and a wide variety of thoughts or feelings the interpreter might have regarding and/or during their work. Such thoughts or feelings might include concerns about one's safety, interpreting performance, liability, or the people and environment they are dealing with during an assignment.

You may be wondering why a category involving the internal processes of the interpreter would be important to include in an analysis of interpreted communication events. Aren't interpreters supposed to be neutral and unbiased in their facilitation of communication? Yes; it is important not to let our personal thoughts or feelings impact the communication event we are interpreting in – as much as we are able do that. But the only way to “get out of the way” in this regard is to recognize that you *are* in the way, by the very fact that you are present in the situation. Your thoughts, feelings, and your biases about the environment, the situation, and the dynamics that are occurring *will* inadvertently get in the way of the facilitation process *if* you are not keenly aware of what your thoughts, feelings, and biases are. That is

why it is so important to be attuned to your internal processes, especially how your judgments about what is going on are deeply influenced by who you are, your values, and your life experiences.

Until you gain more familiarity with the schema, it may be difficult to fully grasp the nature of and distinctions between these four demand categories and how to properly differentiate which demands belong to which category. This is a normal part of the learning process and will become easier as you apply the schema to your thinking about interpreting work. We have designed class activities and homework assignments to help you digest and apply this initial information about the demands of interpreting. Each of the subsequent chapters in this textbook, builds upon this initial information.