



The Inns of
Court College
of Advocacy

Interpreters

Foreign Languages in Court
and the use of Interpreters

Transcript of video

Distressed Woman: My bag! My bag! Where's my bag?

Narrator One: The incident you've just seen was witnessed by the woman in the blue coat. She is Romanian, and does not speak any English. She is summoned to give evidence in court; she will be speaking in her mother tongue, aided by an interpreter.

[Interpreter addresses woman in Romanian]

Narrator Two: Some 400 languages are now spoken in the United Kingdom. This witness is one of the hundreds of foreign language speakers who give evidence in legal proceedings to interpreters every day. Communicating through an interpreter is a complex process, open to misadventure.

Anthony Tanning: Miss Slavic, could you please tell the court your full name?

[Interpreter translates question to Miss Slavic, she replies in Romanian]

Interpreter: My name is Nadia Slavic.

Anthony Tanning: Can you also please give your home address?

Narrator One: This short film is presented by the Advocacy Training Council of the Inns of Court, in collaboration with the universities of Surrey and Middlesex. It shows advocates how to meet the challenge of working with a foreign language witness, and how to work effectively with interpreters. It introduces ideas that will be explored in further training.

Anthony Tanning: Please tell us what your first language is.

[Interpreter translates question to Miss Slavic, she replies in Romanian]

Interpreter: Romanian language.

Anthony Tanning: Do you speak English?

[Interpreter translates question to Ms. Slavic, she replies in Romanian]

Interpreter: Very little.

Narrator Two: Interpreting may appear to be a straightforward task of transferring words from one language to another, however a good interpreter processes a whole message - not just words - and re-expresses that message in the target language. This requires concentration and advanced linguistic and communicative skills.

[Interpreter translates question to Ms. Slavic, she replies in Romanian]

Interpreter: Yes, quite well.

Anthony Tanning: Miss Slavic, while you were sitting in the cafe did something happen that you can particularly remember?

[Interpreter translates question to Ms. Slavic, she replies in Romanian]

Narrator One: When you are examining a foreign language speaker remember your basic training; maintain eye contact with the witness, remember you're examining the witness - not the interpreter, ask one question at a time, keep your questions short and simple, use plain language, maintain an even pace, and give the interpreter time to translate.

[Miss Slavic replies to an interpreter's question in Romanian]

Interpreter: Yes, he was wearing a green jacket.

Anthony Tanning: Miss Slavic do you recall what the man in the blue anorak was doing at this time?

[Interpreter translates question to Miss Slavic, she replies in Romanian]

Interpreter: I don't know, was he sitting at the table?

Narrator Two: Working through an interpreter is a three-way process; the interpreter's aim is to ensure what is said, and how it is said, is understood by the listeners in the same way, and with the impact that the advocate or the witness intended.

[Miss Slavic replies to an interpreter's question in Romanian]

Interpreter: He went towards the lady, wrenched her handbag, and ran off.

Paul Letman: Thank you, your Honour. Miss Slavic, you had started work quite early that day; six o'clock in the morning I believe, so you'd had a long day - and they don't give you many breaks in hospital during the course of the day, so I expect you were tired?

Sir Stanley Burnton: Mr. Letman that sounds to me like three questions and a statement, can you rephrase that please?

Paul Letman: Your Honour, of course.

Narrator One: Keep your questions short and simple.

Paul Letman: ...at about six o'clock in the morning that day?

[Interpreter translates question to Miss Slavic, she replies in Romanian]

Interpreter: Yes

Paul Letman: And you'd finished work about 4:15 in the afternoon?

[Interpreter translates question to Miss Slavic, she replies in Romanian]

Interpreter: Yes

Paul Letman: You work in the A&E department don't you?

Interpreter: May the interpreter intervene your Honour to get clarification of the acronym "A&E"?

Sir Stanley Burnton: Yes.

Narrator One: Avoid acronyms; they do not easily translate into another language.

[Interpreter translates question to Miss Slavic, she replies in Romanian]

Interpreter: No, no, no, no, no, no...

Paul Letman: So you were speaking to a lady friend on the telephone, you were looking out for your bus, the last thing that you were paying attention to was what was going on at the other tables in the cafe?

[Interpreter translates question to Miss Slavic, she replies in Romanian]

Interpreter: That's not true.

Sir Stanley Burnton: Mr Letman if you are putting to the witness that she didn't see the victim knocked over you should put that to her.

[Interpreter translates to Miss Slavic in Romanian]

Paul Letman: Miss Slavic, your attention was elsewhere and you simply didn't see this lady knocked over?

[Interpreter translates question to Miss Slavic, she replies in Romanian]

Interpreter: Well, I was there I saw what happened.

Narrator Two: A skilled interpreter conveys not just the words, but the intended meanings, tone of voice and other features like hesitations, repetitions, and self-corrections.

[Interpreter translates question to Miss Slavic, she replies in Romanian]

Interpreter: Yes, yes.

Paul Letman: Well, Mr. Interpreter can you ask the witness who she was speaking to at the time?

Narrator One: Do not talk to the interpreter, talk to the witness.

Interpreter: With a lady friend of mine.

Screen Text: CONCLUSION

1. Keep questions simple using straightforward English

Sir Stanley Burnton: First of all the questions have to be kept simple, in straightforward English, you can't necessarily rely on an interpreter being able to translate idiomatic expressions.

2. Pacing – allow ample time

Secondly you must be careful about the pacing of your question; you must give ample time for the interpreter to translate it, ample time for the witness to respond, and ample time for the interpreter to translate the answer to the question.

3. Put your case in a straightforward way

Thirdly, ultimately you must put your case in a straightforward way; particularly important in this context where the question is being interpreted by someone who may not understand the direction in which the questioning is going.

Narrator One: The Advocacy Training Council is committed to promoting excellence in all areas of advocacy. We address the core challenges faced by today's advocates. For more information about advocacy training please follow the links below.

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