

Communicating Across Cultures: The Role of Language Interpreters

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Communicating Across Cultures: The Role of Language Interpreters

**Abstract**

“Culture in its broadest sense is cultivated behavior; that is the totality of a person's learned, accumulated experience which is socially transmitted, or more briefly, behavior through social learning.” Therefore, “Culture is communication; communication is culture” (Tamu, 2001). “The collective programming of the mind distinguishing the members of one group or category of people from others” (Hofstede, 1997). Using Edward Hall and Hofstede’s theories, the study explores why culture is prominent in language interpreting. What are some prominent cultural norms that appear while language interpreting? How do they influence the effectiveness of the translation? The study conducted interviews of language interpreters and summarized the results to provide answers to the questions above.

### Introduction

Culture plays an important role on how people interact with each other. Language interpreters are crucial in order to conduct a business that involves people who may not speak English. Interviewing interpreters will provide insight into how they personally interact with others. Categorizing the individual's cultural norms into either high context or low context cultures and the six dimensions of culture will show how language interpreting differs by culture. Language and culture are both a unifying and dividing societal characteristics.

Culture has many definitions which indicates how intangible and important it is to society. "The origins of the word [culture] lie in the concept of cultivation, distinguishing that which is grown under human control, as in farming, from the products of nature. This meaning is still found in the idea of "culture pearls" or in medical phrases such as "culturing bacteria". The contrast between nature and culture still pervades the variety of the word's meaning" (Gusfield, 2006). Throughout the years, humans have created and differentiated culture which has been passed down from generation to generation. Humans have different ways of cultivating crops which creates unique products. This concept compared to culture shows how humans use culture to portray their religion, language and beliefs in their own way. "Culture is acquired, socially transmitted, and communicated in part by language" (De Jongh, 1991). One of the most important issues to understand is that language is the thread used to build a blanket that is called culture. Language represents an enormous amount of cultural beliefs, norms and values.

"Differences between cultures and languages may lead to grave, indeed tragic, misunderstanding; it is therefore imperative that those persons who serve as linguistic intermediaries be not only proficient in their working languages, but also cognizant of how linguistic forms are culturally dependent for effective communication" (De Jong, 1991) Accurate

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communication is more than just language, other communication methods are important too. The understanding of the cultural background of languages is what makes an interpretation complete.

By interviewing language interpreters, this research will attempt to enhance our knowledge of relevance of culture in interpreting languages. The culture of the interpreter and the person being interpreted may be different. This difference may be influential on the subject matter that is being interpreted. Few studies are available on this topic. The language interpreter makes a difference in their work by bridging the gap between two individuals who may not share the same cultural background. The results of the study will be useful to language interpreters in their day-to-day work.

### **Language**

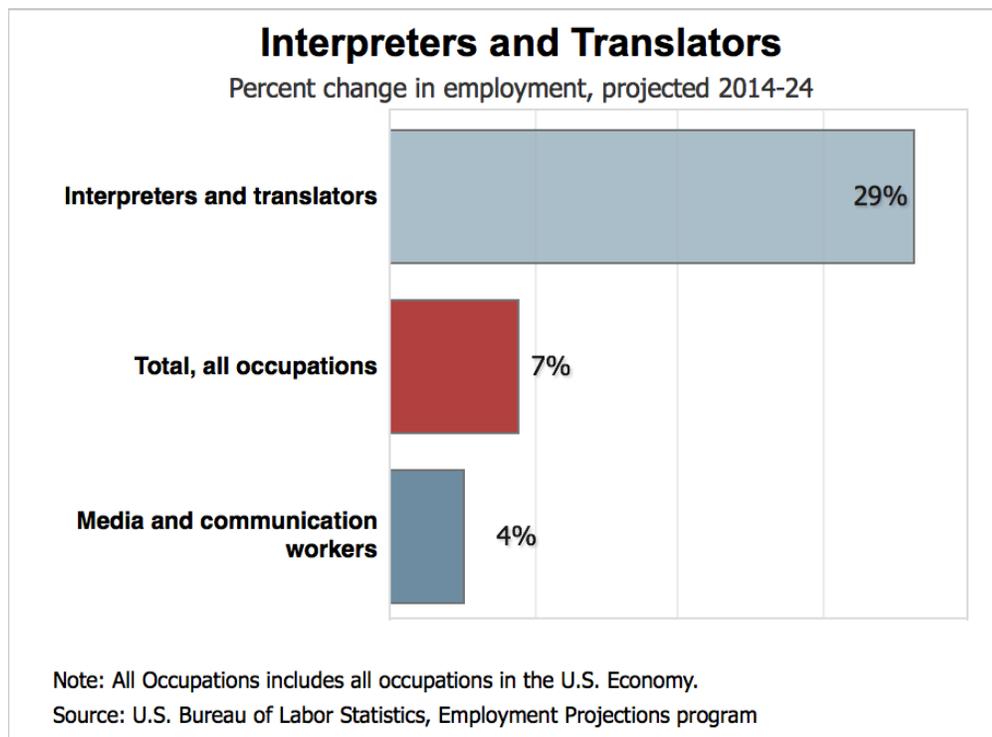
Language is a defining characteristic of cultural expression. It determines how people express and communicate values and norms within their culture. Language and speech, as a whole, are considered to be one of the greatest achievements of human kind. It is one of the most important traits in society. What makes language so binding to culture is the fact that it is a differentiating factor that creates the existence of many different cultures. (Shenkar, 2004) One can always appreciate the ability to conform to social norms by adapting the language of that society. “Defining what is language to a society “language is more than a medium for communication; rather it is "a cultural resource” “language provides the context for our thoughts, interactions and social identities” strongly believe that language is part of a country’s culture” (Welch, 2006).

According to the article “Foreign Language Use Among International Business Graduates”, 41% of recent graduates reported that foreign language in the workplace is very important. Language interpreters use their language skills in the workplace on a regular basis.



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Bureau of Labor Statistics also states that employment in this sector will increase by 29% in the next 7 years. They predict that employment will be 78,500 by 2024. The following graph shows a comparison between the prospects of increase between language interpreters and all other occupations. As can be seen, interpreters will increase by 22% more than other occupations. The increase in demand for interpreting could be explained by “[the] growing international trade and broadening global ties should require more interpreters and translators. The ongoing need for military and national security interpreters and translators should result in more jobs as well. Emerging markets in Asia and Africa are expected to increase the need for translation and interpreting in languages spoken on those continents” (B.L.S.).



*Figure 2 The figure above provides a comparison between the percent change in employment of interpreters/ translators and all occupations.*

(B.L.S)

An interpretation is the “transfer of meaning from a source language to a receptor or target language; [it] allows oral communication between two or more persons who do not speak

the same language” (De Jongh, 1991). Language interpreting is a complicated and important career choice. No two languages are ever considered as representing the same culture or society because they are not sufficiently similar. Some interpreters experience biculturalism which means that they have the ability to interpret in a way that suffices both cultural environments.

### **Edward Hall’s Theory**

Hall’s theory of context cultures will help decipher the culture of an individual into two types: high and low context. High context cultures rely heavily on communication and non-verbal cues whereas, low context cultures will rely on communication but it does not rely heavily on it so relationships and interactions happen quicker (Neese, 2016). He thoroughly expresses “that all human behavior takes place within a cultural context that is essentially out of awareness” (Schlachet, 1977). How humans behave and interact derive from cultural beliefs and ideals which may not be the same for other cultures. Therefore, it is not easy to be made aware of those behaviors unless one is from that cultural background.

“What we call culture of a people's way of life is learned. It is not innate and it can be changed. The fact that man learns his ways and can change them is the basis of our optimism for a better life for all mankind. The principle means by which culture is learned and transmitted is language. In order to understand a culture intimately you have to learn the language, not only because there are inevitable distortions if you do not, but because every language. ... (exercises) subtle and all persuasive influences on the mental processes.” Edward Hall further emphasizes the need for cultural understanding by the means of language. Hall believes there are rules to culture. One of the rules is “learn the language in order to master the culture” which reinforces how the history is important. Culture and society is built by history and the understanding of that is what helps the language interpreter succeed. Hall suggests “If you change the smallest item of

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culture this change will eventually be felt and reflected in almost every aspect of the life of the people. Also, function implies balance between the various elements or parts or components which go to make up a society and its culture” (Hall, 1958).

### **Geert Hofstede’s Six Dimensions of Cultures**

Geert Hofstede identifies six dimensions of culture. The research will try to connect to these dimensions with the interview responses. The six dimensions of culture, as defined by Geert Hofstede are: power distance, individualism vs collectivism, masculinity vs femininity, uncertainty avoidance, long term vs short term orientation and indulgence vs restraint. Power distance entails the distribution of power and how it is unequally distributed. Individualism “can be defined as a preference for a loosely-knit social framework” in which people rely solely on themselves and immediate family. Collectivism presents a tight knit relationship with family and relies heavily on family members. Masculinity signifies “heroism, assertiveness and material rewards for success”. Femininity stands for “cooperation, modesty, caring for the weak and quality of life”. Uncertainty avoidance measures how members of a cultural group deal with uncertainty. Every society has a past and the long term vs short term orientation portrays how they deal with past and future events. Indulgence entails how liberal a society. The opposite, restraint, portrays how strict cultural norms play a part into an individual’s lifestyle (Hofstede, 2001). Other research has been done in the past but none are as specific. Hofstede’s research was based on culture in the national level.

### **Methodology**

The purpose of the study was to gain knowledgeable insight into how culture is of importance when it comes to language interpreting. The questions to the study were developed by the researcher because of their background in language interpreting. Convenient sampling

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was used as a method of recruitment. Out of fifteen recruitment attempts, five people responded to the interview. The five interviewees were of Nepali, Spanish, Vietnamese and American backgrounds. The interviews were approved by the Institutional Review Board. The results of the study are based on the answers to the questions asked in the interview (Appendix A). The interview results will connect interview responses with theoretical properties.

### **Results**

The people interviewed are bilingual language interpreters. Interpreters from different cultural backgrounds and languages were asked a series of questions. The first question entailed any cultural barriers that may be found while interpreting. The Nepalese interpreter responded, "Yes, due to low educational background and because of the new American culture our people seems confuse most of the time to directly answer the questions. For example, in American culture when doctor asks their Nepali client to rate their pain from 0 being no pain to 10 being highest pain, most of our people are confused because culturally, our people knows to rate their pain as low, medium or high." This can cause confusion between both cultures. Hall mentioned how important it is to have cultural understanding because it will help determine how something needs to be translated. The Nepali interpreter was able to adjust her translation in order to help the individual understand the message. If the interpreter had not been from the same culture or had not studied it, then they would've not been able to get the message across to the client. The Spanish interpreter's response was, "An important part of interpreting is to understand the region/country from which the patient originates. A different set of vocabulary is needed to cater for different people, at times a patient won't understand an official medical term in Spanish because it isn't used in conversation at home". This interpreter was able to explain some major points about culture, where the individual comes from is important in order to know how to

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successfully interpret a situation. Communicating across cultures is not an easy task. Hall and Hofstede both describe ways to try and understand culture better by categorizing.

The same set of questions were given to Vietnamese interpreters. In regards to the cultural barriers question, they stated that in Vietnam it is very common to talk about things that may seem too personal to share. They speak freely about “about age, marital status when you first meet someone”. Unlike in America where these types of subjects are too involved and personal. Out of all the interpreters interviewed, all of them believed that there were cultural barriers between cultures.

Within cultures, there may be differences in how they interact with one another. Elderly people may not be treated the same as the young. In the study performed, both the Spanish and Nepali interpreters have found difference in generations. According to the Nepalese interpreter, “Most elderly people have hard time to directly answer the questions compared to the young. Elderly people seem to pull out more stories and history rather than directly answering the questions. Another difference would be elderly people seem more uncomfortable sharing when it comes to private questions because in Nepali culture many elderly populations don’t want to share their personal/private issues to other stranger.” The Nepalese interpreter and the Spanish interpreter had similar answers. “The young are more likely to be proactive and explain in detail the issues they are facing, while the older crowd is more likely to choose their words carefully and care more about their conservative image”. According to these interpreters, they found that older people had issues sharing the personal/ private life with strangers because they do not want to lose face. The Vietnamese was also in concurrence with above. They stated that the young use a more direct approach instead of the old. They also mentioned that they did not have to choose their words carefully with the young; it was easier to translate. For example, one of the Spanish

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interpreters mentioned that she has to use “usted” instead of “tu” when addressing older individuals because of respect. The first word is used as a sign of respect in countries like Mexico and Spain. However, in Uruguay, the word “usted” is used for strangers and not as a sign of respectfulness.

The Spanish interpreter also mentioned that the Spanish language has different words to address the old versus the young. They are treated with more respect than the young. This is where Hofstede’s theory comes into play. He mentions the Power Distance theory. This “measures the extent to which the less powerful members of organizations and institutions (like the family) accept and expect that power is distributed unequally” (Clearly Cultural, 2004). The power distance in Mexico is 81 which means there is inequality between its members. According to the Spanish interpreter, the older members were afraid to lose face because their reputation is more important than their medical treatments, while the young understood that their health was more important than their reputation. For example, the Spanish interpreter mentioned that the elderly relied heavily on home remedies and truly believed they would help their condition. Also, the female Spanish interpreter mentioned that some men won’t speak to her about sensitive and private issues so they will minimize the pain. They would explain the pain as being around the stomach instead of losing face.

The study also questioned if there is a difference between genders. Hofstede’s “Masculinity versus its opposite, femininity refers to the distribution of roles between the genders which is another fundamental issue for any society” (Clearly Cultural, 2004). When asked the Nepalese interpreter responded, “male population is more comfortable sharing their health issues no matter if [it’s] male interpreter or female. Female population prefer female interpreter to be open when it comes to personal questions”. The Spanish interpreters responded

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in agreement to above. “As a male interpreter I will try to avoid appointments geared towards discussing sensitive female issues. At time I have translated and sensitive questions are more likely to get short answers without detail.” The other Spanish interpreter also stated, “As a female interpreter, when having to translate for men, they seem to get nervous and shy... As to translating to other women, they are very open and secure to say what really is going on”.

In Nepal, the Geert Hofstede Masculinity index indicates that “it is considered a Feminine society. In Feminine countries the focus is on “working in order to live”, managers strive for consensus, people value equality, solidarity and quality in their working lives. Conflicts are resolved by compromise and negotiation. Incentives such as free time and flexibility are favored. Focus is on well-being and status is not shown or emphasized”. Contrary to Nepal, Mexico has an index of 69 in Masculinity. “In Masculine countries people “live in order to work”, managers are expected to be decisive and assertive, the emphasis is on equity, competition and performance and conflicts are resolved by fighting them out” (Hofstede, 1997). The Vietnamese interpreters both responded that they did not see any differences in interpreting for different genders. This is interesting because in all the other interviews conducted they responded with very clear differences in interpretation between genders. There could be other factors involved, some interpreters were medical interpreters and others interpreted for a company. As stated above, to provide an example, the Spanish interpreter mentioned how the men she interprets for are afraid of speaking about a real issue with her because they do not feel comfortable. And, “As to translating to other women, they are very open and secure to say what really is going on”. The male interpreter had a similar issue but in regards to sensitive topics about women. He states, “as a male interpreter I will try to avoid appointments geared towards discussing sensitive female issues. At times, I have translated and sensitive questions are more likely to get short answers

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without detail. Interpreting for men, I have found that they will help you understand their issues and lay out the background story of why they're there”.

There are certain challenges faced during an interpretation. Most of the interpreters interviewed stated that they found challenges in areas they did not have a lot of knowledge in. The Nepalese interpreter stated that “It used to be more challenging at the beginning especially not knowing many medical terminologies. However, taking medical classes in college helped so now I am comfortable with lot of medical terminology. Sometimes I feel challenging interpreting for court or other law service since I don't have much knowledge about law terms.” The medical/law terminology is difficult to understand unless an individual has studied it. The Vietnamese and Spanish interpreters all said the same thing, that medical terminology was hard to translate. That is the most challenging part of their interpreting services. The interpreters felt like they had to prepare ahead of time before the translation. All of the interpreters were asked to rate their translations from 0 being the least difficult to 4 being extremely difficult. Five out of five interpreters stated that it was a 2.

The cultural background of the interpreter definitely impacts the way they understand the culture and translate. The Nepalese interpreter was able to share about her Nepalese background and her ancestors who have settled in the Rochester area. “Our ancestors were brought from Nepal to Bhutan to work on construction and agriculture around 1800s and since then they have been living in Southern Bhutan. They lived many generations as minority inside Bhutan. Around 1980s Nepali Community in southern Bhutan has seek more freedom and rights and that's where Bhutanese government played ethnical/cultural and linguistic issues and expelled more than 100,000 of this minority. They ended up living in Eastern Nepal as refugees before they started migrating to the USA and some other countries. Most of our adults and elderly people didn't go

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to school or gain any education in their life. I was born and grew up in the camp. I grew up in the same culture and community that I am translating now so it has been easy for me to address their social, emotional, psychological issues”. The amount of knowledge the interpreter gained from living within the culture and experiencing that first hand has helped her connect with the people she interprets for. One of the Spanish interpreters is not from a Latino background.

“Coming from a very non-Latino background, I have needed to grow my understanding of the Latino community to understand the problems and positioning of our patients. I believe that at times some patients would much rather prefer someone of a similar background to accommodate their needs for services. It takes a lot of communication with my coworkers to understand certain mannerisms patients display.”

Edward Hall emphasizes the need for understanding of the culture in order to correctly address it. High context cultures rely heavily on communication and nonverbal cues. Latino and Asian cultures are considered high context because they build relationships slowly. Facial expressions and gestures are often used to communicate with others. People prefer to be close to one another. They are afraid of change. American culture are low context cultures. Communication is explicit, relationships begin and end quickly, and nonverbal cues are insignificant. Change is fast and every event is planned out. (Intercultural Communication, 2017) The Vietnamese interpreter responded, “Vietnamese culture is completely different from American expressions. Vietnamese people are shy and conservative”. The interpreters found clear differences between cultures. They have to deal with both their own culture and the culture in which they live in.

In regards to any cultural restrictions, half of the interpreters interviewed mentioned they did not have any cultural restrictions within their culture. However, the two Spanish interpreters

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interviewed mentioned that they, “have many patients that cannot or does not use birth control due to their religion (Catholic). The women prefer to have all the children that “God” sends them”. They also mentioned that many of the patients they interpret for “choose not to take the medication and instead they choose the home remedies (teas, herbs, food) to make their health stable again”. They believe so strongly in their cultural beliefs and norms that they are convinced that tea or herbs will cure them from diseases like diabetes.

Due to differences in language, some words or phrases may not be interpretable. The Spanish and Vietnamese interpreters responded to this by stating that several words have two meanings. They also found difficulty in translating things like poems, idioms, jokes and phrases. Some of them find that it is often good to rephrase the sentence in a way that will help the client understand it better. The Nepalese interpreter stated that, “most of English language analogy is hard to interpreted as it is” and that it “hard to directly relay this kind of terminology in Nepali”. The Vietnamese interpreter mentioned that she also tends to interpret things in their own way in order to efficiently relay the message. It is used to benefit the person they are interpreting for to avoid any miscommunication. The Spanish interpreter mentioned, “Spanish phrases or words have many meanings. And depending on your culture and nationality some phrases already have a meaning but to translate it is difficult”.

The study wanted to inquire about how individuals from other cultures adapt to American culture. Some cultural traditions remain the same but some change. According to the Spanish interpreters, they have symbolical cultural traditions that they abide by but have also been modified in order to fit cultural norms of American culture. One interpreter mentioned that in their culture (Mexican) the women were to be married very young but that has changed since they moved to the U.S. The Nepalese interpreter believe that people should not have to modify

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their culture to adapt. However, the Vietnamese strongly believe that they had to modify their norms to fit in to American society because “English is being used widely and easily accepted by the world community”. According to the interviewees, they found that the people they interpret for feel restricted as to what they can do. The Nepalese interpreter mentioned that the elderly population she interprets for does feel restricted because they do not have enough Hindu temples in the Rochester Area for them to pray. Both the Spanish and Vietnamese interpreters agree that there are restrictions, whether it be a temple or a way of thinking.

The next question asked pertained to the consequences of not having an interpreter available to the client. The interpreter from Nepal found that some of her clients do not have the opportunity for a face to face interpretation and they use a phone for services. She finds that the clients often don't like that. The Spanish interpreter stated, “In the health field there are many places that does not provide interpreting services. The patients have hard times understanding what is going on and others don't understand at all. Not knowing also prevents the patients from knowing what is available for them (charity care, transportation, closer facilities to their home)”. The clients feel vulnerable and do not have the ability to ask questions or to seek all the opportunities they have available. The Vietnamese find it common and at times they won't have interpreters available.

There always positives and negatives to any occupation. The Vietnamese found that her position has helped her “learn more about the culture of another nation that is completely different [than hers]. It helps enrich [her] experience and have a chance to meet with many people.” The Nepalese found it rewarding to not only be helping the client but to help the entire community feel like they are understood specially because they are in a country foreign from theirs. The Spanish interpreter stated that it “is gratifying getting to know patients and see them progress

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with their health through appointments and seeing them understand the ailments and follow through on home procedures to take better control of their health.” Another stated that it is a learning opportunity. They have the chance to meet people from a lot of different Spanish speaking countries and learning their culture. They found some negatives like the client not trusting what they are interpreting and differences when interpreting for males and females. The Spanish interpreter found that, “at times a patient can start to use [our interpreting services] as a language line for other services, such as setting up their own transportation with Medicaid when they are perfectly [capable of setting up] their own transportation”.

### **Summary**

Culture, as stated above, is crucial to a society. The beliefs, values and norms are what makes up culture. According to the study, cultural norms are prevalent while language interpreting. Language is a part of culture. In order to translate effectively and efficiently, the interpreter must understand the culture of the individual and adapt their translation to help the client understand. Edward Hall mentioned the importance of understanding the culture in order to be able to communicate properly within that culture. Hofstede was able to categorize certain behavior of a society into six dimensions. Using their theories, the research was able to categorize and explain certain situations within the cultures because of country of origin, language, cultural values and norms. Overall, the culture of the interpreter does have some effect into what they interpret because language affects culture and culture affects language.

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**Appendix A: Interview Questions**

**Please fill out the following questions to the best of your ability:**

What is language(s) do you interpret for?

Spanish

Nepalese

Vietnamese

Other:

- 1) Have you found that there are some cultural barriers when you interpret between the source language and the target language?
- 2) Have you found a difference interpreting between elderly people and the young because of cultural issues? If yes, explain.
- 3) Have you found a difference between interpreting for different genders?
- 4) Do you find any challenges when interpreting?

No challenge      0      1      2      3      4      Extreme Challenge

Explain:

- 5) How has your cultural background impacted your services?
- 6) Do the people you interpret for have cultural restrictions that are specific to your business? (Ex: Some females can't see a male doctor)

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- 7) Do you encounter phrases that are not interpretable?
- 8) Do you often find yourself having to interpret things in your own way in order to deliver the correct message?
- 9) Do you feel like some of the customers have to modify their cultural norms in order to “fit into” American society?
- 10) Do they feel like they are restricted from proceeding with all of their cultural norms because they aren’t the norm here?
- 11) Do you know of any cases that the customer has not gotten the interpretation services they needed?
- 12) Have you noticed a significant difference in people who needed interpretation services and did not receive it versus receiving interpretation services?
- 13) What are some positives and negatives about your position?

Other Comments:

Thank you for completing the study.