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The interpreter – a cultural broker?

By Kristina Gustafsson, Eva Norström and Ingrid Fioretos ¹

Since 1980 the role of the community interpreter in Sweden is defined in a document called *Good Interpreting Practice*. It was compiled by The Legal, Financial and Administrative Services Agency as a means of regulating the role of the interpreter and its professional ethics aspects (most recently revised in 2010). ²

The rules in *Good Interpreting Practice* are general and apply to all interpreters and all interpreting situations. The interpreter 1) should interpret everything that is said, 2) should be impartial and neutral, 3) is bound by secrecy, and 4) should interpret in the first person.

In a three year long research project *The Interpreter - a cultural broker* at Lund University, Department of Arts and Cultural Studies, we have investigated and analysed the role of the interpreter that takes shape in practice. The project is based on the assumption that interpreters work behind closed doors and that they become witnesses to how the exercise of authority and communication is carried out in multicultural Sweden. Over time interpreters collect experience about interpreted meetings and different kinds of power relations, loyalties and responsibilities. They also have to deal with a wide range of ethical issues and dilemmas.

The purpose of this article is to explore the role of the interpreter in a changing landscape, and especially explore what it means to serve as a *cultural broker* from the point of view of the interpreter. The aim is also to analyse the term “cultural broker” from a broader perspective. What is the meaning of culture and cultural competence

¹ Gustafsson, Norström and Fioretos have contributed equally to the production of material, analysis and text.

² *God Tolksed* in Swedish, see www.kammarkollegiet.se

in this context? What does it mean to be a broker? The article is thus a contribution, from a culture-analytical point of view, to a wide-ranging and ongoing discussion – both within academia and among practitioners within the field of interpreting – about what limitations there should be to the role of the interpreter and professional ethics (cf. Hale 2007:41; Pöchhacker 2008:10).

Materials and method

We have interviewed 26 community interpreters in Sweden. The interviews took place in different locations: four interpreters were interviewed in Stockholm, Göteborg and Malmö respectively (making a total of 12). The remaining 14 interpreters are spread across the country. Half are men and half are women; half are authorised and half are not. Some have extensive experience (up to 30 years), others little (three months when we began). One (1) of the 26 interpreters is a native Swede. Furthermore, the interpreters have been active during different periods and in different contexts. Their languages and nationalities reflect migration flows to Sweden and therefore which languages that required interpreting during different periods.

We agreed with the interpreters to meet three times. In the first interview we asked three questions: Tell us how you came into the interpreting profession. How would you describe your role as an interpreter? When did you identify with the interpreting profession?

Before the second interview we asked each interpreter to select five interpretation situations. During the interviews, we discussed the selected situations in relation to rules of professional ethics for interpreters as they are formulated in Good

Interpreting Practice, prescribing what the interpreter *should* do in different situations. But we also talked about what the interpreter *can* do (cf. Brander de la Iglesia 2010). It was during these interviews that the discussion of the term “cultural broker” began to take form.

In additions to in-depth interviews with the 26 interpreters this article is based on recurrent discussions in a special reference group of authorised interpreters.³

Cultural broker

A number of different definitions of culture are used in cultural sciences. We apply the definition of culture used to capture those parts of human interaction that are collective and which concern everyday life, the creation of meaning, values, customs and habits. It covers all aspects of life, from politics and legislation to emotional life and morals. Culture in this sense is constantly produced in the interaction between people and should not be linked to ethnicity or nationality, as is often done in a stereotyping manner. Culture is just as much an expression of gender, class, religion, age, education, profession, and geographical location as it is of nationality or ethnicity (cf. Eriksen 2002; Öhlander 2004). Cultural processes occur anywhere where people interact; in corporations, organisations, school classes etc. This of course also includes interpreted encounters.

Culture is expressed in many different ways. Perhaps the most prominent way in everyday existence is through linguistic acts; spoken language, body language and other forms of expression such as silence, laughter, emotions etc. Translation from one language to another lays cultural conceptions bare. “Language is one of the media through which thoughts, ideas, feelings are represented within a culture.

³ The project has been ethics tested in accordance with the Ethical Review Act (2003:460). All places and names are fictitious. Details and information are slightly changed for reasons of secrecy.

Representation through language is therefore central to the process by which meaning is produced” (Hall 1997:1).

In other words, meaning differs in various contexts, different times, places and situations, and this is expressed through language. Thus, language is never culturally neutral.

The term *cultural broker* was first coined within North American social and cultural anthropology. It was applied to persons who served as mediators, negotiators, interpreters or guides – linguistically, spiritually and/or commercially – between European colonisers and Native Indians in the 17th and 18th centuries, as the North American continent was being colonised. The terms “broker” and “intermediaries” are used in parallel and underline the active role of the middleman (Szasz 2001).

Today the term “cultural broker” is used in a wider context. It occurs frequently in method literature and course materials on various training programmes, with reference to persons who have cross-cultural competences to explain, elucidate and bridge cultural differences in multicultural contexts. This makes introducing the term into modern interpreting research problematic, since the role of the interpreter, according to professional ethics, is *not* to negotiate or try to influence a certain outcome in a meeting. In this sense, being an interpreter and being a cultural broker are two different things.

In research about interpretation, the expression “cultural broker” has been used in parallel with other expressions: mediator, intermediary and gatekeeper. All these expressions indicate that the interpreter uses his/her cultural competence to do something beyond interpreting the verbal exchange (Hale 2007:45). Hale shows in *Community Interpreting* (2007) that the differences between various interpreting

contexts, e.g. legal or health care interpretation, cannot be disregarded and may mean that the role of the interpreter varies depending on the context (Angelelli 2004:134).

Hale writes that questions regarding the role of the interpreter as a more or less active broker have risen mainly in connection with interpreting in health care. Using studies from different parts of the world, e. g. Wadensjö (1992) and Englund Dimitrova (1991), she shows that the majority of interpreters active within health care have no training and, therefore, are ignorant of their role and their powers. Consequently, they tend to serve as brokers rather than interpreters. Following Bolden, Hale distinguishes between *directly interpreted interaction*, where the interpreter translates everything that is said and maintains a neutral/impartial stance, and *mediated interaction*, where the interpreter takes responsibility for summarising what has been said, explaining and helping steer the conversation (Hale 2007:41). For example, if the interpreter feels that the patient is talking about “unimportant things”, he/she simply leaves that out. The interpreter might do this either as a conscious strategy, or because he/she is not in sufficient command of the situation or the terminology to make a direct translation. Marianne, for instance, is an infrequent interpreter who has no specific interpreter training. She describes one of her first interpreting jobs:

Well, when you interpret for someone who is ill, who has a serious illness for example, you're often the first person to tell them about it. I remember an interpretation with someone who had cancer, she didn't know and I had to translate it. That she had cancer and that it was malignant. I wasn't ready for this / ... / so I tried to /... / tell her in milder terms. I said to her that it was

cancer but I didn't say that it was a malignant tumour. I didn't dare tell her (No. 5:1).⁴

Marianne says she became emotionally affected and that simply made her incapable of interpreting the message in its full, fatal importance. She softened it. It was not something she had thought she should do. Instead it happened spontaneously as a consequence of her reaction.

Emrah describes a balancing act between conveying and changing information during interpretation:

We interpreters have to be careful with these terms when we interpret. And it also depends on who is sitting opposite me. If he or she is educated or illiterate, if it's someone from the province or the city. So we as interpreters need to know about culture ... *the rules of the game*... to be able to be more flexible and not think in boxes. We have to be able to play with words or with terms, and with different expressions in order not to create a conflict or a charged atmosphere or so in the interpretation itself (No. 20:1).

He describes how an interpreter has to know "the rules of the game". He is referring to what happens in the course of the interpretation and to how different people can express themselves depending on what their background or position in the society is.

In *Community Interpreting*, Hale advocates "directly interpreted interaction" by quoting Gentile et al. "Cultural knowledge and contextual knowledge is used only to

⁴ The number refers to which interpreter (1-26) we are quoting and whether it is the first or the second interview.

carry out the interpreting accurately, not assist the NES (Non English Speaker) as a cultural broker” (Hale 2007:45). This is close to what Emrah says; the interpreter must know the rules of the game to be able to interpret adequately. Emrah then goes on to talk about a situation similar to the one Marianne experienced:

Doctors in Sweden have to tell their patients what illness it is they’re suffering from. But in our countries they don’t usually tell the patient directly. Instead they tell the person closest to the patient, in order not to shock the patient. And we interpreters come across experiences like these. So many times both staff and relatives will speak to us before the visit. They might meet us on the way to the interpretation and they’ll say “Please, you don’t need to tell my father that he’s got cancer or anything, OK?” Then you try to soften the word “cancer”. Instead of cancer we say “tumour” to the patient. Tumour can mean both malignant and benign. So these are cultural aspects that you have to be able to consider and know as an interpreter in order to be able to play with them (No. 20:1).

In contrast to Marianne, Emrah makes a conscious choice when he follows the wishes of the family instead of fully interpreting the message. In doing so, he uses his cultural competence to assist the non Swedish speaker, going against what Gentile and others consider being right. The difference, however, is very subtle. Emrah uses his cultural competence without directly intervening or explicitly explaining (i.e. to the doctor) that “in our culture we do it this way or that”. Thus, he hides his acting as a cultural broker from the doctor and the patient.

There is no simple way of dealing with the concept of “cultural broker”. How the

interpreter behaves in practice depends on the situation, his/her training, cultural competence, self-knowledge and on what the persons that he/she interprets for expect and demand. In the next section we will look at the “rules of the game” that Emrah refers to.

Rules of the game

We have identified two governing factors that are decisive for how the interviewed interpreters view their role in the interpreting situation, as well as for the keys to conducting a professional interpretation. First, there are the rules of professional ethics in Good Interpreting Practice.

The other governing factor during the interaction with those you are interpreting for is that unexpected events may occur. Such events could challenge the rules of professional ethics. Each interpreting situation is unique and cannot be described in general terms except as far as its routine elements are concerned. Therefore, we base our reasoning on concrete examples. The parties (sometimes more than two) have different expectations on and ideas about the interpreter and what his/her role is. This in turn brings up several dimensions of the interpreter as an individual, e.g. gender, class, ethnicity, and age. Or as Emrah puts it, “it also depends on who is sitting opposite me”.

Several interpreters describe how they often have to find spontaneous solutions to ethical dilemmas that arise during an interpretation, e.g. when the interpreter is perceived as the compatriot of the client, by the other parts. Abdel describes how an applicant during an asylum interview suddenly turned to him and asked (in answer to a question put by the official): “How should I answer that?” (No. 16:2). Abdel could

easily have batted the question back to the official by interpreting everything that is said, but felt that this would have been letting the asylum seeker down or betraying him. Radu recounts how a policeman wondered if wife-beating was part of the culture of the country whose language Radu was interpreting. “What do I know?”, he replied, “I’ve never beaten my wife” (No.14:1).

Perceptions about the significance of the interpreter being the client’s compatriot could also lead to conflicts of loyalty. Daud told us how an arrested man, whose contacts with the outside world were restricted, stuck a piece of paper in his hand when they said goodbye after the interpretation. This happened in front of the lawyer and the policeman. The paper contained a name and telephone number of a person that the arrested man wanted Daud to contact. Daud threw it away but felt qualms of conscience (No. 2:2). The arrested man was his compatriot and expected him to be his *representative* and to show him loyalty by not informing the lawyer and the policeman of the incident. This is an example of the interpreter, due to his/her profession and nationality, being assigned a role which does not conform to Good Interpreting Practice. We will explore what representing someone/something may implicate.

Room for manoeuvre

When we ask interpreters “who do you represent as an interpreter?” the answer is either “both parties in the interpreted conversation” or “myself”. These answers imply that representation means that you tell who you are and what you should be. However, representation is complex since the concept is relational, i.e. what or whom you represent is not only dependent on you yourself but also on how others regard

you. Representation gains meaning in relation to the conceptions and conditions of those around you (Appiah 1994:140).

In a discussion about representation it is fruitful to consider the concept of positioning. Positioning occurs partly through personal choice or intention and partly through structural conditions or the attitudes of other people. Daud, who was passed a note by an arrested man, felt that the prisoner assumed that he, as an interpreting compatriot, would naturally be on his side.

Michel explains why it would be impossible for him to arrive at the office of the Swedish Migration Board at Stockholm Arlanda airport and begin by greeting the staff of the Migration Board. To him it is important that he first greets the newly arrived asylum seeker (No. 25:1). The relationship between the Migration Board officials and the asylum seeker is unequal and Michel does not want to underline this fact by acting in a way that will make the asylum seeker think that he works for or gives priority to the Migration Board. The terms “representation” and “position” could in this sense be used to describe the interpreter’s *room for manoeuvre* and what the interpreter *can* do within the framework of what the interpreter *should* do.

Carla describes “saving” a young boy from a difficult situation in a doctor’s consulting room. The boy had to get undressed but is not prepared to do so in front of a woman. Carla told the doctor that she was unable to resolve the matter without saying a few words to the boy first. The doctor agreed. She said: “My son, don’t worry. The way this will work is that I will sit with my back to you while you get undressed and the doctor examines you.” (No. 22:2).

The nudity is put in a different light and the boy does as the doctor asks despite the presence of Carla. She uses the room for manoeuvre available in the interaction between the parties; she plays with the words and speaks to him “like a mother”.

Comparing Carla's actions to Michel's, both step out of their roles as interpreter and serve as cultural brokers, and both make themselves the representatives of a certain cultural competence in terms of attitudes to illness, to power and disadvantage as well as to generational and gender roles. Radu on the other hand, who is involuntarily handed the role of cultural broker and expert on "wife-beating", finds this extremely insulting and rude.

Consequently, representation is not just about the interpreter's own positioning or expectations and conceptions of others regarding the interpreter and the role of the interpreter, but it is also about power relationships.

Frontlines

Ariana tells about a family with four children for which she has interpreted on numerous occasions. They were refugees and had lived hidden for some years. All family members were in poor physical and mental state, and placed in residential care. She tells about collisions between the family and the care centre. For example the family was forced to go outdoors although they did not want to. The blinds had to be up although the family members wanted darkness.

Ariana talks about a family with a variety of difficulties. She thinks that the framework for treatment, routines, rules and care programmes etc, does not work for a family in this kind of situation. The care and treatment offered to the family was devised in a "Swedish" context and is about treating dysfunctional families. Dysfunctional in this context refers to problems such as mental illness, substance abuse or violence within the family. Ariana's view is that this family is suffering from other problems completely and that the care will not reach them if one does not make

the effort to try to understand the family and how they see their situation.

Ariana stresses that she is familiar with the countries that the family and others she interprets for are from. She is familiar with the Swedish health and social institutions and their regulations. This gives her a cultural competence and the tools to interpret not just what is said, but also situations and relations which arise in the encounter between staff and client/patient, as well as contexts that lie beyond the encounter. Ariana knows that as an interpreter she cannot intervene in individual interpreting situations. Yet she believes that she has the competence and knowledge that could contribute to improving the treatment of families in similar situations.

Ariana's analysis of the situation and her thoughts about how she might contribute are different from the cultural mediating the policeman expects from Radu when asking him about "the culture" of the interpreter and the arrested man. It is important, when speaking about the interpreter as a cultural broker, to bear these differences in mind. One of them could actually amount to a possibility, with considerable knowledge about and insight into how the exercise of public authority works. The other is impossible. No-one can state how things are done in a certain "culture" just because of a shared nationality, except on a superficial and formal level.

Ariana does something else in her analysis. She sets out from the actual situation and the ignorance of the parties of how differently they see the problem and how it should be solved. Instead of claiming stereotypically that Swedes are this way and Romani that way, she delineates cultural and experiential differences.

In this context the term "cultural broker" has potential. A survey of literature about North America's "cultural brokers" reveals that it can be constructive to bear the description of their situation in mind when describing the situation of interpreters in Sweden today, despite the distance in time. There are a number of congruities

between the reality described by the interpreters in our interviews and the picture that emerges from the story about cultural brokers in history. Szasz (2001) describes how the North American brokers felt they were on the *frontline* between the dreams of the native population and the exploitation plans of the colonisers. It is important to understand the interpreter's place on the frontline and how it is a condition for how the interpreter acts in the interplay between the parties he/she is interpreting for.

The margins

Abdel recounts a situation in the frontline: "Two boys changed shoes! It's not the right word; they shoplifted shoes and left their old ones." (No. 16:2). The boys were caught and ended up at a police station to which Abdel was then summoned.

The police threatened the boys that they were going to be "sent back home! Home to Burundi. Home to Africa." / ... / I thought, I have here a very difficult situation. I am here to earn money. I work here. But I know that the significance of the policeman's behaviour is not consistent with his tasks. Only the Migration Board sends people back. Not the police. The role of the police is just to write a report about what happened. Not to shout and threaten. But I was a coward, I did nothing. And that still makes me angry when I think about this situation. Why wasn't I able to tell him: "You know that's enough now. You don't have to shout at them". But I didn't (No. 16:2).

Several interpreters describe, in different ways, how almost all the exchanges they interpret are unequal in some respect. The client/patient is in a weak position in

relation to the official, since one party represents an authority, the legal system or the health care system, while the other party represents himself/herself and most often is the one who needs something from the other. This unequal situation, which is described as fundamental in the encounter between the parties, may be counterbalanced or strengthened depending on how the parties act, meaning that the interpreter has to be careful not to be drawn into this. One interpreter emphasises that if the situation is markedly unequal, the impartiality of the interpreter is also changed. “You can’t be impartial in very unequal situations,” he maintains (No. 17:2).

In the situation Abdel found himself, the balancing act between partiality and impartiality is perhaps taken to its extreme. Abdel is faced with ethical dilemmas on several levels. The situation is unequal and he feels that there has been enough shouting. As an interpreter, Abdel is made an “accomplice” to the unjust shouting threats, making the boys extremely afraid. He is made the instrument of these threats and it is here, his thoughts about carrying out a job for which he is paid arise. At the same time he feels that since he is contributing to an unfair situation, the job in a sense becomes unethical. The policeman is threatening with something that is against the law as well as beyond his own powers. Abdel feels that he ought somehow to stand up for the rule of law and the boys’ rights (Camyad-Freixas 2010). Once again, the interpreter possesses competence and knowledge that places him on the frontline between different interests. In this example, the interpreter does not only have feelings of loyalty towards the threatened boys, but also towards fundamental ideas of the rule of law and human rights.

Such experiences affect the interpreter. Ariana broods and feels frustrated that her experiences and knowledge cannot be used in a constructive way. Abdel suffers

because of his spinelessness. Both express the feeling that they are alone with their dilemmas and insights; being on the frontline, but at the same time in the margins.

The interviews show that many interpreters have a feeling of being in the margins, of not being able to become fully engaged and of not receiving sufficient appreciation. These are complex emotions related to knowing and understanding things but not having the authority to use that knowledge or to intervene.

Nevertheless, the feeling of being on the frontline or between parties and their respective aims also leads to a more existential form of loneliness, which is reinforced by the obligation to secrecy. Carla recounts how she had bought tickets to a concert with a band from her home country. Arriving at the concert she realised that she had interpreted for almost everyone present. She chose to go home again. Meseret says she has even been hated by compatriots because she is very firm about her role as interpreter (No. 3:1). “I have no social life”, Michel says (No. 25:2).

The interviews also contain considerable testimony of the importance of being recognised. This recognition usually comes from the authorities, the legal system or health care, through further interpreting commissions, or as direct compliments and from being treated as an equal. But interpreters often feel that they become marginalised – by compatriots as well as by officials who neither make use of their knowledge nor respect of their professional role.

Tools for Good Interpreting Practice

Remaining neutral with respect to the content of the interpreted encounter and impartial in relation to the parties involved requires knowledge, experience, and self reflection from the interpreter. With no training, no self-awareness and no reflection

on his/her role, cultural brokering could lead to breaking the rules of the professional ethics. Marianne's story shows how an interpreter can be caught by surprise emotionally when not possessing the appropriate tools for dealing with the situation. During the course of the interviews we were surprised to find that many interpreters do not reflect on themselves and their role. Several of them were convinced that they are "automatically" neutral and impartial because they say so in the introduction to an interpretation. Based on our material, we distinguish a lack of debate about Good Interpreting Practice among interpreters.

In order to handle impartiality and neutrality, an interpreter needs techniques and a consciousness about his/her role and its limitations as well as an awareness of what the expectations of others might be. Our own research and the ethical discussions and considerations we have to deal with, are in many ways similar to the work of the interpreter; the academic discussion about *self-reflection*. Self-reflection deals with methodological questions regarding inner considerations. For example it might concern reflections about how a given interpreting situation is handled; the relationship with the others in the interpreted encounter. This kind of reflection give interpreters tools to distance themselves from their work and to look at their role; what you *can* do as well as what is not possible within the framework of what you *should* do. Furthermore it gives the interpreter tools for exploring the sense of loneliness or lack of recognition they might be experiencing. An important question in the discussion about self-reflection concerns *cultural self-knowledge*, i.e. the knowledge that you are a cultural being and that you have frames of reference and cultural conceptions.

During a course for interpreters that we participated in, Aino told that she gets irritated with an official at the Migration Board who always begins the asylum

interviews by a cheerful clap of his hands while exclaiming: “Can you tell us about your trip to Sweden?”. Aino feels that the word “trip” is associated with something pleasant, positive, something you do of your own free will, such as a trip to the seaside. But the story the asylum seeker has to tell is not about a trip, it is about a flight – an involuntary journey following an involuntary departure, often under terrible circumstances.

Aino asks her teacher and fellow students if they think it is acceptable for her to downplay it by using the word “flight” or “journey” instead, in order not to offend the asylum seeker. The teacher concludes that she must say the words as the official says them, and interpret the whole cheerful display. Thus the asylum seeker has the opportunity to object, and the interpreter will serve as a mirror in which the official can see himself, which may affect the way his questions are phrased in the future (Field notes 2009).

This shows how the interpreter can become the balancing factor in an unequal situation and how this can affect his/her neutrality before the content and impartiality before the parties. It highlights the practice of interpretation, how the interpreter manages to manoeuvre within the framework of the rules. It is about finding the right word for the right person.

Aino’s reflections show that meaning, culture and representation are important parts of the practice of interpretation and cannot be negotiated. Beyond the cultural meanings that exist in the language itself, the interaction between the parties for whom the interpreter is interpreting, constitutes a cultural arena with rules and room for manoeuvre, in which cultural brokering occurs consciously or unconsciously. Self-reflection and self-knowledge are important tools in the process of laying these rules and this room for manoeuvre bare, and for critically analysing them.

Cultural broker – once again

Above, we noted that acting as a cultural broker is not always consistent with the role of the interpreter such as it is defined in Good Interpreting Practice. Acting as a cultural broker means that the interpreter serves as a proactive negotiator and strives for a certain outcome. However, our examples show that the interpreter actually cannot avoid the role as a cultural broker. This role is intrinsic to the phenomenon of interpretation, in which messages formulated in cultural contexts are to be conveyed in an encounter between people with different frames of reference and different prior understandings of what the encounter is meant to achieve.

Via many concrete examples from our search for an understanding of what the role of the interpreter as a cultural broker means in practice, differences have emerged between:

1. Being handed the role as broker;
2. Taking on the role as broker;
3. Realising that you possess cultural competence which *should* be used, but *cannot*.

Number 1: Being handed the role as broker usually concerns situations when clients/patients and/or officials expect the interpreter to be loyal to his/her compatriots. Daud was on one occasion expected to pass on a secret note from an arrested man. Abdel was expected to answer questions from an asylum seeker during an ongoing interview. In situations where officials want to use the interpreter as a cultural broker, the expectation is about the interpreter being able to make pronouncements on the “culture” that he/she and the client/patient assumedly belong

to and share because they come from the same country or speak the same language. In these examples, the expectations are simplified and stereotypical versions of what culture and cultural brokering are.

Number 2: Occasionally the interpreter takes on the role as cultural broker. Mindful of the cultural background of the patient, Emrah changed information from the doctor to the patient by avoiding the word cancer. He explained to us how to play with words so that they suit different people in accordance with their cultural differences, educational level and whether they are urban or rural. Carla told how she shifted her position from female interpreter to representing “a mother” and thereby facilitated events during a medical examination. Both interpreters describe a carefully considered, conscious strategy, and an understanding of what culture and cultural brokering actually involves.

Abdel wanted to, but chose not to intervene when a policeman threatened two young boys on unfair grounds. This instance of cowardice still makes him feel bad, and as if he had been an accomplice to the policeman. By strictly following Good Interpreting Practice, and by observing his obligation to secrecy, he felt as if he became hostage to the guidelines, with limited room for manoeuvre. The fact that he held back in accordance with a rigid reading of professional ethics rather than acting as a broker, still troubled his conscience.

Number 3: Here we are dealing with aspects of brokering on a more abstract level, beyond concrete interaction in the interpreting situation. Ariana described her cultural competence as coming partly from her background in another country, and partly from her having lived in Sweden for many years. Her cultural competence is not about stereotypical notions of cultural differences. It is about her having the opportunity to analyse, at close quarters, a process where cultural conceptions and

expectations constitute the framework for the treatment of a family. This framework is created and reformulated in the encounter between the different needs and goals of the parties involved. Suddenly trivial routines intended to promote “good health” – the blind *has to* be up, or you *have to* go outdoors – become more complex and need to be scrutinised. These seemingly harmless routines may be fine for Swedish families but not for the refugee families she interprets for. Ariana becomes frustrated. She displays an understanding for the concept of culture and cultural brokering. However, as an interpreter she is limited by the rules of professional ethics, restricting her room for manoeuvre. Ariana feels that the analytical ability of interpreters and their experiences of being on the frontline *cannot* be used, though they *should* be seen as assets.

We have discussed culture, cultural competence and the interpreter as a cultural broker from the perspective of interpreters and their descriptions of actual events that occurred during interpreted encounters. We have analysed different rules; general ones, in good interpreting practice, and specific ones, arising when interacting with those for whom you interpret. We have explored the room for manoeuvre and the position of the interpreter, on the frontline and at the margins. We have shown that it is almost impossible for the interpreter to avoid the role as a cultural broker.

It could well be potentially favourable to closely analyse interpreted meetings on the basis of the concept of the cultural broker, providing tools for understanding the role of the interpreter in a broader social context.

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