

INTERPRETING IN A REFUGEE CONTEXT (RLD 3)

June 1993

Introduction

Why this module?

The function performed by interpreters – that of overcoming the barrier of language – is vital in any international context. This function assumes an added dimension when it comes to the tasks for which UNHCR was created, which are those of protecting and assisting refugees.

Of the numerous settings in which the services of an interpreter are needed, the most important is that of the interview for refugee status. Being recognized – or not – as a refugee will have direct consequences for the life and well-being of the applicant and his/her family. A heavy burden of responsibility lies on the interviewer. The ease and accuracy of communication are also of great importance, and it is in this that the interpreter has a vital role to play.

Persons who are called upon to provide interpreting services, especially those with little previous experience of UNHCR's work, need guidance on how to perform their role effectively. This module is designed to provide this guidance and to meet the needs of a wide range of users including persons who are relatively new to interpretation.

What the module contains and how it was developed

The module includes **four Chapters** as follows:

- Understanding the Context
- Choosing the Type of Interpretation
- Taking Notes for Consecutive Interpretation
- Some General Advice

The module is based on in-pu from a variety of persons and sources both within UNHCR and outside, including the International Catholic Migration Commission. All have first-hand experience of working through interpreters, particularly within the refugee determination process. In preparing this module, we have also benefited from the expertise of a professional interpreter, Ms. Kathy Bijleveld, to whom we are greatly indebted.

How it can be used

- The module is primarily intended as a self-instructional tool. Each chapter begins with simple *learning objectives*, which form the basis of the text itself. Wherever possible, the advice and guidance offered is in the form of checklists for quick and easy reference by the user. Additional training activities are suggested when relevant.
- It can also be used by staff of UNHCR or its operational partners who frequently use the services of interpreters. They will find it useful to gain a better understanding of the interpreters' role and techniques. They may also choose to use it as basis for training sessions which they may wish to organize for the benefit of their interpreter(s). In this case, additional tools are available on request from the Training Section at Headquarters.

For practical reasons, the English language is the reference used by the module. However, the basic principles it contains can be applied to all other languages.

Acknowledgement

Thanks are due to the Ford Foundation, which helped cover the cost of developing this training module.

Chapter 1 **Understanding the Context**

In this Chapter you will find answers to questions such as:

- why was UNHCR created?
- what is its mandate?
- where and how does UNHCR operate?
- what kind of work does UNHCR do?
- what is meant by UNHCR's protection functions?
- how does the determination process work?

As an interpreter working in the refugee context, it is important to understand the broader context of this work. This is the purpose of this first chapter. Although the information provided here is brief, it is important that you read it carefully. It will provide you with answers to some basic questions that relate to UNHCR, where it fits within the United Nations system, its history and its work, the definition of a refugee and the process of determining refugee status.

More detailed information is contained in a general Information Paper issued by UNHCR, as well as in other training modules such as the Introduction to International Protection (RLD 1), UNHCR Within the UN System (OHC 2) and the Determination of Refugee Status (RLD 2). Copies of all of these texts are available with UNHCR Field Offices, or can be obtained from the Training Section at Headquarters.

Understanding the broader context of UNHCR's work will help you perform more effectively in the task for which your services are needed. This is particularly true of interviews to determine the granting of refugee status.

Why was UNHCR created?

UNHCR was conceived in the aftermath of the Second World War, at a time when the issue of human rights was high on the agenda of the international community. Its immediate predecessor, the International Refugee Organization (IRO), had been concerned with resettling people displaced by the war, and reached the end of its mandate in 1950. Yet there still remained over 1 million refugees, many of whom were living in camps.

By decision of the General Assembly of the United Nations, UNHCR began operations in 1951 as a new humanitarian organization. The High Commissioner is elected by the General Assembly and reports to that body through the **Economic and Social Council**. Policy directives are provided by the General Assembly. In accordance with its Statute, UNHCR's work is *humanitarian* and *non-political* in character.

Look carefully at the chart overleaf. It shows clearly where UNHCR fits within the UN system.

What is UNHCR's mandate?

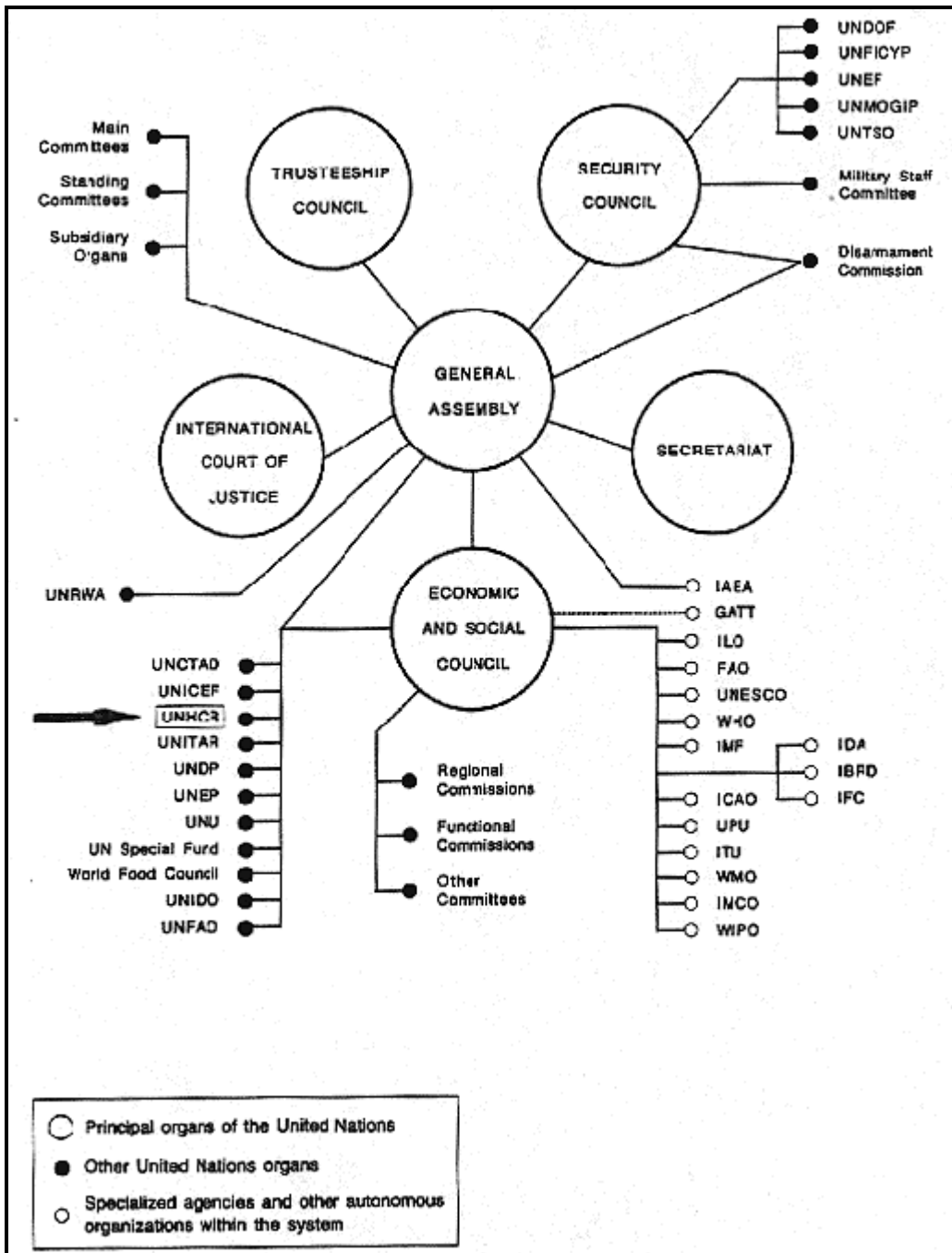
UNHCR has two basic functions, which are as follows:

- to provide international protection to refugees;

- to seek lasting solutions to their problems.

These solutions fall into three categories:

- **voluntary repatriation:** usually the preferred solution;
- **local settlement:** assisting refugees to integrate within the host community;
- **resettlement:** encouraging governments to offer places for permanent settlement.



Where and how does UNHCR operate?

UNHCR's Headquarters are in Geneva. It has field offices throughout the world as you may see from the

maps below. Much of its work is performed through operational partners. These may be national or local authorities of the country concerned, other organizations of the United Nations system, non-governmental organizations, or private technical agencies.



What kind of work does UNHCR do?

The scale and scope of UNHCR's activities have changed radically over the years.

In the **early 1950's**, Western Europe gradually emptied its camps of Second World War refugees, many of whom found new homes in the Americas and Oceania. But at the same time 10,000 new refugees were arriving each year from Eastern Europe. The first major post-war influx saw 200,000 Hungarians fleeing to Western Europe in 1956. Solutions were found for all of them. In 1959, UNHCR's reputation and finances benefited enormously from the World Refugee Year Campaign.

In the ensuing decades the refugee situation gradually deteriorated. In the **1960's**, the increasing number of wars of independence, the emergence of new powers, outbreaks of civil war and conflicts fanned by East-West rivalry combined to force hundreds of thousands of Africans to flee. In just a few years, the

brunt of the human burden had shifted from Europe to the Third World.

The **1970's** witnessed massive population displacements, beginning with a wave of 10 million Bengalis fleeing their war-torn country. Exodus upon exodus from Cambodia, Ethiopia, Laos, Southern Africa, Sudan and Viet Nam increased the number of refugees in only 10 years from 2.5 million to 8 million. Durable solutions were increasingly difficult to find. For many, being a refugee meant languishing in a camp for years.

The **1980's** were marked by the arrival of 5 million Afghans in Pakistan and Iran. There were new exoduses in Central America and Africa and a steady flow of departures from Viet Nam. During the same decade, the number of asylum seekers from the South arriving in countries of the North increased rapidly. UNHCR ended the decade with nearly 16 million refugees in its care.

The **current decade** shows no sign of an abatement. As events unfold in the post-Cold War world, the scale of humanitarian needs has continued to grow. The sudden dislocation of international relations has brought in its wake refugee flows of new proportions and complexity. In Europe, the situation in the former Yugoslavia has posed an unprecedented challenge to UNHCR, following the conflict in the Persian Gulf in 1991, with its exodus of over 1 million Iraqis fleeing to Iran and Turkey. Elsewhere, particularly in Africa, millions of refugees continue to rely on UNHCR for protection and assistance.

What is meant by UNHCR's protection functions?

In normal circumstances, a person benefits from the protection of the authorities of the state of which he/she is a citizen. Refugees, by the very nature of their circumstances, are deprived of the protection of national authorities. UNHCR was created by the international community primarily with the function of providing international protection to such persons.

The 1951 United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (which has now been ratified by well over 100 States), was the most comprehensive attempt ever made to codify and ensure the humanitarian treatment of refugees. Many of the tasks performed by UNHCR as part of its protection functions, are closely linked to the provisions of this important Convention.

The list that follows is by no means exhaustive. It identifies some of the priority tasks to give you some idea of the scope of UNHCR's activities in the field of international protection, and help you understand the meaning behind the status of refugee. Providing protection includes:

- securing the **admission of asylum-seekers**, especially when states are tempted to close their frontiers indiscriminately;
- **preventing refoulement**, which implies opposing measures to expell or return refugees to a country where their lives or liberty may be threatened;
- assuring that the treatment of asylum-seekers corresponds to certain **basic humanitarian standards**. It is UNHCR's duty to encourage governments to make adjustments to their national laws and regulations, and make sure that they are properly applied;
- ensuring that asylum-seekers have **access to refugee status determination** (of special relevance here);
- piracy or abusive detention;
- promoting the **reunification of separated refugee families**. This is particularly important when family members stay behind in the country of origin or first asylum and wish to join the head of the family in a resettlement country.

How does the determination process work?

The refugee definition as contained in the 1951 Convention, and in UNHCR's Statute provides that an

applicant for refugee status must meet **four main criteria**:

1. outside the country of origin;
2. well-founded fear;
3. persecution;
4. reasons (race, religion, nationality, member of a particular social group, or political opinion).

The purpose of the interview is to establish whether the applicant meets these criterias. UNHCR's involvement in the determination of refugee status varies from country to country:

- it can confer refugee status in **accordance with its Statute**. This is what happens when the country is not a party to the 1951 Convention or other international treaties. It can also happen in a country which has signed and/or ratified the Convention, but has not introduced national legislation to implement it;
- it can conduct the determination process **on behalf of the national authorities**, which prefer to leave this responsibility to UNHCR;
- it can participate in the determination process, as an **observer/adviser**. This usually occurs at the appeal stage.
- outside the procedure itself, UNHCR may **review rejected applicants** who are due to be expelled.

The need for your services may occur in any one of these scenarios. It is the responsibility of the interviewer to explain which process applies, and the sequence of events. It is also the responsibility of the interviewer to listen carefully to the applicant's case, to ask questions and assess whether or not he/she meets the legal criteria.

As interpreter, your role is to assist in this process by **providing a channel for communication**. Each party speaks through your voice. It is an important role that must be accomplished with a high degree of professionalism.

Chapter 2

Choosing the Type of Interpretation

In this Chapter you will learn:

- the four types of interpretation (and their variations);
- typical situations where each apply.

As interpreter, you may choose between several types of interpretation. These are described briefly in this chapter. In practice, the technique you choose will depend upon the circumstances in which you will be providing your services.

The four types of interpretation (and their variations)

1. Consecutive Interpretation

This is by far **the most common type of interpretation** in a refugee context particularly in an interview for refugee status. As interpreter, you listen to a segment of speech, then repeat what you have heard in the language of the listener(s). The speaker then resumes his/her statement, before pausing again to allow the interpreter to translate. In this way the interpreter **alternates** with the speaker (in contrast with

simultaneous interpretation described later).

The length of what you can retain before rendering your translation will depend upon the complexity of the statement being made, and upon your own experience. A new interpreter will need to keep the segments short (no more than a sentence or two). A more experienced interpreter will be able to take in longer segments. The chapters that follow will provide you with guidance on how to take notes, and other important tips on rhythm and delivery to help you perform as effectively as possible.

2. Summary Interpretation

This is a condensed form of consecutive interpretation, and one that requires considerable experience and skill. The interpreter listens attentively to a lengthy statement, taking notes, and then provides a summary in the language of the audience. This implies using judgement as to what needs to be said, and reformulating in a more concise manner, perhaps even changing the order of the points made by the speaker.

You may need to use this type of interpretation when there is a discussion between two or more people, which cannot be interrupted (*examples*: a meeting or conference). It is far less precise than the kind of consecutive interpretation we have just described. It is **not** appropriate for a refugee interview, nor whenever detailed information is important.

3. Verbatim Interpretation

This type of interpretation implies a word-for-word interpretation after each phrase or sentence. The interpreter thus gives an exact translation of the speaker's words, rather than interpreting the speaker's meaning. It is mainly used in court settings. In refugee interviews, verbatim interpretation is useful to convey precise procedures or a factual statement.

Example: a word-for-word translation is useful to convey the definition of a refugee.



“Monitoring” is closely related to verbatim interpretation, but involves a written text. In this case, the interpreter simultaneously translates a statement that is being read aloud from a text.

Example: the interviewer reads back the recording of the applicant's statement. At the same time, the interpreter translates word-for-word from the text, thus allowing the claimant to check on the accuracy of the written statement.

This type of interpretation is chosen in order to exclude any possible misunderstanding on either side.

4. Simultaneous Interpretation

With this type of interpretation, the interpreter listens to the speaker and translates at the same time. It requires equipment such as soundproof booths, microphones and headsets, as well as technical support staff. It is the type of interpretation that is used in a multilingual conference setting, but is rarely applicable to interpretation in a field setting.



“Whispering” is another type of simultaneous interpretation, but one for which no technical equipment is required. The interpreter translates a statement while the speaker continues to speak. To do it, the interpreter must be close to the listener's ear, and use a low, regular tone (*“sotto voce”*). For obvious reasons, whispering is suitable for

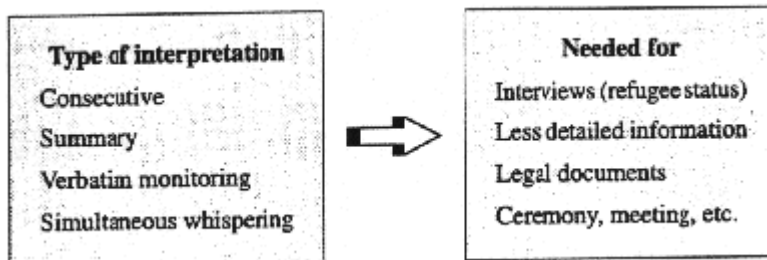
only one or two persons.

Example: whispering can be used at a ceremony, public gathering or group meeting.

Simultaneous interpretation is a difficult technique that requires a high degree of concentration, a good short-term memory and high level of language skills. Experience and intense practice is needed to master this technique.

Typical situations where each apply

As already explained, the type of interpretation you choose will depend upon the circumstances. The table below provides a brief recapitulation.



It can occur that a situation requires a **combination** of two types of interpretation.

Example: The Minister of Health has come from the capital to meet with a group of refugee leaders at a major camp. A meeting is organized in order to let the Minister listen to the concerns expressed by the leaders. Upon arrival, he/she makes a general statement on which you take notes and provide **consecutive interpretation**.

The Minister then invites the leaders to voice their concerns. As interpreter you stand next to the Minister and **whisper simultaneously** your translation of the various statements and questions.

Before leaving the meeting, the Minister makes a concluding statement. As interpreter, you revert to **consecutive interpretation**, speaking out loud once more.

For the purposes of this module, emphasis will lie on **consecutive interpretation**, since this is the most appropriate for the determination interview. This in turn requires skill in note taking, which is the subject of the Chapter that follows.

Chapter 3

Taking Notes of Consecutive Interpretation

In this Chapter you will learn:

- how note-taking can help you in consecutive interpretation;
- what you should find in your notes;
- what to avoid;
- how to proceed (in particular in choosing your symbols);
- basic points to remember;

- how to train on your own.

As we have just seen, consecutive interpretation is the format you are likely to use most often when working with refugees. It is useful for any formal exchange between two parties, particularly an interview. To perform effectively you will need to take notes. This is a technique in itself.

How note-taking can help you in consecutive interpretation

It is important to understand that an effective system of taking notes during an interview will:

- increase your self-confidence. Relying on memory may be risky, especially when you are tired;
- help you to focus on the meaning of what is being said rather than just translating the words;
- allow each speaker to talk more freely without constantly stopping to be interpreted. Frequent interruption and switching between languages upsets the flow of thought and often hampers the logic and clarity of the speaker's ideas. Choppy statements reflect poorly on both the speaker and the interpreter;
- help you to report faithfully all the information provided and in the same order as the original statement. This ensures continuity and precision;
- assist the interviewer who, in turn, is taking notes from your interpretation. As you interpret, you may point to the names and figures you are interpreting with your finger so that the interviewer may see in writing a name he/she finds difficult to spell or understand;
- increase your credibility with the speaker, who will recognize the logic and structure of her/his statement as s/he watches you follow your notes;
- be used during or immediately after the interview as a means of verification should the interviewer wish to check on a detail of information.

What you should find in your notes

Notes in consecutive interpretation are a very special way of writing down and understanding what you hear. Their purpose is to supplement your memory. They are a visual aid, a photo-graphic representation of what the speaker said. They must contain:

- names, dates, figures;
- facts, descriptions and other detailed information that can immediately be brought back to mind and interpreted.

Your notes are intended for immediate use, and will be made up of words, signs and symbols that your mind can immediately connect with an idea, without immediate concern about what language that idea is to be expressed in. The guidelines and practical tips that follow will help you acquire a good consecutive note-taking technique. However, it is important to realize that there is no universal note-taking system. Just as we each have a different way of thinking and learning, we each develop a different note-taking system. Note-taking in consecutive interpretation is thus highly **individualized**. The end result, however, must always be the same for each of us: the message we communicate must correspond in every way to the message expressed by the original speaker.

The reason for using a note-taking system that “jumps to the eye” and is a memory aid, is that the two speakers (in this case interviewer and applicant) should forget that they are speaking through a go-between or intermediary. The interpreter must therefore be able to deliver the message as naturally as the speaker, with no difficult deciphering of words, and without wasting time reading translated words, while being very precise.

What to avoid

Never use shorthand with consecutive interpretation. Here are the reasons why:

- several lines of shorthand cannot be read at one glance;
- reading back shorthand takes longer as it is a word-for-word reproduction of the speaker's statement;
- shorthand does not allow you the flexibility to insert phrases or ideas added by the speaker as an after-thought.

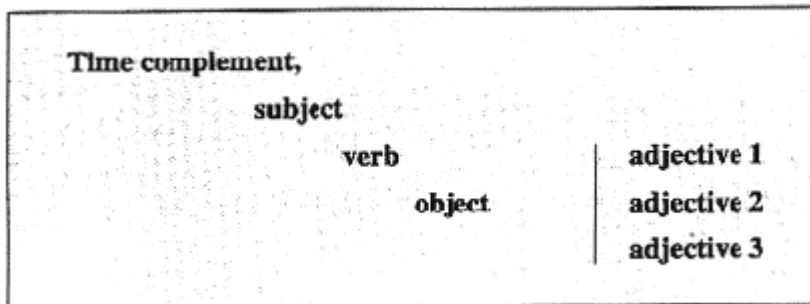
NOTES ARE TO BE TOLD NOT READ!

How to proceed

- Always start taking notes as soon as the speaker starts talking. What is promised as a “few brief words” may turn out to be a statement of several minutes and you will only be able to retain a small part of what he has said;
- always make sure the words or signs you put down are easy to read, so that you will immediately recognize them and remember what they mean.

Using the page

- Construct your phrases in a logical manner, with parts of the page reserved for specific parts of phrases and with margins of varying widths, leaving enough space for your eye to catch the picture at a glance.



Example: “On the first day of the month, my grandparents liked to prepare traditional food made of raw fish, vegetables and spices”.

On 1st day/mth.
my grps
♥ cook
trad. food w. | *fish (raw)*
vegs
spices

Such a logical analysis will give you all the required information at a glance, while giving you the flexibility of using your own words.

Which language to use

Take your notes using words in the first language that comes to your mind. It is best, if you can, to take

notes in the target language (language that you will be interpreting the statement in) so that the translation problems are solved before you render your interpretation. If you cannot think of the exact translation, note the word you hear and, when interpreting, paraphrase the idea in your own words.

Choosing your symbols

It is important to work out a system that is adapted to **your own** logical way of thinking. In developing your system you will need to create signs and symbols, each representing a global concept that can be reproduced for any language you are hearing and working into. Here are some examples of symbols used by many Western interpreters to represent global concepts.

person, individual, man
country
world
peace
conversation, statement, speech, discussion
thought
to like, to welcome
agreement, approval
money
programme

On the basis of these global concepts, work out your own more specific concepts, so that you have reliable, immediately recognizable "associations". This can often be done, for example, by adding an extra letter to the global concept.

person
 refugee or
 mother father
 population
 casualty
 soldier

country
 developed country
 developing country
 oil producing country
 the population of Canada
 many rich countries

Indicating tense

Work out your own precise system for signaling the tense of the verb or time of the action.

Examples:

We say:	<i>we</i> ^o		he likes to work: he ♥ ^s wk ^o
We said:	<i>we</i> ^o		she is living in the States: she liv.
We will say:	<i>we</i> ^{-ll}		USA

Overcoming problems of syntax

The same symbol can be used for words which are more or less synonymous, but it is important to find a way of noting whether the symbol is referring to a noun, a similar noun, a verb or an adjective. Again, this is an individual choice. One idea is to circle the word or symbol to indicate a noun, while a small o at the upper right-hand side of the word or symbol can indicate an infinitive verb.

to act
 an act
 an action (... ion: ...)
 active
 an activist
 an activity

Distinguishing between negative and affirmative

Find a clear way of expressing what is negative and what is affirmative.

Example:

Switzerland is not a big country

big
or
not
or
no big
or
small

Expressing quantity and intensity

Use different kinds of underlining to show intensity, quantity, feeling, etc.

Example:

Your statement is very important Yr. is imp.

My brother is a little rich My . b: rich

He is not at all happy He:

Showing movements

Use arrows and/or mathematical signs to show ups and downs, fluctuations, movements, increasing or decreasing amounts.

Example:

France is bigger than Ireland FR > IR

The value of the dollar has dropped
but the yen has increased

Value/\$ ↓
b. / yen ↑

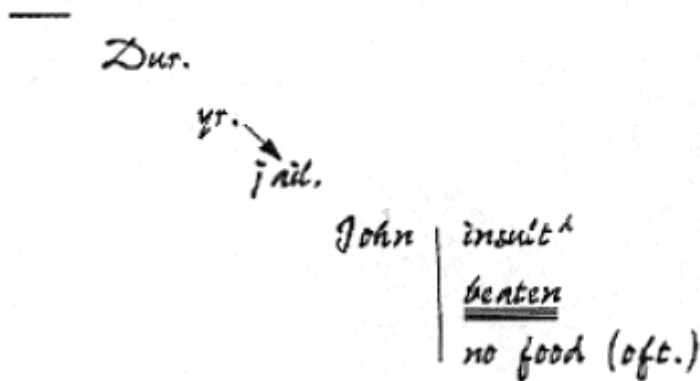
Indicating lists

Short vertical lines are useful to indicate an enumeration, a list of adjectives or whatever is associated with the word or concept preceding it.

Example:

During his year in jail, John was insulted, severely beaten and often deprived of food:

During his year in jail, John was insulted, severely beaten and often deprived of food:



Linking and ending

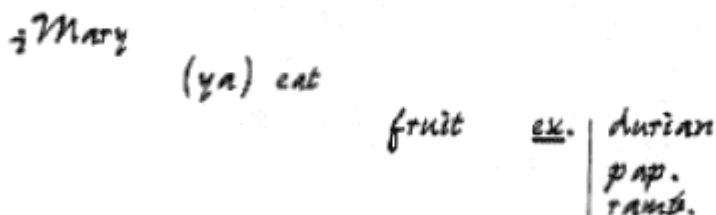
- find appropriate links or a way of indicating a **sequence** of ideas or the connection between successive ideas; find a quick formula to express “that is why”, “before that”, “but”, “because”, “in spite of that”, etc.
- use a clear sign to show the end of a sentence (not a period or full stop which is not visible enough and should be used for other purposes), such as a short horizontal line on the left hand side of the page. A short double horizontal line can show the end of a comment on one topic and the passage to a different idea. A full horizontal line across the page can show the end of the entire statement.

Conveying a question

- when the speaker asks a question, it is handy to use the Spanish-style upside down question mark at the beginning of a question to remind you that you must indicate in your tone that you are asking a question and not making a statement.

Example:

¿Has Mary ever tried to eat tropical fruit, such as durian, papaya and rambutan?



Using punctuation

Try to make best possible use of punctuation marks such as commas and parentheses. Remember that they don't have to correspond to usual grammatical usage: for consecutive interpretation note-taking, spelling and grammar rules don't count: you are dealing with purely ORAL expression, and all means are justified if they help you interpret the message accurately, reflecting the exact meaning of the speaker including his tone, his style, his cultural patterns, etc.).

Basic points

- ✓ your notes are intended for **immediate use**, to remind you of information still fresh to the mind. Don't expect to be able to re-utilise your notes a few days, or even a few hours later, except perhaps for dates, names and figures;
- ✓ make sure you write **clearly** and only use signs, abbreviations or symbols you are certain you will **immediately recognize** and be able to re-read easily;
- ✓ although your interpretation of a statement should contain all the information given by the speaker, it should not take longer to deliver;
- ✓ draw a diagonal slash across the segment you have finished interpreting. When the speaker stops talking, quickly turn back to the sheet where you started noting his last statement and start interpreting without wasting time to look over your notes;
- ✓ while glancing at your notes, keep your head up and look at the person you are addressing. Speak in a natural and convincing manner so as to constantly maintain the interest of your listener. The golden rule is to put yourself in the shoes of the person you are interpreting, sharing his/her wish to communicate and be understood in every way.

How to train on your own

There are a number of methods that can help you improve your skills. Most are quite simple and can be done on your own or with the assistance of a friend. They are used by all professional interpreters:

- ✓ take short articles in magazines or newspapers and do some **sight translation** to stimulate mental switching. Practice this exercise regularly, interpreting to yourself out loud (in front of a mirror) or to a friend or colleague;
- ✓ take articles and read them out loud paraphrasing or re-phrasing the sentences using different words but keeping the same meaning to stimulate your vocabulary and your reflexes in finding synonyms;
- ✓ ask somebody to read you a text at normal speed (starting with one minute, going up to three or four) and take notes in consecutive style. Re-write the entire text in longhand comparing it to the original and check where you went wrong and why. Do this in one language until you feel confident, then from one into another and back again. (eg. English-English or Vietnamese-Vietnamese, then English-Vietnamese, followed by Vietnamese-English);
- ✓ if you have a tape recorder with incorporated micro-phone, tape a short radio programme or read out a short speech. Then listen to the recording taking notes. Tape your own interpretation immediately after the original reading and compare the two. This can help you to correct certain voice deficiencies (intonation, diction, sounds of hesitation or nervousness). It is also important to learn to like the sound of your own voice, since this will give you confidence and pleasure when on the job.

Chapter 4

Some General Advice

In this Chapter you will learn:

- some general guidelines on quality;
- tips on the delivery of consecutive interpretation;

- maintaining accuracy and neutrality;
- interpreting for refugee children;
- interpreting for refugee women;
- guidelines on attitude and conduct.

Some general guidelines on quality

Preparing and training on your own using the kind of exercises described at the end of the last chapters can help improve the quality of your work. What follows now are a few more ideas along the same lines.

Reinforcing your vocabulary

Prepare a list of words and phrases you anticipate. Each time something new or unfamiliar occurs, make a note of it and add it to your list. In this way you will compose a **glossary**, that can save your precious time and avoid searching for a translation. Your delivery will flow more easily, and your confidence will also grow!

Working at your diction and articulation

As interpreter it is essential to be **heard and understood**. If you find that your clients ask you to repeat, the chances are that your speech needs improvement.

- Practice your **vowels** and **consonants**

If a particular vowel or consonant is difficult for you, analyse which parts of the mouth are at work. Understanding the mechanics of how the sound is produced can often help articulate more clearly.

- Study your **pronunciation**

Be particularly careful where the accent falls in the word. If in any doubt consult your dictionary.

- Learn to **phrase** and to **emphasize**

Adjust your speech by groups of words that flow naturally, and modulate your voice to avoid monotony. This will make your interpretation both easier and more pleasant to the listener.

Improving your voice

As we have already seen, understanding the mechanics of the voice can help you work on your articulation. The same also applies to the quality of your voice. Learning to **relax** and to **breathe correctly** are also important. Relaxation for good speech requires a lessening (but not an absence) of tension. Experience will help you acquire the right degree of muscular tension for proper control. A well-trained voice must also have carrying power. It must project. Although this is less relevant in the context of an interview, it becomes important if you are asked to interpret at a meeting or ceremony. There are a number of simple breathing exercises that can help develop the volume of your voice.

Tips on the delivery of consecutive interpretation

Adjusting the length of segment

It is important to set a standard length with which you are comfortable. This will vary according to the complexity of the subject, the clarity of the speaker, and your experience at the job. It is up to you, as interpreter, to stop the speaker before the segment gets too long. You may interrupt the speaker (a discreet gesture should be enough), until s/he gets accustomed to the right length, or simply ask that the segments be shorter. An experienced interpreter should be able, with the help of notes, to wait over

4 minutes, but this would be too long for a less experienced interpreter.

How fast should you be?

Aim to speak at your normal speed (quickly yet clearly). A slow interpreter can considerably extend the session, and this must be avoided. Under ideal circumstances, your interpretation will be a **little shorter** than the speaker's statement. If it is much shorter, you have probably over-summarized perhaps by waiting too long before interjecting your interpretation. If it is longer, it is a sign that you are speaking too slowly, searching too long for your words, or adding explanations of your own. All of this must be avoided.

Adopting the right tone

There are two schools of thought among professionals as to the kind of tone the interpreter should use. For some, the interpreter must remain entirely neutral, seeking only to translate what is being said as accurately as possible. For others, the interpreter must put expression into his/her speech in order to convey the emotion of the speaker. In the context of a refugee interview, it is natural for the interpreter to insert intonation and avoid monotony. As interpreter, you should reflect the speaker but not "outdo" him or her. **Remember also to look up from your notes and to speak clearly.**

Where you should sit

The place you occupy in relation to interviewer and applicant is an important detail. The correct place is to the side of the interviewer and slightly withdrawn, leaving the interviewer and applicant face to face.

NEVER PUT YOURSELF **BETWEEN** THE INTERVIEWER AND APPLICANT

The correct position is illustrated in the sketch below.



Maintaining accuracy and neutrality

This must be your constant and prime objective in all circumstances. Your credibility as interpreter depends upon it as recalled later in the section on behaviour and attitude. Developing a reliable note-taking system, such as recommended in Chapter 3, can help you immensely.

A few additional hints:

- pay attention to all details. Do not attempt to sift the information given by the applicant, but faithfully translate all factual and anecdotal details. Remember that it is the responsibility of the interviewer, not the interpreter, to decide whether or not the facts given are relevant to the legal criteria;
- avoid conversations with the applicant. Translate all his/her questions, even if you know the probable answer;
example: *applicant:* *What time is it?*
 interpreter: *"He is asking what time it is"*
- if there is a conversation that which either the interviewer or the applicant cannot understand, give a summary of what is said;
- avoid expressing a personal opinion. It is not up to you, as interpreter to react either verbally or through facial expression, to what a speaker says.

What if...

- **You cannot understand an expression or a word?**

If this happens, ask for clarification rather than hazarding a guess. You will need to signal to the other party (interviewer or applicant as the case may be) that you are asking for additional clarification.

- **The applicant expresses a notion that is very typical of his/her culture?**

Here again, you must take the time to explain, rather than allow a misunderstanding to arise. Do not forget that your value to the interviewer is not limited to your language skills. You are also a channel for communication. Simple words such as “brother”, “family”, etc. can convey very different notions from one culture to another. Remember to explain to the applicant the reasons for your dialogue with the interviewer.

- **The applicant makes an embarrassing or offensive statement?**

In principle it is your duty to translate whatever is said. In practice, you may warn the interviewer as to the character of the applicant's statement, and ask his/her permission to check that the applicant really wants to use such language, before giving a translation. The slight pause may be enough for the applicant to adjust his/her tone.

- **The language used by the applicant is primitive and unsophisticated?**

Do not seek to polish or embellish – this is not your role. You may sometimes make a statement more clear and concise but this must never be at the expense of accuracy.

There are two situations calling for additional guidance. They concern interviews with refugee children and those with refugee women. The guidelines below can help you in both cases.

Interpreting for refugee children

The advice that follows is based on the “Guidelines for interviewing unaccompanied refugee children and adolescents and preparing social histories” issued by the Programme Technical Support Service at Headquarters. As interpreter you will be called upon to play a more active role, in view of your capacity for communication in the child's language.

- explain carefully to the child before the interview begins that he/she is being asked to respond to a few questions and why;
- be reassuring and understanding if the child shows signs of anxiety;
- resist the temptation to act as an advocate, since this may distort proceedings;
- sit closer to the child than to the interviewer, in order that you should not be perceived in a position of authority and inhibit his/her ease of expression.

Interpreting for refugee women

There exist a set of “Guidelines on the protection of refugee women” that should be available from the UNHCR field office, and which you may wish to consult, giving special attention to the section on legal procedures and the criteria for the determination of refugee status.

It is important for the interviewer and interpreter to work together to create a setting that will allow the applicant to explain her story with the least difficulty possible. This is particularly true if the applicant has suffered traumatic experiences such as rape or physical abuse, since she may well be experiencing persistent fear, loss of self-confidence and self-esteem, and various other distressing symptoms that

make it hard for her to communicate.

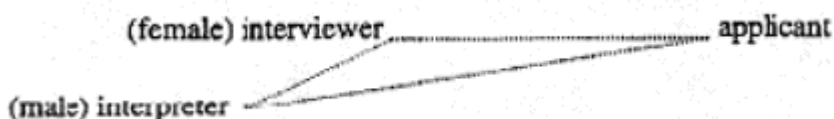
Your task will of course be easier if you are also a woman, and if the interviewer is female. If this is the case, you can follow the advice given earlier in a preceding section concerning seating arrangements. Here it is again, for easy reference.



This arrangement should change if the interpreter is male, or if the interviewer is male, since there will be another relationship between participants.

- **Male interpreter with female interviewer**

In this scenario, it is preferable for the male interpreter to take more distance from the interviewer, and for the latter to move closer to the applicant.



- **Female interpreter with male interviewer**

Here it is preferable for the female interpreter to move closer to the applicant, while the interviewer maintains more distance.



Guidelines on attitude and conduct

As we have been reminded throughout this module, the task of an interpreter is difficult in any circumstances. To do it well requires concentration, language skills, agility of mind as well as many personal qualities.

Interpreting in a refugee context can make even greater demands. The conditions in which you work may be noisy and uncomfortable, making concentration more difficult. There may be wide cultural gaps between the various parties, calling for more than a simple translation of the words that are spoken. You may meet vocabulary or notions that are new or unfamiliar to you.

More serious still, the interviewer may make other demands on you, expecting you to run errands or perform tasks that are not those of an interpreter. In one case, an interpreter complained that he was being required to fetch the reluctant applicants from their huts and bring them to the place of the interview. Alternatively, the applicants may seek to put pressure on you, using bribes or threats and demanding you to lie on their behalf.

It is therefore extremely important for you to be clear on your attitude and conduct as interpreter. What follows is a set of rights and responsibilities which we recommend you to use as a **code of professional conduct**. It is in your interest to remind yourself of this code as a means of guiding and protecting yourself.

Your Rights as Interpreter

✓ Adequate briefing

Ask to be given adequate briefing on the job to be performed. This must include the background of the case about to be heard. Time may be short, but you will perform more effectively if you are briefed on the purpose and context of your work. Ideally the interviewer will organize a training session before you start, but this will depend on individual circumstances.

✓ Defining your role

It should be standard practice for the interviewer to introduce you to the applicant, and define your role. This is not merely a matter of courtesy. It can also help to protect you against pressure from the applicant if the interviewer makes it clear that your role is to allow communication, but that you have no responsibility for the outcome of the interview.

✓ Obtaining respect

As interpreter, you are entitled to be treated as an equal. Interpretation is a service, but interpreters are not servants! There may of course be circumstances in which you will be asked to perform a task or make an enquiry which the interviewer is unable to do because of the language barrier. This should, however, be the exception rather than the rule. The bad example given above of having the interpreter go alone and fetch an uncooperative applicant should not be allowed to become a pattern.

✓ Gaining the right support

To perform effectively, you need the support of the interviewer. If things go wrong, and if misunderstandings arise, you must be given the opportunity to interrupt the interview and put things right. Even though the interviewer may be working against the clock, he/she must give you support in this way.

Your Responsibilities as Interpreter

The rights we have just defined are complemented by responsibilities. These are briefly described below.

✓ Maintaining a high level of performance

Much of the advice contained in this module is specifically designed to help you maintain the highest possible level of professional performance. It has included tips for improving your techniques or learning new ones, and advice on maintaining a professional attitude to your work. As an interpreter, your task is to be as accurate as possible. If in doubt as to the meaning of what has been said, it is preferable to ask for additional explanation. It is equally important to maintain your cultural sensitivity, since communication is much more than just words and phrases!

✓ Remaining neutral

As interpreter, it is not your role to take sides. You may well feel sympathy for the applicant, but you are not allowed to act as his/her advocate. As mentioned earlier, the applicant may even insist that you should invent or lie on his/her behalf. Never accede to such a request. Your credibility and that of the interpreter's function is at stake.

You may even feel compelled to **refuse to act as interpreter** if there are strong personal ties between yourself and the applicant. This could happen if, for example, you are of the same family or close community.

✓ Maintaining confidentiality

It is standard practice for professional interpreters to maintain strict confidentiality as to the content of any discussions to which they are party. This requirement must apply rigidly to interviews for refugee status. Revealing facts that concern an applicant's story could be of great danger, for example, for family members or relatives who are still in the country of origin. With this in mind:

- never discuss what you have heard during an interview with anyone outside the interview;
- destroy your written notes as soon as you no longer need them. If you need to keep them between interviews, always make sure they are inaccessible to anyone but yourself.

✓ **Refraining from abusing your power**

As interpreter, you are often the only person who can follow exactly what is going on in a given circumstance for which your services are needed. In addition to the constraints we have already defined, this situation brings with it a certain power. You owe it to your function to resist any temptation to abuse that power, but on the contrary to use it constructively.

In conclusion you will find a summary of these rights and obligations. Together they make up your code of conduct

Rights	Responsibilities
Adequate briefing	Maintaining a high level of performance
Defining your role	Remaining neutral
Obtaining respect	Maintaining confidentiality
Gaining the right support	Refraining from abusing your power