

Unit 8:

Sight Translating Interview Transcripts

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*“It is not possible to step twice into the same river...
or to come into contact twice with a mortal being in the same state.”*
(Heraclitus, Fragment B91. Quoted from Graham 2015)

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Participants will be able to

- » critically analyse the term ‘back-translation’;
- » describe sight translation and its requirements;
- » understand how interview transcripts are composed and used in the asylum procedure;
- » enact sight translation as a dialogic activity;
- » understand critical interactional factors and how they operate.



What are ‘Back-Translation’ and ‘Sight Translation’?

Providing a translation of an interview transcript (also called transcript, written statement, protocol, interview report, or interview record; hereafter, ‘transcript’) is one of the most critical things that an interpreter may perform in an asylum procedure. As the source text is in **written form**, the term that is used to refer to this is ‘sight translation’. The sight translation of a transcript functions as a **checking procedure** for the content of the transcript. Depending on the country that the interpreter works in, there may be different conventions in how oral statements made by asylum applicants are written down. In most countries, a transcript of an asylum applicant’s words is then sight translated back to them by the interpreter. In other countries, the convention may be that there is no sight translation of a transcript. The information provided in this unit applies to situations in which the interpreter is required to provide a sight translation of the transcript to the asylum applicant during the course of the asylum interview, as follows:

During an interview that is conducted via an interpreter, the responses provided to the interviewer are recorded in written form. Before this written version is finalised, a translation of it is provided to the applicant so that they can make sure that it reflects what they said. Once verified, this written version then becomes an official document

(hereafter ‘transcript’) in the asylum application. This checking procedure therefore assumes great importance with respect to the outcome of the application and any appeal that may be made against a decision. As it can directly affect the future status of an applicant, the sight translation is something that merits close consideration.

THE MYTH THAT WE CAN TURN THINGS BACK TO HOW THEY WERE BEFORE

Within the legal context in general, including asylum procedures, the **translation of a transcript** is often referred to as ‘back-translation’. This concept is in stark contrast to what translation practice and research has shown it to be.

At a basic level, interpreting involves comprehension of a source text. A source text contains not only intended meanings, but also possible meanings that extend beyond these. The technical term for these possible meanings is ‘potentials of interpretation’. It is therefore not possible to apprehend one single, absolute and all-encompassing meaning of a source text. What we understand is always specific to our perceptions and has a particular perspective. What this means is that the understanding of a source

text – even under optimum conditions – is always subject to an **element of choice**. The same applies to the way that a target text is conveyed. In addition to the way we intend our own interpretations to be perceived, there exist a number of other possible meanings beyond this.

From this we can conclude that an interpretation – with the proviso that it should be as accurate and complete as possible – is always accompanied by the **creation of new meaning**. Professional interpreter performance depends not only on a high degree of precision, but also on consciousness of responsibility for this aspect of the interpreted interaction that is both open and dynamic.

Interpreting in an asylum procedure, as in all interactions, involves not only a simple rendering of meaning from one language into another but also an element of transformation. When a transcript is sight translated back into the language that was used by the applicant themselves, this element of transformation is present, as is the factor that the ‘back-translation’ does not represent, in a complete sense, a ‘return’ to the words or signs that the applicant used.¹ This is not to suggest that the source text and the target text are not congruent with each other. What we are suggesting here is that a ‘return’ to the original form of the source text via translation is not possible, because there is rarely a one-to-one relation between the words, forms or signings when moving between languages (Mikkelsen 1999).

What we seek to demonstrate here is that ‘back-translation’, which is sometimes referred to as ‘literal back-translation’, is something that does not exist in reality. This raises the question why interviewers in the course of the asylum procedure still commonly use this term. The most likely reason for why they do this is that they view speech or signing as consisting of a sequencing of small, ‘bite-size’ entities that can be broken up and transferred between languages, and when re-transferred back to the original language, the ‘bite-size’ entities form the same pattern as in the original. For example, a directive of this kind given to interpreters: “Interpret everything word-for-word, so it stays the same in the other language,” is a completely unworkable expectation. In order to protect themselves, interpreters should challenge this erroneous expectation where they encounter it. For an interpreter, one element of discharging their duties responsibly is to be conscious of what is actually happening during the interpreting process.

To summarise: a sight translation represents an ‘offering of information’ in the target language (Vermeer 1982, 97) that is closely congruent to the source text, but with the further attribute that **it always contains something new** (Shlesinger 1991).

COMPARING APPLES AND ORANGES

When considering the meaning of the term ‘back-translation’, it is important to note that in a technical sense, ‘translation’ and ‘interpreting’ refer to two different activities for those taking part in them, even though the two terms are commonly used interchangeably (see Units 3-5).

On the one hand, **translation**

- refers to a fixed text created in the target language,
- does not occur in a synchronous, face-to-face interaction,
- is asynchronous, allowing the translator to research, check and correct their translation,

while on the other, **interpreting**

- is a one-off verbal or signed representation of a target text,
- is not readily amenable to evaluation or correction, due to the time pressure under which interpretations are produced (Kade 1968; Pöchl 2004).

The immediacy of the asylum procedure interview means that the type of inter-lingual transfer that occurs at it will be interpreting rather than translation.

APPEARANCES AND REALITY

An interpretation occurs through the **rendering of a source text**. The act of ‘rendering’ involves the notion of ‘departing from’ the original, not in the sense of departing from the meaning or content of the original, but in the sense that a rendition is ‘a new edition’ of something already said or signed, not ‘the same edition’. Slavishly following the structure of the source text (for example, choice of words, sentence construction and sequence of sentences) may yield a measure of similarity between the source and the target text. At the same time, such a rendition can amount to a distortion or even a complete misrepresentation, if what is expressed in the source language is ordinarily expressed in a completely different way in the target language. Notwithstanding this, in some sight translations that are performed in the course of the asylum procedure, there are known to have been declarations that have contained the following wording, “The applicant was provided with a word-for-word back-translation into their native language of the above-mentioned transcript.”

This creates a **dilemma** for the interpreter. In legal proceedings, the clarity of the language used is critically important. What this means for interpreters is that they are confronted with two problematic issues, when they are required to sign such a declaration: that they have provided an interpretation that is ‘literal’ (see Unit 4) and that is also a ‘back-translation’. As already

mentioned in this unit, in both cases these terms can only be understood in a **metaphorical sense**. From the perspective of the relevant authorities, this declaration serves the purpose of providing a quality assurance as to the accuracy of the interpretation. But within the field of **translation research and practice**, the term 'literal back-translation' refers to something that actually means the opposite.³ It is therefore questionable, in an ethical sense, for interpreters to sign such a declaration in the course of the asylum procedure. To safeguard confidence in their own professionalism (see Unit 5), interpreters should request a formulation that more closely reflects the work that they do. It could, for example, be worded: "A full sight translation of this written transcript was provided to the applicant to verify that what they said or signed has been understood and for them to check its contents".

The points outlined above in regard to 'word-for-word back-translation' and the use of this term (by some) as a quality assurance mechanism suggest that we should look at this term as more than just an example of legal jargon. Its use can have broader repercussions. For example, there can be negative consequences, if the wording of this declaration influences the interpreter to feel obliged to structure their sight translation such that it facilitates a particular kind of 'back-translation'. Sight translation and interpreting are not carried out so that the sight translation or interpretation can then be compared against the source text, speech or signing. Such a belief is contrary to contemporary, empirical research on interpreting and how interpreters transfer meaning across languages. What we are dealing with here, therefore, is **not 'back-translation', but 'sight translation of a transcript'** that is provided so that the recorded version of what the applicant has said or signed has been understood and verified by the applicant.

Sight Translation

WHAT IS IT?

Translation at sight occurs in settings in which the source text is in written form and the target text is verbal or signed (Gile 2009; Loreto Sampaio 2007; Agrifoglio 2004; Changmin 2001). In the case of signed interpreting, the target text is sometimes called 'text-to-sign interpreting'.

The activity of sight translation is a form of inter-lingual transfer that has the following attributes:

- the source text is written,
- it is delivered in an ad-hoc manner,
- it is rendered into a spoken- or sign-language target text.

Sight translations can be provided in the **consecutive mode** or the **simultaneous mode**.

Consecutive sight translation involves the interpreter first being able to read through the full text, making annotations or notes on the text or elsewhere to aid comprehension or transfer, and then delivering the interpretation of the text from the perspective of knowing the text in its entirety. For a sight translation to be delivered in the consecutive mode, an allocation of time needs to be made before or during the interaction in which the interpreter is able to familiarise themselves with the full text before giving the sight translation.

With simultaneous sight translation, interpreters are commonly given little or no reading or preparation time. They are required to read and comprehend the written text and to provide a sight translation on the spot. The source text, whether printed or in electronic form, remains accessible and unchanged throughout the sight translation (see Unit 6).

The function and means by which a sight translation is provided depends greatly on the general context of the situation (for example, cultural, political or business interactions) or the setting itself (for example, peace negotiations, award ceremony or shareholder meeting).

In the context of the asylum procedure, sight translation may be performed for a number of reasons. In addition to the purpose of ensuring that an applicant has understood and verified the written version of what they have said or signed, sight translation may be employed when the following are presented: identity documents, official extracts, certifications, proof of inoculations, medical history reports, official correspondence or country-specific reference documents.

Documents may be presented for sight translation in the following ways:

- Without warning, the text is presented and a sight translation is required straight away.
- The text is presented to the interpreter, and they are given only a brief amount of time to look through it and prepare themselves before giving the sight translation.
- The text has already been made available to the interpreter from a previous interaction or through access to the applicant's documents.³ (In general, it is not common for the document to be available to the interpreter in advance.)

The timeframe involved in many steps of the asylum procedure means that **it is seldom the case that an interpreter can preview and prepare** the text to be sight translated.

THE COGNITIVE DEMANDS OF SIGHT TRANSLATION

When providing a sight translation, we can identify the following **simultaneously enacted activities** that are based on Gile's (1985) Effort Model of attention and memory capacity in interpreting. In relation to sight translation, Gile (2009, 179-180) describes effort expenditure in the following way:

Sight translation = Reading Effort + Memory Effort + Speech Production Effort + Coordination

- **Reading Effort.** Understanding what is presented in visual form;
- **Memory Effort.** Short-term memorizing speech segments to identify and understand them;
- **Speech Production Effort.** Providing the sight translation in its totality, which includes any or all of the following: voice, rhythm, gesture, body language, gaze, proxemics and self-monitoring;
- **Coordination Effort.** Managing the reading, memory and speech production effort.

THE IMPORTANCE OF 'LETTING GO' OF THE VISUAL REPRESENTATION

In spoken- and sign-language interpreting, listening, memory and analysis effort is required to recall what has just been said or signed. This 'one-off' contact with the source text makes it easier for the interpreter to disregard the text's actual structures. With sight translation, though, the source text remains constantly accessible, and this is the challenge that sight translation presents: the need to **constantly switch between silent reading of the text and spoken or signed interpreting** that is natural-sounding and not needlessly influenced by source text constructions, so that we can speak of the interpreter 'having let go' of its visual form. At the same time, the interpreter's gaze needs to move periodically between two points of attention: the source text itself and the recipient of the sight translation (Gile 2009; Agrifoglio 2004).

Letting go here refers to 'letting go' of the structure of the source text. There can be differences in the way that a particular sense is rendered from the source into the target language, according to the situation and the context. In the process of practising and acquiring the skill of sight translation, interpreters should keep the following points in mind and reflect on how and to what degree they are able to let go of the visual representation of the source text:

- individual words; for example, keeping in mind that a seemingly affirmative response in one language need not be equivalent to 'yes';
- syntax; for example which elements may be in clause-initial position, which ones in clause-final position, and which ones may be elsewhere;

- voice; for example a source text sentence may be in passive voice, while its equivalent in the target language may be in active, or vice versa;
- mood; for example indicative, interrogative, subjunctive or imperative;
- time as an expressed category; for example, use of past tense in relation to past events, as against present tense in relation to past events, to express 'immediacy';
- pronouns used; for example, use of 'we' to refer to a subject not further specified, or use of 'you' as a generic pronoun;
- number as a grammatical category; for example, whether the language formally distinguishes between singular and plural forms;
- coherence markers; for example, words that perform a linking function such as showing relations of cause/effect ('because'), contrast ('but'), temporal order ('and then', 'before') or addition ('and');
- the marking and sequencing of sentences through the use of full stops or other punctuation markers, as a feature that may not be followed in the target text;
- visual delineation of text into paragraphs that accord with the thematic or rhythmic norms of the source language; these may differ in the target language.

Using a **pen to mark or annotate** particular structures can be a useful strategy for interpreters to use to capture the sense of a source text. Other aspects of the text, where these are clearly recognisable as such, can serve as text-internal visual aids that facilitate the delivery of the sight translation. These include things like clearly recognisable dialogue passages, changes in font size or style, or use of italics.

'Letting go' also relates to terms used in the transcript, such as particular concepts, procedures or events that may be conceptualised in the source culture in a different way to that in which they are conceptualised in the target culture. This may necessitate further explanation in the sight translation delivery, for example terms such as 'family', 'home', 'occupation', 'strike' or 'rainy season' (see Unit 4 and Unit 10) can have different connotations according to the language that they are used in. What this can also mean is that the **length of time for delivery can differ** from the length of time it would take to read out the source text in the source language.

DEPARTING FROM THE NORMS OF WRITTEN LANGUAGE

Another feature of sight translation is the **shift from written to spoken or signed language**. When working from a written text, an interpreter needs to be aware of the specific characteristics and functionalities that characterise a written text and those which distinguish it from spoken or signed text. Some researchers, for example Linell (2005), go so far as to state that they are completely

different. Oral or signed communication is generally more readily comprehensible than written text. This needs to be kept in mind, especially as the applicant in the asylum procedure is likely to be listening very attentively to the sight translation.

EYE CONTACT

Interpreting can and should be conceived of as an activity that involves not only inter-lingual transfer, but also gesture, voice modulation, facial and body language (Bahadır 2010). This goes without saying for sign-language interpreting. The challenge of sight translation is to enact elements from a written text. In dialogue interpreting, the situational dynamics alone usually have the effect of engaging all parties, but in the case of sight translation, the interpreter needs to be careful that they do not focus solely on the text to the detriment of engaging with the participants in the interaction. If the interpreter focuses too much on the text, they are unable to see how it is actually being received by the other party and whether it appears coherent to them. To avert this risk, and to ensure optimum delivery of the sight translation, **frequent eye contact with the other parties is an essential interactional strategy.**

SPEECH OR SIGNING TEMPO AND FLOW

Sight translation should be delivered at a **similar pace and rhythm to spoken or signed language.** The interpreter is the one who determines the speech or signing tempo and flow of sight translation (Gile 2009). This is a feature that distinguishes it from interpreting, where the interpreter is largely guided by the rate or speed of speech/signing from the source speaker/signer. It is important to keep in mind that too slow a tempo can make it harder to take in the sight translation, as can other aspects of performance such as abrupt changes in voice/signing rhythm, frequent false starts and repairs or repeated insertions.⁴ With regard to the **length of the sight translation**, interpreters **should monitor others' ability and readiness to understand and absorb the text.** In some cases, this may necessitate the insertion of a pause/pauses or the elicitation of back-channelling signals from the other party/parties.

DEALING WITH ONE'S OWN AND OTHERS' FEELINGS

When delivering a sight translation, interpreters have an awareness of their own performance. They may be thinking or feeling things like, "I did that well", "I was a bit off the mark there", "How am I supposed to sight translate this?", "Why isn't the applicant looking at me?", "This is a really badly composed transcript", "Am I speaking too fast?", "Should I offer extra clarification about that? Can I do that now?", "The interviewer has been looking

at me the whole time in complete disbelief", and so on. What these thoughts represent is an internal dialogue or monitoring that runs alongside the delivery. Interpreters need to be careful that these thoughts do not affect their concentration such that they impact on the delivery of the sight translation itself. These thoughts have been known to distract some interpreters to the extent that their performance was severely affected.

One feature of sight translation is the fact that there are fewer interactional stimuli from others, such as the turn-taking that normally occurs in dialogue or liaison interpreting. This means that interpreters need to be especially mindful of their inner thoughts. It is important to keep in mind that it is quite normal for there to be a mismatch between one's own internal thoughts and others' perceptions. For example, what an interpreter may perceive to be awkward may not be perceived as such by others, or at least not to the same degree. In order to work out how and why this inner dialogue operates in the way it seems to, it is perhaps a good idea to reflect on when and why it occurs in the course of the sight translation delivery, and to use this self-evaluation as a guide for self-improvement (Bahadır and Pinzker 2014).

Sight Translation in the Asylum Procedure

THE TRANSCRIPT AS A SOURCE TEXT

The successful delivery of a sight translation in the asylum procedure depends in the first place on the source text – in the context of the asylum procedure this is the transcript – and how it is interpreted and understood. A transcript belongs to a particular text type. In order to fully understand the function and impact of this text type and to see what are the implications for the interpreter in understanding and reproducing it, a number of points that should be considered are presented below.

WHO WROTE IT, AND WHO IS THE 'AUTHOR'?

In the first place, it seems logical to think that the applicant is the 'original author' of the transcript. However, the transcript is a text that contains not what the applicant said or signed, but what was interpreted from their speech or signing. The interpreter is therefore a 'co-contributor' of the transcript. The actual 'control' over the composition of the transcript lies in the hands of the interviewers, who determine its content. The form of the transcript therefore also reflects their 'voices'.⁹ This makes it seem as if the transcript has a number of authors who determine its content. In fact, all parties actively present in the interview can be considered contributors to the text (Coulthard and Johnson 2007; Eades 2008). As a text, the transcript has multiple contributors to its content, but what is important to note is that where the text is signed by an applicant for asylum, in a legal sense, the applicant is the author of the text. Their signature makes it a transcript of which they alone are the author.

WHAT IS RECORDED IN THE TRANSCRIPT?

Conventions in the collation and recording of information in an application for asylum vary from country to country. In some countries, the process may include the preparation of a transcript that occurs on the basis of information provided by the applicant to an interpreter, with the interpreter's interpretations forming the basis for the interviewer's or their typist's preparation of a transcript. In other countries, there is no distinguishable transcript but a series of responses to questions asked in the course of an interview, and the responses are entered under each question. In this case, the sequence of responses forms the transcript that supports the asylum application.

It is usually not a good sign when the interpretation of an applicant's responses to questions appear to resemble bureaucratic jargon rather than natural-sounding answers,

and when such responses are found in the transcript (for example, responses such as "Yes. I understood everything. I was able to understand everything that the interpreter said." or "Yes. I understood everything. I have no further questions about the legal consequences of what you just explained to me."). This may indicate that the applicant is giving a response that they feel that they have to give, or that the interpreter formulated their translation as 'transcript-ready' to ease the work of the interviewer or typist. It is up to the interviewer to check or to question the applicant further, if the response given by the applicant appears to be overly or unnaturally compliant, raising the possibility that what is written down in the transcript is not a reflection of what the applicant said or signed. The interviewer has no interest in recording inaccurate or mistaken information in the transcript, as this may be revealed at a later stage of investigation or at an appeal hearing. The interviewer bears the responsibility for the content of the transcript, not the interpreter. There are a number of recognised ways in which the transcript can be prepared:

- **The interpreter dictates their interpretations directly to a person responsible for the written recording of the applicant's statements;**
- **The interviewer selects certain sections of the interpretations and assembles a text-ready version of the applicant's statements;**
- The interviewer themselves composes the transcript on the basis of what they have heard, which they then record in translated form in place of the interpreter performing the inter-lingual transfer (That means that there is no need for an interpreter, if the interviewer chooses to do this);
- In court settings, a court stenographer follows the discourse elicited in court proceedings and prepares a transcript based on the sections of what is said.

In the preparation of a transcript, the two ways marked in bold above are usually considered the best. The third way listed above presumes that the interviewer has skills in both languages and is able to translate aural or signed text in one language into written text in another, that is 'aural translation'. Where the interviewer occupies two roles – that of interviewer and interpreter/translator – the interviewer should declare this to the applicant, and clearly indicate to the applicant when they are performing one role or the other, and when they are performing both roles simultaneously. Further, it is likely to be common practice that the name of the person responsible for inter-lingual transfer – usually the interpreter, but in this case the interviewer – is officially recorded in the transcript or in an accompanying document. The interviewer should do this to indicate their identity as the person who performed the task of inter-lingual transfer in the transcript preparation.

There are further known ways in which a transcript may be prepared. These include the interpreter taking on a role beyond inter-lingual transfer. We do not advocate that the interpreter take on this role, and we warn against the following two ways of preparation of the transcript. We include them here as examples of how a transcript should **not** be prepared.

In the first, the interpreter is allocated the role of preparing the transcript itself by writing it in the host country's official language, based on the speech or signing of the applicant, and sight translates it back to the applicant. This way includes the interpreter taking on another's role (that of the interviewer) and taking on the responsibility for the content of the prepared transcript.

In the second, the interpreter is allocated the role of preparing the transcript in written form in the applicant's language. This way excludes the interviewer and does not facilitate their involvement in the protocols of the transcript. The interpreter then reads out orally, or signs the transcript to the applicant in the applicant's language, or allows the applicant to read the transcript (where they have literacy in this), and seeks their agreement to it. The interpreter then translates the transcript into the host country's official language. This is usually the first opportunity that the interviewer has to access the transcript document. The interpreter then sight translates their own translation back into the applicant's language, so that the applicant can verify that the translated transcript conforms to the transcript written in their own language that they had just been given access to and agreed to. Clearly, this second way, like the first one, has the undesirable effect of the interpreter taking on the role of another, which is risk-laden and contravenes the principle of impartiality that is contained in most Codes of Ethics for interpreters. This second way also requires the interpreter to undertake double the volume of inter-lingual transfer compared to what they would do in the optimum ways shown above. It also means the exclusion of the interviewer, which often leads to their disengagement from the procedure. This is not a desirable outcome (Fowler 2003; Angelelli 2015).



COUNTRY-SPECIFIC INFORMATION

Translating Transcripts

- In what way are interviews recorded in your country?
- Is a translation of the transcript provided to the applicant so that they can ascertain that it reflects what they said? If yes, in what way is the back-translation provided?
- Does the applicant have to approve of or demonstrate their agreement with the transcript?

To return to the four points listed above about how the transcript may be prepared, it is clear that one characteristic of the transcript is the 'refraction' that occurs in the repeated transfer of text via back-translation. To use the phrase 'travel literature' as an illustrative example, it is possible to imagine it being rendered in the interview statements as '**travelling texts**'. Some of these meanings arrive safely at their stated destination, while others take a detour or a wrong path before getting to where they need to go. And some of them never actually make it to their final destination and do not get included in the transcript (Rock, Heffner, and Conley 2013).

WHAT KIND OF TRANSFER IS TAKING PLACE?

In the process of preparing a transcript, **switching between linguistic codes** occurs on a variety of levels:

- in formal linguistic terms, from the source language into the target language;
- in terms of genre, often from every-day, colloquial speech or signing into the formal, bureaucratic language of government institutions;
- in terms of macro-skill, from spoken language into written language.

THE NEED FOR A TRANSCRIPT

The parties involved in the asylum procedure often have different needs and expectations with regard to the transcript and the purpose that it serves for them. From the perspective of the applicant, the transcript serves the purpose of being a formal representation of the details that they have conveyed to the interviewer. From the perspective of the interviewer, the transcript is a working document that collates individual and situationally-based responses that are then weighed up in regard to their validity and tenability as part of the decision-making process ⁶ (Scheffer 1998; Iedema 2003).

What else do we need to know about the transcript? A transcript is a point of reference, as well as being an expression and the concrete result of a highly dynamic interaction, in which meaning is negotiated and in which possible meanings may shift according to perspective and the flow of the conversation. It is now clear that the sight translation of a transcript is not some kind of repetition of what has previously been expressed. Instead, as a form of inter-lingual transfer, we can speak of it as a '**new target text**', with the proviso that working from a written source has consequences on delivery.

We can therefore conceptualise sight translation not so much as a formal act that concludes the asylum procedure interview but more so as a '**new or second act**' of a performed activity. In doing this, it is important for the

interpreter to mentally 'move from' what was previously spoken or signed and to approach the written document as a 'new source text'. This ensures that any differences between what is contained in the written document and what was said or signed previously are then rendered in the sight translation.⁸

What this means is that the interpreter should not orientate themselves according to the **patterns of interpretation from previous parts of the interaction**. Features from these previous parts may have included, for example, a change in mood⁹ or a sense of hesitation that, at the time, had a measurable effect on the meaning of what was said and how it was understood. These things cannot really be recorded in the transcript, and so what the interpreter has to work from is the transcript and nothing more.

Sight Translation as a Dialogic Event

YOU AND ME

As a checking and verifying measure, the sight translation of a transcript is an important part of a process that seeks to be fair. In an immediate sense, it is directed at the applicant. But it is not a monologue, similar to a poetry reading¹⁰ for example. Instead, it should be thought of as **a conversation with the text**.

In order for the sight translation to achieve its purpose, it needs to be seen as something that enables both parties – the interviewer and the applicant – to enter into a dialogue with one another. This dialogue can take the form of spoken or signed utterances directed at the other party (for example, queries or explanations) or as non-verbal cues (for example, stance, body language, gesture or gaze). What is important here is that it is clear to both parties when the interpreter is providing a sight translation of the transcript's content, and when they are using language in a phatic way to build rapport between the participants.

While the above dialogue is going on, it is important for the interpreter to **be mindful of the other parties** in the interaction. In the course of the sight translation, it can be particularly disturbing where there are passages that claim things that the applicant never said or signed or at least did not say or sign in the way that these are being re-presented to them (Eades 2010).

During the course of the interaction, there may be points at which the interviewer wishes to ascertain that the applicant has fully understood the interpretation provided to them by the interpreter. This may occur as an interjection in the course of the delivery of the sight translation. An interviewer may interject and ask questions such as, "Did you understand what the interpreter just said?"

GIVING AND RECEIVING

The sight translation of a transcript makes sense only if what the interpreter conveys can be received by the applicant. In order for the sight translation not to sound monotonous, and to prevent the applicant from losing concentration at a time when they could be experiencing fatigue, it is important for the interpreter to consciously employ **attentiveness strategies**, such as voice modulation, variation in volume, occasional pauses, variation in voice tempo, gesture, body language, stance and so on. Where the sight translation contains figures (for example, amounts or dates) or dense factual content (for example, detailed descriptions), the interpreter should make a conscious effort to provide **pauses** in their delivery, or at least to slow the speed of their voice.

Being attentive to the other participants and to the constellation of the asylum procedure interview means that the interpreter is constantly required to reflect on their own performance and may ask themselves the following questions: "How did the others react to my interpretations? How have their reactions affected my own interpretations?" It is also important here to register strategies by the applicant that amount to an attempt to establish rapport, and to allow the applicant to use these. Where either party appears overtly to be suffering from fatigue, it is advisable that the interpreter suggests taking a break, or at least inviting both parties to have a drink of water.

BACK-AND-FORTH ALIGNMENT

The success of sight translation delivery also depends on the interpreter being able to balance a number of challenges that present themselves, when looking at sight translation from a dialogic perspective:

- The **gaze of the interpreter** should be focused on the passage of the text being sight translated at that moment, and also looking further on to anticipate the meaning of forthcoming sections. At the same time, their gaze should, at times, be directed at the applicant, so as to be able to gauge their reaction to what is being conveyed to them.
- The **linguistic register** of the sight translation should be such that the text is accessible and readily understood by the applicant, while also retaining some of the tone of official language used by government institutions.
- The **rhythm** of speech or signing should be smooth and fluent, so that the applicant is easily able to take in longer stretches of details or courses of action. The interpreter should leave themselves open to signals from the applicant that they need the interpreter to pause, to actively clarify something or to allow the applicant to check something.

The gaze of the applicants themselves may change in its orientation. An applicant's gaze may indicate that they are comprehending and taking in what is said to them, while at other times it is clear that they are taking time to process things and to think of possible consequences. Their focus may shift from what is being said at that moment to remembering back to what happened in the past. It may be torn between the impulse to take the initiative in the interaction and the knowledge that it is best to remain calm and reserved in such situations. In order for a sight translation to be properly delivered and fully comprehended, both parties – the interpreter and the applicant – need to make themselves fully aware of what the interaction requires of them.

1) A subsequent transformation implies a transformation of the previous transformation.

2) As a basic principle that underlies training in sight translation, Weber (1990, 50) recommends that "A word-for-word translation should never be accepted."

3) Such instances are still considered examples of 'sight translation' where there is no written translation available to the interpreter. Where the interpreter does have access to a written translation and then reads it aloud or signs it, this is not 'sight translation'.

4) Within this context, it is important to note that a fluent and smoothly delivered sight translation can be a cause for concern. Sight translation is a highly complex and dynamic activity. Delivery with no sign of hesitation or deliberation at all can be an indication that the person providing the sight translation may be glossing over difficult passages (i.e. shortening some sections or even omitting them) rather than striving to provide a full and complete rendition (Pöchhacker 2005; Kolb 2010).

5) In the context of court proceedings, the court stenographer should also be included as a person responsible for the composition of a transcript. The discourse conventions that the court stenographer employs in capturing in written form what they have heard are part of the content of the text. This includes visual layout, orthographical choices and font settings that form part of the text content (Kredens and Morris 2010; Nakane 2014).

6) In some ways, the transcript can be seen as a text that 'stitches together' verbal fragments provided by the applicant.

7) It is illusionary to think that it is possible for the interpreter to completely disregard everything that was said or signed before.

8) In order to demonstrate how different the sight translation could be from the speech or signing that preceded it, an interpreter who was not previously present in the interaction could be called in to do this. It is likely that such an exercise would reveal the influence of being party to prior stages of the interaction.

9) For example "Are there guns in your head or violets?", Phipps (2013).

10) Delivery of information-dense content in such a way would eventually exceed most people's capabilities.



Printable worksheet: *Critical factors and dilemmas*

This printable worksheet relates to asylum procedures in countries in which a sight translation of a transcript is a required component of the asylum interview. As stated, conventions on the necessity and manner of sight translation in the asylum interview differ from country to country.

» **Having a short break to catch one's breath**

Before commencing the delivery of a sight translation, it is for the benefit of all parties that a short break be taken. If a break has not been scheduled into the interview by the interviewer, then the interpreter should request one. A short break serves the purpose of allowing the interpreter to catch their breath. It also serves the purpose of marking the end of what has been said or signed previously and interpreted, and allows the interpreter the chance to have a brief read through of the transcript.

» **Image projected by the interpreter**

How does the interpreter deal with situations when they find it difficult to render sections of the text or to provide adequate equivalents, or even make mistakes? In terms of what the recipient of the sight translation hears or sees, it is easier for them to understand a fluently delivered sight translation, even where in places it may be incomplete or even slightly inexact. Constantly stopping, subsequently correcting mistranslations, or providing further paraphrases are intended to ensure a high degree of precision in the inter-lingual transfer, but at the same time, they make it hard for the applicant to fully absorb and understand what is being conveyed. There are risks to both such types of delivery. On the one hand, the ethical and professional standards (see Unit 5) that are incumbent on interpreters require them to **correct any mistranslations knowingly made**. On the other hand, the interviewer or the authority responsible for the interpreter being employed for the assignment may see such a course of action on the part of the interpreter as an indication of lack of professional competence. The interpreter needs to maintain a balance between these two contrasting positions, and to keep in mind that the person most at risk if a mistake or mistranslation were to occur is the applicant.

» **Physical positioning in relation to others**

Physical proximity to and visual contact with others are key things for the interpreter to consider, whatever others may think about where the interpreter should be located (Inghilleri 2005). If the interpreter is familiar with the communicative strategies that interviewers typically employ (Dialogical Communication Method, see Unit 2), then they can apply this as a frame of reference for their sight translation delivery of the transcript. It will usually be less likely for the interpreter to be familiar with the communicative strategies that the applicant may employ, and this could cause the interpreter to align themselves more readily to the interviewer. It could also be possible for the interpreter to align themselves more closely with the applicant. This is noticeable if the interpreter verbally or visually draws attention to passages of the text that appear to be of critical importance for the applicant's case. In such instances, the interpreter is providing the applicant with an overt (or covert) opportunity to pay attention carefully to the content of the transcript and to make corrections where appropriate.

It is important to keep in mind that whatever position an interpreter takes up in relation to other parties will have consequences. The interpreter bears responsibility for the physical proximity and visual contact that they maintain with other parties, and it is important for them to reflect periodically on where they are situated in relation to others. Where a physical constellation appears to be detrimental to the interaction and seems to prevent equal consideration being given to the communicative needs of all participants, then the interpreter should consider reconfiguring the physical constellation.

» **Peer consultation**

It is often the case that after an interpreting assignment, an interpreter will reflect on and self-evaluate their performance. It can sometimes happen that they do not realise that they made a mistake or mistranslated something until later on, upon **critical reflection** of their performance, re-visiting what they sight translated. When this happens, it can be very useful to **swap notes with interpreter colleagues**, to see how they would have managed such a situation. It is instructive to see and hear how others would respond, in a situation when a sight translation is being delivered or in an analogous context. Consulting with their peers on a regular basis is something that can not only consolidate a professional interpreter's level of competence but also contribute to their ability to deal pre-emptively with difficult situations (see Unit 12).



» Clarification

No one can know everything. No one can understand everything. No one can be prepared for every eventuality. When the interpreter does not understand something in the transcript, the only course of action for them to follow is to ask the interviewer or applicant for repetition or clarification. In their daily work, interpreters may not understand everything that is said or signed to them, but through the context, they may deduce the meaning of what is not fully understood. This is a legitimate and commonly used strategy. But in the setting of an asylum application, this should not be considered an option. Instead, if what the interpreter hears or sees is unclear, or if there are circumstances in the interaction that hinder the interpreter's reception of what has been said or signed, the interpreter should seek clarification. The interpreter must seek clarification in order to fully understand what they are about to interpret. **Requesting clarification** is not an indication of a lack of competence. On the contrary, it is a **hallmark of professionalism**.

» Correcting and adding to the transcript?

Interpreters should be given the opportunity to read through the transcript and to check its structure and content before providing the sight translation. If it is discovered that the transcript does not correctly represent what had been interpreted previously, or if the written text represents a qualitative change from the original source speech or signing, the interpreter should consider intervening. If the interpreter wishes to seek a correction or addition to the transcript, they should do so, by stating that the interpretations that they have provided are not fully rendered in the transcript, or not rendered in a way that reflects the interpretations provided. The content of this communication should be interpreted to the other party, usually the applicant. If the interpreter does not intervene, the transcript is sight translated in the form that it is provided to the interpreter.

EXAMPLE: An interpreter provides interpretations that fully convey the emotional state of a person seeking protection, who suffers from constant and recurring pains. But in the transcript itself, there is only the following entries:

Interviewer, "Were you in hospital?"

Applicant, "Yes. I still suffer from recurrent pains."

Regardless of whether the interpreter intervenes with regard to the transcript content or not, it remains the responsibility of the applicant to indicate non-agreement with the content of the transcript, if they believe that it does not reflect what they have said or signed in the interview. **The 'author' of the transcript, as stated above, is the person who signs the transcript.**

In some countries, the asylum procedure may require the interpreter to provide a declaration not only of the accuracy of their interpretations, but also of the accuracy of the transcript itself. This places the interpreter in the position of being co-responsible for the content of what is recorded in a transcript (see Unit 5 for ethical implications).

» A repeat rendition of the sight translation?

Where the transcript undergoes **changes or additions** on the basis of interpretations of further speech or signing from the applicant, then these changes or additions are to be considered **new source texts**. They are also sight translated as new source texts, and the process of dealing with changes or additions continues until the transcript fully reflects what the applicant has recounted.

» Withdrawal

Acting professionally means **knowing one's own limits**. Circumstances can arise which make it impossible for an interpreter, in a reasonable sense, to provide sight translation. The interpreter should first attempt to remedy these circumstances, through intervention with the interviewer and/or the applicant, or with a third party for them to be able to work as an interpreter. The interpreter should also alert others of the consequences of their inability to interpret and to work as an interpreter. It is therefore professionally acceptable, if such circumstances persist, and weighing up the possible consequences, for an interpreter to withdraw from an interpreting assignment. Similarly, it is also professionally acceptable to refuse to sign a declaration that the interpreter "has faithfully interpreted" between languages, when the conditions or circumstances have compromised the interpreter's ability to have a reasonable quality of access to the speech or signing of any party, or compromised any party's ability to have a reasonable quality of access to the interpreter's interpretations.



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Activities

Activity 1: Reading and preparation time for sight translation. Getting the sense and meaning of a text.

1

Form of activity: Participants initially work in small groups and come together at the end of the activity for plenary discussion.

Duration: 40 minutes (25 minutes in small groups, 15 minutes plenary discussion).

Description: Working in small groups, participants are given a newspaper text of approximately 250-300 words. Participants are given 1-2 minutes to read through the text. They are allowed to mark the text or make annotations with a pen. The text is then hidden from view, and participants are required to answer general questions about the text's content.

In the second stage of this activity, participants are given the opportunity to read through the text again – this time for 30-40 seconds only. Participants are then asked more specific questions about the text. Following this, each participant is required to briefly recount the most important parts of the text to the person sitting next to them.

The aim of this activity is to help interpreters develop the ability of quickly and efficiently grasping the main points and overall content of a text. Participants are encouraged to share the strategies that they employed to do this in group-wide discussion.

Source: Ersozlu, Elif. 2005. "Training of Interpreters: Some Suggestions on Sight Translation Teaching." *The Translation Journal*. <http://translationjournal.net/journal/34sighttrans.htm> (Accessed January 20 2017)

Activity 2: Moving back and forth

2

Form of activity: Working in pairs.

Duration: 30 minutes

Description: Each pair of participants receives a fairy-tale story of approx. 500 words in length. One person in each pair gives a paraphrase of the story at sight by recounting the content of it but using different words. The paraphrase is given in the same language as the fairy-tale story. It is important for each participant to keep in mind that they should maintain some eye contact with the person they are delivering the sight translation to. Upon completion of this, each participant swaps roles.

The point of this exercise is to help interpreters develop the ability to 'let go' of the source text in a cognitive sense, that is, it is intended that the interpreter learns to disregard individual words or sentence structures, and to also 'let go' of the text visually, via eye contact with their partner. Where the interpreter fails to exchange some eye contact with their partner, the partner may make this known to them.

This activity can be concluded with a group-wide exchange of the challenges that each pair experienced in doing the task and of tips on how to manage these.

Activity 3: Peer review

3

Form of activity: Working in pairs.

Duration: 2 hours (10 minutes for preparation, 20 minutes for recording, 30 minutes for evaluation, 60 minutes for presentation to plenary).

Description: Each participant is given a one-page text that they are required to sight translate. Participants should be given time to read through and prepare the text. They are given one chance to deliver their sight translation – they are not to interrupt their sight translation or attempt to start it again. The sight translation is video-recorded (e.g. via Handycam) and the recording is sent to the participant's group partner for evaluation. The group partner should prepare a report on the performance of the sight translation, focusing on the following: enactment, receptiveness and the ability to deliver the sight translation as a dialogue rather than as a monologue. Details specific to actual inter-lingual transfer need not be focused on.

Each group partner presents their evaluation report to the whole group in group-wide presentations.





Test yourself!



Answer the following questions. Feel free to talk about the issues and circumstances that influence your responses.

- 1.** What things are problematic about the term 'back-translation' itself?

- 2.** What are the challenges of sight translation that are different from those of spoken or signed interpreting?

- 3.** Why should interpreters view the transcript as a completely separate source text?

- 4.** How is it possible to structure a sight translation so that it assumes the characteristics of a dialogue?

- 5.** Why is it that in the course of delivering a sight translation, those instances where the interpreter is tempted to correct themselves can present such a dilemma?

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Preface

“It is a fiction that I am neutral and invisible.”¹

Interpreters play a crucial, yet often underestimated role in asylum interviews. An asylum applicant who does not speak the language of the country of asylum will be reliant on an interpreter to present their claim accurately. Similarly, if the interviewer is to assess the applicant’s claim effectively and fairly, they have to rely on the interpreter to facilitate communication². As it is often not possible for applicants to provide written evidence to corroborate their claims, their oral accounts of what has happened to them are usually the sole basis for an official’s decision and ultimately a pivotal point in the applicant’s life. These oral accounts are rendered by the interpreters between the official language of the proceedings (that is to say, the language(s) of the host country) and the applicant’s language (the applicant’s mother tongue or another language used by the applicant).

It seems obvious that such a critical situation calls for a well-trained and professional interpreter who has the requisite linguistic, cultural and technical skills and is aware of their role and the enormous responsibility they bear towards the other parties involved. In many countries, however, interpreters are appointed on the strength of their language skills but often do not have specific training for the asylum situation. The aim of this handbook is to offer a specific training curriculum for interpreters working in an asylum context.

This handbook was originally drafted in German, within an UNHCR-led project entitled QUADA (“Qualitätsvolles Dolmetschen im Asylverfahren”, literally: quality interpreting in the asylum procedure). The curriculum and content was designed between January and December 2014, in cooperation with experts in the field. The project was co-financed by the European Refugee Fund and the Austrian Ministry of the Interior. The major purpose of the QUADA project was to contribute to improvement of the quality of interpreting and communication in the Austrian asylum procedure.

The German handbook contains a comprehensive asylum-specific training curriculum that was published as a 200-page PDF-document and print version in 2015 and includes twelve different units on perspectives that are key to interpreting within the asylum context in Austria.

This English version, based on the original German handbook and adapted and modified with the help of international experts, was prepared between October 2016 and May 2017, in cooperation with the Department of Translation Studies at the University of Graz and financed by UNHCR. The English handbook offers a modified, country-independent version of the handbook that can be used in European countries and beyond.

The handbook responds to the need for qualified interpreters, which is evident in the asylum context both within Austria and beyond, by offering a theoretical insight into a variety of topics relevant to interpreters in the asylum context, as well as activities and exercises enabling experiential and interactive learning. It is aimed both at interpreters at asylum procedures who have no formal training and trained interpreters who wish to specialise in the field. In addition, the handbook is intended for facilitators and trainers to use in face-to-face training courses. The handbook is also relevant to asylum authorities and interviewers, providing them with insights into and guidance in working with interpreters.

We hope that this handbook will offer guidance and support to interpreting practitioners, trainers and authorities and that it will advance efforts to promote the use of trained and qualified interpreters in asylum interviews.

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¹ *Comment of an interpreter at asylum interviews*

² *For ease of reading, the term “interviews” is used for all three of the following situations: initial asylum screening interviews, where the admission of an applicant’s claim or their return to a safe country is determined, the personal interview, where the applicant gets an opportunity to describe their reasons for claiming asylum, and interviews in the appeal process against negative decisions. Accordingly, a state official conducting any one of these interviews is referred to as “interviewer”.*

How to Navigate the Handbook

The handbook consists of an introductory unit on role playing exercises in interpreter training and 12 units covering different aspects of interpreting in the asylum context³⁾:


1. Asylum and International Protection
2. The Personal Interview and Interview Techniques
3. The Basic Principles of Interpreting
4. The Interpreter's Role
5. Professional Ethics and Professional Conduct
6. Interpreting Modes
7. Note-taking
8. Sight Translating Interview Transcripts
9. Interpreting for Vulnerable Applicants
10. Interpreters as Experts in Multi-lingual and Transcultural Communication
11. Information Mining for Interpreters
12. The Interpreter's Emotional Experience

Each unit is structured in a similar way. Specific symbols help readers and users to navigate the content more easily.

▶ Learning Outcomes: This bullet-point list indicates the knowledge, skills and understanding that users can develop by means of the teaching and learning activities.

Theory: Each unit starts with the theoretical background of the topic tackled in that unit, which is usually divided into sub-sections. These sections are based on current research in this field. The information is presented in a way that it is understandable to readers with little background knowledge of the topic (for example, including explanation of technical terms and definitions of specific terms), while at the same time being precise and focused. Sometimes, more detailed and additional information is presented in a separate **💡 Fact Box**.

🌐 Country-Specific Information: Some aspects of asylum procedures and interpreting in the asylum context are largely shaped by national regulations and practice. Since these regulations and practices can differ significantly across countries, answers to certain questions may vary in different countries. Country-specific information boxes list questions that should be tackled by trainers in the particular national context in which the handbook is being used.

📖 Literature and Links: This section presents literature used in the theory section ("References") and lists materials and sources of information so that more can be learned about the different topics ("Basic Reading", "Further Reading"). It also includes a list of relevant **websites** .

🗣️ Activities: This section offers diverse training activities and exercises. It also includes ready-to-use **worksheets and templates** for trainers.

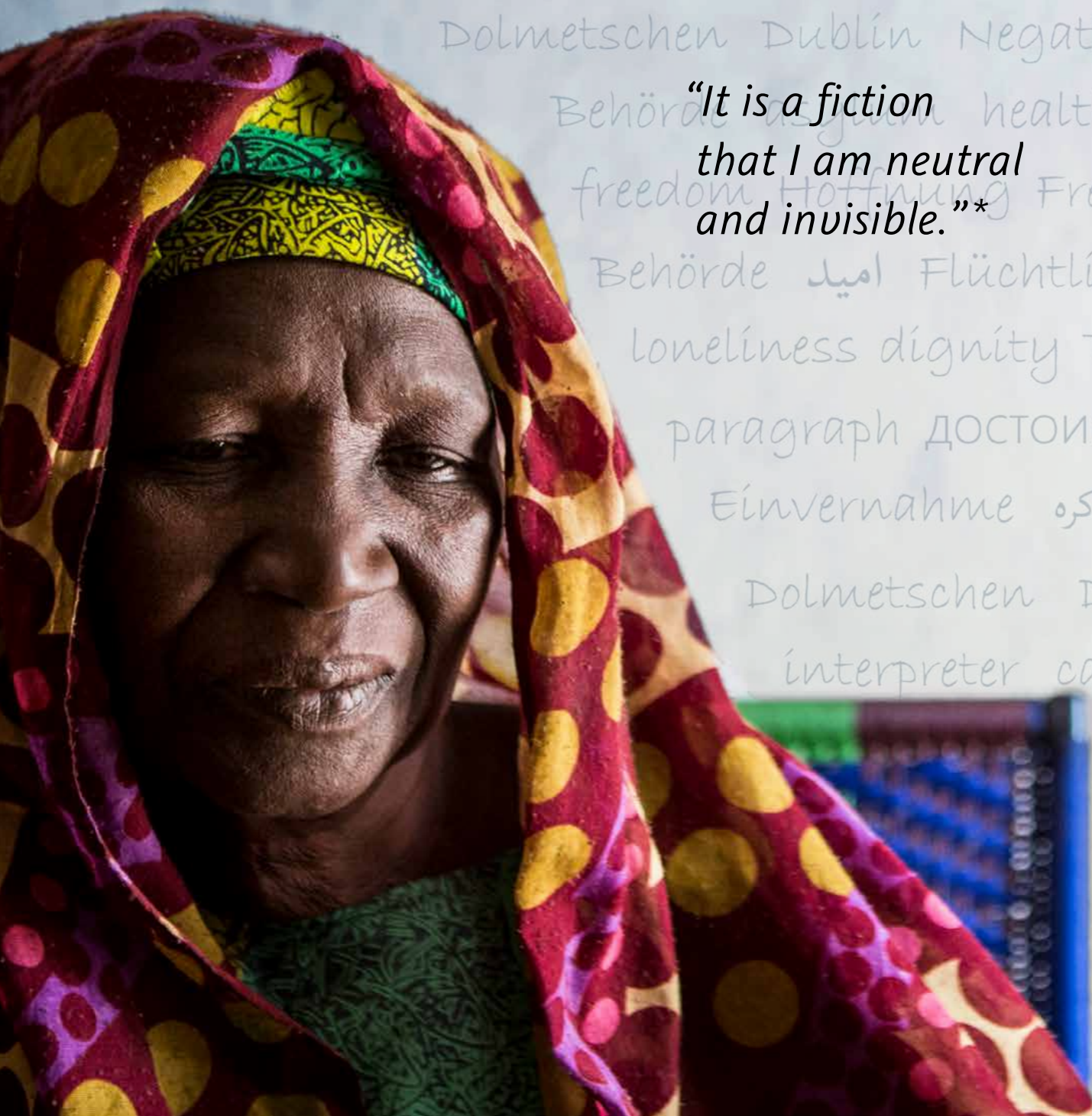
🧠 Test yourself!: This section invites readers to reflect critically on what they have learned in a specific unit. It is a mixture of questions (in an open and/or closed question format), examples and scenarios that can be analysed and reflected upon. The questions can be reflected on individually or discussed in plenary sessions.

³⁾ While we have taken every care in compiling this handbook, we cannot guarantee that the information it contains is accurate, complete and up-to-date.



Handbook

for Interpreters in Asylum Procedures



*“It is a fiction
that I am neutral
and invisible.”**

Frei
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Dubl

* Comment of an interpreter at asylum interviews

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