INTERPRETER'S PERSPECTIVES ON INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

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INTERPRETERS’ PERSPECTIVE ON INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

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Abstract

Although Translation/Interpreting Studies and Intercultural Communication Studies appear to be closely related fields of studies, both seem to have ignored their potential connectedness. In Interpreting Studies, scholars and practitioners have begun to recognize that interpreters have intercultural communication functions and do not simply automatically convey messages across parties. In Intercultural Communication Studies, scholars have neglected examining intercultural communication in the interpreting context. This study explores professional Azerbaijani interpreters' lived experiences of intercultural challenges they face in the interpreting setting to help better understand both the communication processes involved in interpreting, and interpreting as a scene for intercultural communication. Conversational interviews were employed to access lived human experiences of the researcher and the co-researchers, and thematic analysis of the capta revealed four broad themes regarding intercultural challenges encountered by interpreters during interpreting: “the interpreter is not a robot,” “the interpreter has her/his sex, religion, and culture,” “the interpreter is between two cultures,” and “it depends.” These themes are intertwined and point to the conclusion that cultural difference should not be ignored in the interpreting setting.
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Chapter 1

Review of Related Literature

1.1 Statement of the Problem and Goals of the Research

I became interested in intercultural communication because of my own exposure to this communication context, much before I came to the USA to study. I had worked as an interpreter for four years and had interacted with people from Russian, Middle Asian, Western European, and U.S. American cultures, but never recognized the process in which I was involved as a matter of intercultural communication. In my study in the USA I became more aware of the complexity of communication, including intercultural communication, and realized how the perception of the communication aspect of the profession of interpreting had been ignored in my professional life in Azerbaijan. In exploring intercultural communication I came across theories that take into account a number of aspects of communication between members of different cultures. None of the theories, to my surprise, even mentioned interpreting as a possible communication context. Given my background, I sought related literature in intercultural communication that would describe the process of interpreting, but found nothing. I also sought research that would describe the process of interpreting in terms of intercultural communication, but failed here as well. Against this background, I decided to study the interpreting process without separating interpreting from intercultural communication. They are constituents of a holistic process and it is not realistic to study one while ignoring the other.
Having worked as an interpreter for four years, I experienced many intricacies as a mediator in the communication process between members from different cultures. Added to this involvement was my own interaction with each party, at least one of which was from a different national/ethnic culture. However, this complexity usually seemed to be ignored by both parties. The only characteristic of the interpreter that was of significance for participants of the interaction seemed to be the capability to transmit words and meanings. The participants simplified the process to a model wherein the speaker conveys a message to the interpreter, who transmits it to the hearer, then takes the answer message back to the first speaker. However, interpersonal communication is a much more complex process, wherein messages are not sent as objects from one person to the other. If one recognizes that this two person situation involves a third person, the nature of this multifaceted communication pattern is apparent. The lack of research on intercultural communication in interpreting situations drove me to take some first steps. Although there is some scholarly literature on the connection between translation/interpreting and communication, most of this literature is in Translation Studies, rather than in Interpreting Studies, hence the process of intercultural communication has been largely ignored.

As an interpreter myself, I decided to explore one of the many aspects of intercultural communication within the interpreting context: interpreters' lived experience of the challenges they encounter in intercultural contexts, leaving the broader exploration of the process for further research. How do interpreters perceive the challenges in their work? How do they deal with those challenges? Awareness of these challenges as elements of
intercultural communication should be an inseparable part of interpreting competence. Through conversational interviews I explored the most vivid themes and meanings regarding challenges constructed with my co-researchers.

1.2 Translation and Interpreting Studies

Lefevere and Bassnett argued for a “cultural turn” in Translation Studies (TS) in the late 1990s (Gentzler, 2003). Research in 1980s and 1990s had clearly shown that translators’ decisions go beyond the scope of the syntactic and semantic level of texts, in that they are based upon extra-literary, conscious, and unconscious factors. To explore these factors, scholars in TS employ theories from other disciplines. Gentzler (2003) maintains that “the years of comparative studies of translation and reception of often canonical and innovative texts have given TS scholars great insight into how cultural values and ideals are constructed” (p. 21). The interdependence or inseparableness of translation/interpreting and intercultural communication is undeniable. In exploring the scholarly literature on translation I looked for discussions of interpreting as intercultural communication wherein the challenges of interpreters as intercultural agents were recognized.

The present ongoing globalization process, population mobility across borders, and developing communication technologies, draw attention to translation and interpreting as intercultural interaction. Translators and interpreters frequently operate in spheres involving two or more different cultures and languages. They perform intercultural as well as intra-cultural functions in professional and educational contexts such as court trials, refugee hearings, disaster situations, and conventions.
Historically, both translation and interpreting were labeled with the umbrella term "translation." There is an essential difference between the two terms: "A translator is normally not present at the time and place when a source text is conceived, or a target text consumed" (Smirnov, 1997, p. 214). As a consequence, research and theory in the discipline of Translation Studies has dealt mainly with translation of written texts. Until recently, interpreting and everything related to it was mostly ignored. Interpreting is "characterized by a different degree of space and time proximity to interlocutors and their discourse" (pp. 214-215). The basic two types of interpreting are simultaneous and consecutive, which are distinguished by "temporal proximity between an utterance and its rendition" (p. 215). Consecutive interpreting is performed in two language directions by the same person, whereas simultaneous interpreting is customarily done into one language, usually the interpreter's native tongue. So, in consecutive interpreting, the interpreter interprets the first speaker's utterance for the second speaker, waits for the answer, then interprets the answer to the first speaker, and the process continues. During consecutive interpreting, the interpreter is physically present while interpreting the exchange between the parties. However, in simultaneous interpreting, the interpreter is usually seated in a booth, which can be far from the speakers, so that the interpreter can interpret at the same time as the speakers speak. Simultaneous interpreting employs technology in order to reach the audience. The interpreter speaks into a microphone in the booth and the members of the audience usually have earphones with channels for several interpreted languages.
There has always been a large body of opinion about the nature and process of translation. In the second half of the twentieth century, an independent academic discipline called Translation Studies (TS) began to develop, distinct from the discipline of linguistics. Scholars such as Catford (1965) and Nida (1964) established theories of translation using linguistic concepts and research methods, and based on the encoding-decoding model of communication. Translation was divided into two stages. In the first stage, the author/speaker is the sender of the message and the translator/interpreter is the receiver. The translator has to decode the message sent to form her/his own meanings. In the second stage of the process, the translator/interpreter is the sender and the hearer is the receiver. The translator now encodes the same message according to the receiver’s code system so that the receiver can form her/his meaning. In this tradition, the meaning of the target text was believed to be the equivalent to the meaning of the original text.

The limitations of the linguistic approach soon became apparent, which opened a new page in the development of Translation Studies. Starting from 1970, TS adopted concepts and approaches from other disciplines including text-linguistics, socio-linguistics, discourse analysis, and communication studies (Schäffner, 2003). Concepts such as context, communicative intention, function, genre, and type of the text became indispensable parts of considerations about the translation process, thus interdependence of language and culture came to be recognized. In 1978, Vermeer founded the functionalist approach to translation by suggesting his Skopos theory. The functionalist approach maintained that every text has its own specific purpose, and translation came to be recognized as a specific kind of communicative action. The Skopos theory made
evident that the translator had to focus primarily on the purpose of the action, however, “the purpose of the source text and that of the target text may be identical or different” (Schäffner, 2003, p. 84).

In the early 1980s, Descriptive Translation Studies came into existence and challenged the notion of equivalency between the original and target text. Comparison of translated and original materials confirmed that translations were not authentic reproductions of the originals. Translators and the translations that they produced were considered subject to historical contexts and specific socio-ideological conditions or norms. As a consequence, TS started to employ concepts and methods from ethnography, anthropology, and cultural studies. This was a turning point in TS.

Post modern theories in TS emphasize the role of translation in cultural exchange. They suggest that through the methods either of “foreignization” or of “domestication,” translators have power to shape communicative processes (Schäffner, 2003). When using foreignization as a translation method, the translator points out differences between cultures and consequently educates the reader/listener about the other culture, allowing her/him to compare the two cultures (the reader’s/listener’s culture and the culture of the author/speaker). This perspective changed the traditional perception of the translator as “an invisible transporter of meanings” (p. 85) to that of an interventionist. Schäffner adds that this shift in perception of roles opened new areas of studies related to translation, such as translation and ethics (e.g., the special issue 7 (2) of The Translator, 2001), translation and ideology (e.g., Baumgarten, 2001), translation and identity (e.g., Venuti,
1994), translation and power (e.g., Álvarez & Vidal, 1996, Tymoczko, 2000), and translation and gender (e.g., Simon, 1996).

When using domestication as a translation method, the main purpose is to entertain the reader, to make the reader think. In this context, the main role of translation is said to be conveying the purpose of the source text. The translator adapts a piece of fiction to the norms of the target language and culture to make it comprehensible for the readers. If the translator employs the first method, foreignization, all the new information on the foreign culture will distract the reader from the main idea of the fiction.

Schäffner (2003) concludes that modern Translation Studies is concerned with a wide variety of topics, such as analysis of translation products, translation processes as cognitive acts, translation practices in socio-political settings, the functions and effects of translations (as products) in the receiving cultures, and the status of translation and translators in socio-historical contexts. (p. 86)

She summarizes the main objectives of the discipline as

(i) describing the phenomena of translating and translation(s) as they manifest themselves in the world of our experience, and (ii) establishing general principles by means of which these phenomena can be explained and predicted. (p. 84)

Schäffner shows the complexity of the translation phenomenon, with a principal accent on social influence and human agency.

TS is widely accepted as an independent discipline, especially in Europe, with its own methods, concepts, and approaches, even though it employs methods and concepts from other disciplines as well. As the process of translation and its effects are explored more
fully, and as the discipline extends its questions, the border line between TS and neighboring disciplines becomes less obvious and other disciplines borrow the object of the discipline, translation, to help understand their own questions. Schäffner (2003) presents several examples: “in anthropology, ethnographic encounters are described as processes of cultural translation; within postcolonial studies, texts written by the ex-colonized in the language of the ex-colonizer have been labeled compositional translations” (p. 86).

1.2.1. Contexts of Interpreting

In this study the focus is on consecutive rather than simultaneous interpreting. Different scholars and practitioners classify interpreting in various ways. There is no consensus on the roles of interpreters, either in general terms or in specific contexts. Their roles and responsibilities are usually determined consciously or unconsciously by their clients. However, there are certain general traits that define each context. For example, compared to the court-room context, where interpreters must translate as precisely as possible, in refugee hearings, the interpreter’s involvement as an intercultural mediator is generally recognized. I will describe the process of interpreting within the framework of four general contexts: court, refugee, disaster, and conference. These four categories of contexts include many others, and analyzing them will provide a view of the interpreter’s position in the process.

1.2.1.1. Court context. One of the more widely researched contexts of interpreting is court interpreting. In the judicial context, the terms “interpretation” and “interpreting” have distinct uses. Morris (1995) distinguishes between “interpreting as an interlingual
process and interpretation as the act of conveying one’s understanding of meanings and intentions within the same language in order to avoid misunderstanding in the judicial context” (p. 25). That is, “interpretation” is an intralingual process. Interpreting is more rigid in the context of the judicial system. Legal practitioners require that, court interpreters are not to interpret – this being an activity which only lawyers are to perform, but to translate – a term which is defined, sometimes expressly and sometimes by implication, as rendering the speaker’s words verbatim. (p. 26)

In other words, legal institutions do not allow interpreters to use their judgment and do not accept them as mediators in the judicial process. Morris points out two basic reasons, the first being that doing so may “highlight the interpreter’s presence and contribution,” and second, that interpreters may “challenge and potentially undermine the performance of the judicial participants in forensic activities” (p. 26). Morris argues against this restriction stating that interpreting is “a particular way of communication in which performance of the activity is grounded in the judicious sensing of speaker meaning” (p. 28).

There are various viewpoints about what role and responsibilities interpreters should take upon themselves during trials, particularly with regard to “accuracy” (Conomos 1993, Scimone 1996, Barsky 1996). Some researchers see interpreters as “advocates,” who should do their best to help the defendant, and some, mostly those in the court system, require absolute accuracy with no omission or addition to the messages.

Police interpreting is a subdivision of legal interpreting, with its own peculiar expectations. In police interrogations some police officers urge interpreters “to assume
the role of 'auxiliary police officers' or 'assistants,' because of the need to establish the required 'co-operative basis of talk'” (Pollabauer, 2004, p. 149). However, not all scholars agree with such “empowerment” because, according to Donk (1998), “by replying and reacting only to the interpreter’s interventions, some defendants succeed in taking advantage of this complex interactive situation” (translated by Pollabauer, 2004, p. 150).

1.2.1.2. Refugee context. Barsky (1996) focuses on refugee hearings and argues both that “the interpreter’s role as intermediary is generally downplayed and restricted to the performance of basic translation tasks,” and that “interpreters should be recognized for what they are, namely agents of culture rather than transmitters of words” (pp. 45-46). Although this context is another subdivision of legal interpreting, it differs from courtroom interpreting. Barsky points out three basic functions implemented by interpreters in refugee hearings: “articulating the refugee’s claim and compensating for errors in judgement [sic]” (p. 52), “minimizing potential damage by mediating culture-specific attitudes” (p. 55), and “improving the narrative” (p. 56). Emphasizing the tendency of examinees not to believe refugee stories, Barsky suggests that interpreters may make the stories sound believable by adding to them, thus taking upon themselves the wider function of redressing “the wrongs of the system to some extent, but in order to do so they have to be allowed to work as intercultural agents rather than translation devices” (p. 61).

As one of the challenges in the context of the asylum-seekers’ cases, Pollabauer (2004) mentions cultural differences. The way people present themselves or the way they
tell stories are different across cultural borders, and one would not expect asylum-seekers to know about the cultural peculiarities of the host country. The context of the hearing and the already-established system makes it harder for refugees, who are probably not aware of the “rules” for telling their story. Pollabauer notes that “unfamiliar argumentation strategies and ‘unbelievable’ or ‘unacceptable’ facts may provoke a climate of conflict and disrespect” (p. 151). Wadensjö (1998) posits, in an interpreter-mediated conversation, the progression and substance of talk, the distribution of responsibility for this among co-interlocutors, and what, as a result of interaction, becomes mutual and shared understanding – all will to some extent depend on the interpreter’s words and deeds. (p. 195)

Pollabauer (2004) suggests that “interpreters in asylum hearings frequently assume discrepant roles which may at times be determined by the perceived expectations of the officers in charge, and ... these roles are not clear-cut” (p. 143). In the context of such hearings, the author notes that interpreters play crucial roles, in they “hold the key to these people’s [asylum seekers’] future” (p. 143). Neither the officers nor the asylum-seekers seem to regard interpreters as “invisible,” neutral mediators. Their behavior and interventions make them highly visible and in most cases equal participants in the hearings. They shorten and paraphrase statements, provide explanations, try to save their own, and if possible, the other participants’ face, and intervene if they deem it necessary (p. 175).

1.2.1.3. Disasters. Another context where interpreters are not conceived as invisible is during disasters. Bulut and Kurultay (2001) focus on this specific interpreting practice,
which they term “interpreters-in-aid at disasters (IAD).” As one characteristic role of IADs, the authors mention “the coordinating role of a community interpreter as an actively responsible intermediary” (p. 250). For example, mobilizing Search and Rescue teams in time and at the needed sites depends on interpreters, who take on the role of establishing coordination and communication, which can be a matter of life and death (p. 254). The authors add that interpreters “are naturally supposed to interpret the expectations of the relevant parties in light of the purpose of the action to be accomplished and thus establish the necessary contact between the parties” (p. 255). Interpreters in two earthquakes that took place in Turkey in 1999 reported that they considered “preventing delays and loss of time, as well as saving more lives and dealing sympathetically throughout with the victims and locals who sometimes made unreasonable demands” (p. 255) were part of their ethical responsibility. Bulut and Kurultay quote from the IAD Code of Ethics, prepared by IAD Committee of the Turkish Translation Association in May, 2000:

Each IAD has responsibility as a communicator in an international situation, working as part of universal culture, without any religious, linguistic or racial discrimination, remaining sensitive to the norms that change with societies and regions. IADs are representatives of universal cultural values more than those of their native cultures and languages. This is in keeping with their role as mediators in cross-cultural communicative situations. (p. 263)

1.2.1.4. Conference. Conference interpreting is the most wide-spread form of interpreting, but ironically has elicited the most confused discussion in the scholarly
literature. Most research on conference interpreting examines simultaneous interpreting, and in some studies simultaneous interpreting is even equated with conference interpreting. In my own experience, however, consecutive interpreting is more often used in conferences than simultaneous interpreting. The two primary reasons are that it is a real challenge to interpret simultaneously between English and Azerbaijani due to the language structure, and that consequently, it is cheaper to hire a consecutive interpreter than a simultaneous interpreter. I include seminars, training sessions, and workshops within this context.

Although conference interpreting may be the first context that drew attention to interpreting as a profession, the role of these professionals is not well defined. In conference the most common practice is that interpreters negotiate their roles with clients to identify the roles the interpreter can and will take upon herself/himself. For example, can the interpreter paraphrase what the client has said to make the utterance more comprehensible, or must she/he keep the utterance in the target language as close as possible to the utterance in the source language? Even if professional interpreters and professional clients try to negotiate all expected interpreter responsibilities, there will be some additional clarification of responsibilities needed in the process. It is impossible to predict all possible cases regarding how the interpreter should behave. In some cases the interpreter may even take the stand of a speaker/trainer, if the trainer is confident about the interpreter’s knowledge of the subject matter and asks her/him to explain the subject to the trainees. In my own experience, there have even been cases when, seeing the lack
of understanding on the side of target language speakers, I have asked for permission to go into detail about certain issues.

This review of interpreting in different contexts makes evident that the interpreter’s presence does influence the interaction between two people with different languages and cultural backgrounds whether the interpreter chooses to intervene, to stay partial, or to co-ordinate the conversation. Blinstrubaite (2000) argues that it is “physical exhaustion, long sections, conflicts of interest and contrasting ideas” (p. 126), among other factors, that keep the interpreter from impartiality. Intervention can be and is sometimes welcomed by clients, and Zimman (1994) insists that a community interpreter should have the authority to take over an interview. Whenever there is a misunderstanding, the interpreter must make the ethical and professional decision whether or not to intervene, to make adjustments, or to give advice to one or both parties. Blinstrubaite (2000) sees the interpreter in the role of an evaluator, a third party, or even an advocate (p. 132). Gentile (1996), however, argues that interpreters must decline any such call.

The indefinite number of contexts and situations in which interpreting occurs is the reason for uncertainty about interpreters’ roles. Ethics is a fuzzy domain, and it is the interpreter’s personal bias, in most cases based on her/his cultural bias, that influences the ethical decision. Blinstrubaite (2000) provides an excellent example of an interpreter caught in a difficult situation: “she is employed by the Dane, but being a Lithuanian, she has national feelings which might influence the negotiation” (p. 129). In this case the interpreter chooses to intervene and
summarises [sic] the renditions and omits the rude words or phrases. Thus, the interpreter can exercise a good deal of control in emotionally charged conversations, as long as this control facilitates communication and does not hinder it. (p. 130)

Awareness of the role and possible influence of interpreters on the interaction will benefit all parties.

1.3 Models of Communication

It is important to clarify the model of communication employed in this study because it underlies the description of any phenomenon and/or event occurring in the process of interpreting. In the scholarly literature in Translation and Interpreting Studies, one can see confusion about the model of communication assumed in descriptions of various interpreting phenomena. Most scholars accept the widespread model of communication as encoding and decoding a meaning. According to this model, the translator/interpreter “transmits” one speaker’s meaning to the other speaker. The writer/speaker first encodes her/his message into the code system of her/his language. The translator/interpreter decodes the message and gets the exact meaning, then encodes it into the code system of the reader/listener, who now decodes the message and gets the speaker’s meaning. Even when scholars do not specifically describe the communication process involved in interpreting, they speak of the process as the transmission of coded messages as described above. Thus, the translator/interpreter is considered the transmitter of the meaning. Recently, some scholars and practitioners have added to the role of the interpreter that of a moderator and intercultural agent (Barsky, 1996), but the interpreter is still viewed as the “transmitter” of the encoded message.
The epistemology underlying this study is Constructionism and the theoretical perspective is the Social Construction of Reality. Meanings do not exist outside a human mind, they are constructed in the interface between the knower and the known, and in the interaction between knowers. People, therefore, have different perceptions of reality and different interpretations for words. There is no fixed, identical relationship between meanings and words across language users, as encoding/decoding models assume. The interpreter has her/his own meanings for her/his language, hence it would be absurd to expect her/him to understand meanings the same way the speaker herself/himself understands them. Furthermore, it is naïve to believe that the listener will understand the exact meaning held by the interpreter. The meaning of a message changes as the message moves across people. Interpretation and expression change to different extents, and it is in the process of communication that these changes occur, and can be clarified or ignored. The encoding/decoding model of communication, and any other model that stems from it, are not applicable to the communication process in the interpreting context.

The model that underlies the view of interpreting process employed in this study is the Conjoint Co-constituting Model of Communication (CCM) (Arundale, 1999, 2007). Compared to the model described above, the CCM is complex, which brings it closer to the complex process of human communication. The model describes communication as involving an interlinked sequence of interdependent utterances and/or visible acts within a dyad or group. Each utterance/visible act is based on the prior utterance/visible act and serves as a basis for the next utterance, as well as confirming or changing the interpretation of one’s own and/or the other person’s prior utterance(s). Therefore, “at
every moment in communication, our partners are actively shaping the interpretations we have for our acts, and we are doing the same for them – we are conjointly co-constituting our meanings and interpersonal actions” (Arundale, 2006, p. 1). Although each participant’s interpretations are different from others’, “because each has a part in the other’s co-constituting, participants will at times conjointly co-constitute overlaps in some of their interpretations” (p. 1).

The communication process that takes place in the interpreting setting normally involves communication between persons of different cultures. In the scholarly literature on interpreting, as well as in everyday life, the notion of “culture” is interpreted differently, and viewed in terms as different as personal culture and mainstream national culture. From the perspective of CCM, culture is “the set of overlaps in perceptions and meanings that a group of interacting individuals conjointly co-constitutes within the network of people with whom they regularly interact” (Arundale, 2006, p. 2, 2007). It is not an independent force and/or entity. It “cannot act on anyone or teach anything. It ‘exists’ only as the overlapping knowledge that a group of people conjointly co-constitutes in on-going communication with one another” (p. 2).

The CCM provides an understanding of the process of communication and culture that is more productive than the encoding/decoding model. The CCM, together with other theories of intercultural communication, provide bases for understanding the complexities of face to face interaction in intercultural interpreting situations.
1.4 Intercultural Communication Studies (ICS)

Intercultural communication has existed since time immemorial, as people from different cultures on the level of kin and/or tribe communicated. In the Medieval Ages, it occurred between people of feudal estates and kingdoms. Because of easier travel, intercultural interaction has become much more intensive in present times between persons of different countries, continents, civilizations, and religions. By comparison, the process of theorizing about intercultural communication is very recent, having started in the 1980s and made essential progress in the last two decades.

Gudykunst, Lee, Nishida, and Ogawa (2005) group theories of intercultural communication into three broad categories. In the first category are theories that integrate culture and communication: constructivist theory (Applegate & Sypher, 1983), cultural communication (Philipsen, 1992), and coordinated management of meaning (Cronen, Chen, & Pearce, 1988). Theories of the second category explain differences in communication in various cultures: face negotiation theory (Ting-Toomey, 1988; Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998), conversational constraints theory (Kim, 1995), and expectancy violation theory (Burgoon, 1992, 1995). Third are the theories that “describe or explain communication between people from different cultures” (Gudykunst et al., 2005, p. 4). Most theories of intercultural communication belong to the third category, including cultural convergence theory (e.g., Barnett & Kincaid, 1983), anxiety/uncertainty management theory (e.g., Gudykunst, 1988), communication accommodation theory (Gallois, Giles, Jones, Cargile, & Ota, 1995), identity negotiation theory (Ting-Toomey, 1993), and the communication theory of identity (Hecht, 1993) among others. The
theories in this category tend not only to compare groups of people from different cultures, neglecting the separate human agent in the process of communication, but also to assume that communication in intercultural, interethnic, and intergenerational contexts is similar.

Among all these theories that help to understand various aspects of intercultural communication, I will explore only those that are most relevant to the subject of this study. One of these is the Coordinated Management of Meaning theory (CMM) of Pearce and Cronen (1980). CMM provides insights into how individuals come to some degree of mutual understanding through their social interaction. Rather than focusing on isolated speech acts, Pearce and Cronen take an interactional approach. The theory also posits that individuals construct and act upon their interpretations of experience (Philipsen, 1995). Hence, individual actions are seen as interdependent parts of the interactional systems that they constitute. Five levels of the context need to be considered while examining a speech sequence: content or “the specific mental items or categories a person uses to interpret or perceive experience,” speech acts or the “categories interlocutors bring to the planning and interpretation of particular acts like ‘threat,’ ‘promise,’ ‘advice,’ and so on,” contracts or the “system of rules two or more individuals have jointly constructed that pertain to the relationships they have to each other,” episodes or “communicative routines people view as distinct wholes,” and life scripts or “the repertoire of episodes that a person perceives as identified with herself/himself” (pp. 22-23). The theory rests on four major concepts: coordination, social reality, order in social reality, and communication. “Coordination” is the successful structuring of a sequence of individual actions. “Social
reality” is what the speakers bring to their interaction, their beliefs about meanings and action in the field of interaction. “Order in social reality” refers “to the match or mismatch of the interlocutors’ beliefs about meanings and actions in the conduct of interpersonal life” (p. 24). Finally, “communication” is the process through which “social reality is created, deployed, and managed” (p. 25). The theory posits that human communication is imperfect, hence, any party in interaction, including an interpreter, cannot be expected to have perfect communication. Every participant will have her/his influence over the flow of conversation. All members of interaction have to follow moral orders that “emerge as aspects of communication.” For effective communication across cultures the interlocutors must be aware of other cultures because they are “patterns of coevolving structures and actions” (Cronen et al., 1988, p. 78). Members of a culture will use the patterns of their culture in communication.

The second category of theories of intercultural communication consists of those that explain cultural differences in communication. According to face negotiation theory (Ting-Toomey, 1988; Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998), cultural norms and values influence how individuals manage conflict situations. The theory seeks to explain face concerns, individual conflict styles, and face-to-face behaviors (Gudykunst et al., 2005, p. 9). All three elements of face negotiation theory – face concerns, individual conflict styles, and face-to-face behaviors – are present in the interpreting situation.

In conversational constraints theory, Kim (1995) differentiates between social-relational and task-oriented types of conversational constraint. The relational constraint puts the accent on concern for others (e.g., avoiding hurting listeners’ feelings and their
negative evaluation) and is mainly experienced in collectivistic cultures. Task oriented conversational constraint accentuates concern for clarity and is mainly experienced by individualistic cultures. Conversational constraints theory can be applied to interpreting in that parties may have both types of constraints in their communication. Not recognizing these constraints may create challenges for the parties, as well as for interpreters.

In expectancy violation theory, Burgoon (1978) suggests that human conduct is guided by an individual's culture, in that culture generates expectations about the behaviors of others. In other words, expectancies are largely based on social norms and rules, as well as on the individual's own typical behavior patterns. Violations of expected behavior result in arousal or alertness in others. The positive or negative interpretation of the violation depends on communicators' valences (individuals' characteristics, e.g., "how attractive and familiar they are perceived to be" (Gudykunst et al., 2005, p. 11). Burgoon (1992) posits that expectations vary along Hofstede's (1980) dimensions of cultural variability. For example, members of collectivistic cultures would expect more indirectness and politeness than members of individualistic cultures. In the interpreting situation all members have constructed certain expectations, however, the cultures in which these expectations were constructed are usually different. Lack of awareness and incautiousness about possible different expectations may well result in problems in intercultural communication.

Gudykunst et al. (2005) include anxiety/uncertainty management theory (e.g., Gudykunst, 1988), among other theories that focus on effective outcomes. Gudykunst
(1988) extends the uncertainty reduction theory of Berger and Calabrese (1975) in developing anxiety/uncertainty reduction theory, seeking to explain interpersonal and intergroup communication. Intercultural communication is introduced as one type of intergroup communication. Gudykunst (1993) hypothesizes that the "individual's communication is influenced by their cultures ... but they also can choose how they communicate when they are mindful" (as quoted in Gudykunst et al., 2005, p. 12). He also posits that the basic grounds for effective communication are the management of anxiety and uncertainty, including mindfulness.

Certain assumptions of the theory can provide insights on issues arising during the interpreting process. Gudykunst (2005) contends that,

If we interpret strangers' messages from our own perspectives, as we do when we communicate mindlessly, we tend to communicate ineffectively. The more we are able to learn how to describe strangers' behavior and the less evaluative we are, the more positive strangers will perceive our intentions to be. (p. 305)

Considering that there are at least three communicators in the interpreting setting, the complexity of the intercultural communication situation is evident. The interpreter cannot expect both parties to be able to avoid evaluating each other. The interpreter’s role as a mediator sets an expectation on her/his part that she/he will introduce the actions of the parties to each other in a way that does not cause false evaluations. Whether or not she/he manages to do so will decide the effectiveness of the intercultural communication. Gudykunst also observes that anxiety during interaction between members of different cultures may result in social categorizations, such as creating ingroups and outgroups.
The interpreter can potentially become the victim of such categorization, which will inevitably have an impact on her/his interpreting. Gudykunst suggests that “we must first mindfully manage our anxiety,” not to let it rise above our maximum threshold, “before we can accurately predict strangers’ behavior (e.g., manage our uncertainty)” (p. 305).

Communication accommodation theory (Gallois, Giles, Jones, Cargile, & Ota, 1995) focuses on “how communicators accommodate or adapt to each other” (Gudykunst et al., 2005, p. 14) and to a limited extent is relevant to the subject of this study. Communication accommodation theory integrates research which has been conducted since the establishment of speech accommodation theory, including intercultural variability in accommodative processes. However, only one of the four components of the theory, “immediate situation,” aids in better understanding the interpreting situation. The authors attribute five aspects to this component: sociopsychological states (the communicator’s interpersonal or intergroup orientation in the situation), goals and addressee focus (motivations in the encounter, conversational, relational needs), sociolinguistic strategies (approximation, discourse management), behavior and tactics (language, accent, topic), and labeling and attributions. All these aspects are interrelated and may affect the extent to which the parties accommodate to one another’s communication styles.

Identity negotiation theory (Ting-Toomey, 1993) and the communication theory of identity (Hecht, 1993) focus on negotiating identity in intercultural interactions. In identity negotiation theory, the two core concepts are “identity” and “negotiation.” Ting-Toomey (2005) defines identity as “reflective self-images constructed, experienced, and
communicated by the individuals within a culture and in a particular interaction situation;” negotiation is “a transactional interaction process whereby individuals in an intercultural situation attempt to assert, define, modify, challenge, and/or support their own and others’ desired self-images” (p. 217). She contends that:

cultural variability influences the sense of self, self-identification involves security and vulnerability, identity boundary regulation involves a tension between inclusion and differentiation, managing the inclusion-differentiation dialectic influences the coherent sense of self, and a coherent sense of self influences individual’s communication resourcefulness. (p. 218)

In order to achieve effective communication one must be able to recognize the identity domains considered significant by the person with whom she/he is communicating. For example, if the person with whom one communicates values her/his gender membership identity most, failing to be responsive to her/his gender identity may create challenges to effective communication. In the interpreting situation, one’s ability or failure to understand salient identities of the other two persons present can determine the communication process.

In his communication theory of identity, Hecht et al. (2005) maintain that identity is formed and changes in communication and therefore should be studied in the context of conversation. He argues that “not all messages are about identity, but identity is part of all messages” (as quoted in Gudykunst et al., 2005, p.19). He assigns four layers to the notion of “identity”: personal, enactment, relational, and communal. In the personal layer the individual is the locus of identity. The enactment layer implies that “identity is
enacted in communication through messages” (Hecht et al., 2005, p. 263). The relational layer refers to relationship as the locus of identity. Finally, in the communal layer the group is recognized as “a place where identity exists” (p. 263). The four layers are not independent, but interpenetrated. In the interpreting setting one can see how each individual, particularly the interpreter, brings in all layers of her/his identity. Among the propositions of the theory, three are most relevant for the subject of this study:

• Identities prescribe modes of appropriate and effective communication.
• Identities are a source of expectations and motivations.
• Identities are emergent. (p. 264)

Although there is progress in theorizing intercultural communication, there is a lot to be improved. The majority of the intercultural communication theories were established by Western, and specifically US American scholars, and there is a need for theories established by theorists outside the USA. None of the above-mentioned theories specifically recognize the role of translation/interpreting, although they can be employed to provide insights on challenges interpreters face in intercultural communication.

As mentioned above, this study assumes the Conjoint Co-Constituting Model of Communication (Arundale, 2007). The model contends that we conjointly co-construct our meanings for objects, persons, and events in interaction with other individuals. Over time each of us interacts with a number of other individuals and as part of various networks of individuals who communicate with some regularity. Arundale (2006) observes,
Because we are part of other’s co-constituting of meanings and perceptions, and they are part of ours, over time some subset of the meanings and perceptions being conjointly co-constituted between the people in one’s personal network are likely to begin to converge or come to overlap, although these will never be identical across these people. (p. 2)

These overlapping perceptions and meanings comprise what we call “culture,” and the network of individuals with whom we share these perceptions and meanings is a “cultural group.” Cultural groups can vary in size from a dyad to a national culture or religious culture. Culture is not some form of matter or energy. It is created and maintained in the on-going interactions of the members of a cultural group.

Pearce (1989) uses the notions of “resources” and “practices.” The term “resources” refers to “the knowledge individuals have of meanings, actions, norms, beliefs, etc., relevant to their interaction with other persons” (Arundale, 2006, p. 3). “Practices” is a term referring to actual activities that communicators engage in using their resources. Resources and practices are interdependent in that one supplies the other; based on resources people act, and based on their activities they maintain resources and construct new ones. One’s resources for engaging in practices also provide expectations for interaction which persons use “to interpret other’s practices and to design our own” (p. 3). As a consequence,

When we communicate with a person from another cultural group, we are likely to be engaging with a person whose resources for interaction, and hence whose expectations for practices … are different from those of our cultural group. (p. 4)
If one is unaware of the resources of the cultural group of the member with whom one is communicating, she/he will “very likely interpret the other’s utterances and visible acts using the resources of’ her/his own cultural group (p. 4). One’s expectations for practices will likely be violated, and as consequence, one will form inferences about the other person that are not always favorable. Being aware of both cultures to a certain extent, an interpreter can help avoid these challenges of intercultural communication, but cannot eliminate them.

Having explored the scholarly literature in intercultural communication, I have witnessed that although there is progress in theorizing about intercultural communication, none of the theories specifically mention one of the more common contexts for intercultural communication, the interpreting setting. In this chapter, I have attempted to characterize both fields, translation studies and intercultural communication studies. I have showed the significant role of intercultural communication in the process of interpreting and how different theories in intercultural communication can provide insights into the complex issues involved in the interpreting context.

Having worked as an interpreter for four years, I have become aware of many challenges in interpreting related both to linguistic and/or language aspects of the process and to its intercultural communication aspects. As I have become more aware of the issues involved in intercultural communication I have realized that in the study of interpreting, intercultural communication has been mostly ignored. As an important step in the process of integrating research in translation studies and intercultural communication studies, I have chosen in this thesis to examine the lived experience of
interpreters in dealing with intercultural communication challenges in the process of interpreting.
Chapter 2

Research Methodologies

The purpose of this study is to understand the challenges interpreters face in intercultural communication and how they respond to these challenges. I sought this understanding by eliciting lived experiences of my co-researchers in dealing with intercultural communication while they are interpreting. When I began the research, I was aware of the potential for diverse lived experiences among the co-researchers and the consequent possibility of diverse co-construction of meanings for those experiences.

2.1. Research Contexture

It is vital to describe the research contexture of this study, as it differs from the approaches employed in most studies of the process of interpreting. At the most general level, the study employs the epistemology of Constructionism. Within this context I have chosen Social Construction of Reality as my theoretical perspective, Narrative Inquiry as my research methodology, and conversational interviews and thematic analysis as the specific methods used to gather and explore data/capta.

2.1.1. Ontology and Epistemology

In order to be able to decide on a theoretical perspective one needs to decide on an ontology, or to clarify one’s understanding of “what is,” as well as on an epistemology, or a perspective on “what it means to know” (Crotty, 1998, p. 10). Ontological and epistemological issues arise together, which is why some writers fail to differentiate between the two. My research is based on the ontology of Realism: “an ontological notion asserting that realities exist outside the mind” (p. 10).
Maynard (1994) notes that epistemology “is concerned with providing a philosophical grounding for deciding what kinds of knowledge are possible and how we can ensure that they are both adequate and legitimate” (as quoted in Crotty, 1998, p. 8). It is “the theory of knowledge embedded in the theoretical perspective and thereby in the methodology” (Crotty, 1998, p. 8). This research employs the Constructionist epistemology, which claims that meanings and Truth do not exist in objects themselves, and thus cannot be discovered. They come “into existence in and out of our engagement with the realities in our world” (p. 8). According to this understanding of knowledge, “different people may construct meaning in different ways, even in relation to the same phenomenon” (p. 9). The Constructionist view is consistent with Realism in that it does not deny the world outside of the human mind. However, “before there were consciousnesses on earth capable of interpreting the world, the world held no meaning at all” (p. 43). Humphrey (1993) adds that: “I am not suggesting that the world had no substance to it whatsoever. We might say, perhaps, that it consisted of ‘worldstuff.’ But the properties of this worldstuff had yet to be represented by a mind” (as quoted in Crotty, 1998, p. 43). For these reasons, constructionist researchers attempt to understand the meanings co-researchers construct through their lived experiences.

2.1.2. *Theoretical perspective*

Theoretical perspective, as Crotty (1998) puts it, is “the philosophical stance that lies behind our chosen methodology” (p. 7). When one decides on a methodology, one makes certain assumptions, and in elaborating the theoretical perspective one explains one’s “view of the human world and social life within that world, wherein these assumptions
are grounded” (p. 7). The theoretical perspective used in this study is the Social Construction of Reality, which is concerned with such issues as “language, communication, interrelationships and community” (p. 8). Social Construction is all about those basic social interactions whereby we enter into the perceptions, attitudes [sic] and values of a community, becoming persons in the process. At its heart is the notion of being able to put ourselves in the place of others… (Crotty, 1998, p. 8)

Social constructionists also believe that persons co-construct their reality, and maintain, develop, and even change it in interactions with others. Researchers using this theoretical perspective as a standpoint study lived experiences and realities. They believe that doing so will provide richer information regarding the human reality of the studied event and/or phenomenon.

The phenomena I am studying are completely based in human communication. In interpreting in intercultural situations, interpreters are faced with challenges constructed with the participants in the interaction. Interpreters construct the reality of these challenges through their lived experiences of communication with persons from different cultures. They may or may not consciously perceive those experiences as challenges. Through conversations about intercultural challenges in the profession, interpreters become more aware of meanings we have for those challenges. Therefore, I considered qualitative methodology and methods the most valid for the given study.
2.1.3. Research methodology

One’s research methodology is one’s “strategy or plan of action” (Crotty, 1998, p. 7). Crotty defines methodology as the “process or design lying behind the choice and use of particular methods and linking the choice and use of methods to the desired outcomes” (p. 3). The methodology that guides my choice of methods is Narrative Inquiry. It is a methodology that “is applied in the creation, analysis, and reporting of life stories” and informs my selection of methods for both gathering and analyzing capta (Schwandt, 2001, p. 171).

2.1.4. Methods

2.1.4.1. Conversational Interviews. Human beings co-construct their realities through narratives, through stories. In order to meet this study’s goal of gaining greater understanding of the lived human experience of interpreters in dealing with intercultural communication, it was necessary to solicit co-researchers’ stories. As Kvale (1996) states, “interviewing is a craft” and “the outcome of an interview depends on the knowledge, sensitivity, and empathy of the interviewer” (p. 105). Interviewing is a skill that demands both knowledge of rules and intuition from the researcher. A researcher with craftsmanship is capable of obtaining rich capta and of thoroughly analyzing it in the process of and after the interview.

Considering that humans are storytelling beings, a researcher employing conversational interviewing attempts to have co-researchers share their experiences through narratives using natural language. The natural language employed in everyday settings is the best means to describe the particulars of lived experience, providing richer
and thicker opportunities for description. The method of conversational interviewing is therefore ideally suited to obtaining "qualitative descriptions of the life world of the subject with respect to interpretation of their meaning" (Kvale, 1996, p. 124).

A conversational interview is a dialogue between two partners about "a theme of mutual interest" they both are knowledgeable about (Kvale, 1996, p. 125). Kvale also describes the conversational interview as a construction site. Both the researcher and co-researcher bring their "materials" – meanings and stories – to the site. Through conversation they co-construct meanings together with their own and their partner's experiences so that "knowledge evolves through a dialogue" (p. 125). The main purpose of a conversational interview is to achieve a whole story so that the researcher will be able to look at and understand the studied phenomenon holistically.

In order to facilitate dialogue, a conversational researcher does not begin with a prepared schedule of specific questions. Instead, she/he determines the desired general direction of the conversation and asks open-ended questions like, "What is your lived experience as a translator in dealing with challenges caused by cultural differences during translation?" and "How do you perceive your role in solving these cultural challenges?" This approach provides co-researchers with flexibility in talking about their experiences, and in deciding which of their experiences is more relevant for evolving the topic of the conversation. The researcher still controls the broad direction of the discussion, and uses questions to keep co-researchers on the topic. After each interview, as a result of the analysis which is existent in all stages of the research, I anticipated improving my
craftsmanship and expertise in conversational interviewing (Kvale, 1996), and hence being able to obtain thicker and more relevant information.

2.1.4.2 Thematic Analysis. I chose to analyze the capta from my conversational interviewing by conducting a thematic analysis. In order to explicate common themes I had to make sense both of my co-researchers’ and my own narratives. Thematic analysis takes place throughout the research – during interviews, during the transcribing process, while reading transcriptions, and so on. In other words, the process of analysis, interpretation, re-construction of meanings, identifying themes, and writing all take place at the same time. Thematic analysis is a holistic process.

Thematic analysis rests upon the meanings of co-researchers’ lived experience prior to the interviews, which we re-constructed during interviews regarding the challenges we face as interpreters in intercultural situations. Through thematic analysis, the researcher compares the lived experiences of the participants, as expressed in their natural language, and the researcher’s own experience, seeking emergent meanings and organizing them under common themes.

The reader of a thematic analysis does not have access to the audio recordings. She/he has to depend completely on the statements made by the researcher. In order to control the analysis process, Kvale (1996) suggests providing the reader with an explication of procedure, by which the researcher arrives at themes. In order to explicate the procedure, the researcher must ensure that the reader follows the steps taken by the researcher, so that they will come to a similar understanding of the studied phenomena. For this purpose, I will provide the reader with examples of the natural language used by co-
researchers, which served as a basis for my analysis and interpretation. Although researchers and/or readers with different views may construct different meanings from those materials, the most important factor here, as Giorgi (1975) suggests, is "whether a reader, adopting the same viewpoint as articulated by the researcher, can also see what the researcher saw, whether or not he [sic] agrees with it" (as quoted in Kvale, 1996, p. 209). In short, my aim is to show the logical flow of my analysis of capta.

2.2. Participants

Kvale (1996) advises that the purpose of the study determines the proper number of participants, and suggests 15±10 as an appropriate number (p. 102). I interviewed six co-researchers for this study. The criterion for determining the actual number of participants is whether or not the interviewer is getting new capta from new interviews for the research. After six interviews, having seen that I was not getting new meanings and themes, I decided six interviews were sufficient.

Given the research question I posed in this study, I specifically sought co-researchers who were eighteen or older and had at least two years of interpreting experience. Educational background in interpreting was not a necessary criterion. Four co-researchers were friends, with whom I studied at the Azerbaijani University of Languages. Each of my friends has either a BA or MA in Translation and Interpreting and has interpreted for more than two years. One of the co-researchers was my professor at the same University. My professor has a degree in Philology, but has worked in the faculty of Translation and Interpreting and as an interpreter for many years. The last co-researcher was a colleague of my friends, with whom I did not have a previous acquaintance. He majored in a
different field, but has 8 years of experience as an interpreter. Three co-researchers had interpreted mostly in refugee-interview contexts. The other three participants had experiences in diverse contexts.

2.3. Procedure

Following the plan outlined in my proposal to the Institutional Research Board at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, I contacted the co-researchers for this study in advance either by phone or via e-mail. I explained to each of them the purpose of my research and described the narrative methodology I was going to use. I indicated that I was seeking to interview people with lived experience as interpreters, and that the interviews might last for about an hour, although there was no strict time limit. I asked if they would like to participate in this study. Once they agreed, we set a time and place for the interview that was convenient for them. Before the interviews, I made the co-researchers aware that the interview would be audio-taped, that only the researcher would have access to the audio material, that their identities would be kept confidential, unless otherwise desired, and that their participation was completely voluntary. Each participant was provided with an Informed Consent Form (see Appendix A), which contained more detailed information about the procedures involved in the study. Each co-researcher read and signed the form before the interview began.

During the interviews, I asked open-ended questions to give the co-researchers more opportunity to share their experience. However, from time to time I also shared my perception of certain experiences in order to establish common ground between us and to encourage further dialogue on the question. Questions also helped me to confirm my
understanding of the co-researchers’ stories, and their meanings for their lived experiences. I sought to give my co-researchers the independence of deciding which narrative to share, even though I also sought, through my questions, to direct the entire interview to ensure that it was appropriate to the study.

Once both the co-researcher and I determined that there was little left to be explored conversationally, I brought the interview to a close. However, I did not stop audio recording until we physically separated, because sometimes even if interviews are officially ended, the co-researcher may continue to share their understanding of the subject and their stories. All interviews were audio-taped with a digital recorder, and after each interview, the audio material was transferred to my computer and password protected.

All interviews were held in Azerbaijani, which was both my and the co-researchers’ native language, however, the participants were offered the choice of three languages – Azerbaijani, Russian, or English – to ensure their comfort in expressing their thoughts. The interviews were transcribed in Azerbaijani to avoid possible omission of relevant information. In order to guarantee confidentiality, I used pseudonyms both in the transcriptions and analysis. All records of the capta will be kept in the Department of Communication at University of Alaska Fairbanks for five years, after which all collected information concerning this study will be destroyed.

2.4. Researcher as the research tool

In qualitative research methods, such as conversational interviewing and thematic analysis, the primary instrument in collecting stories and analyzing capta is the
researcher. Throughout the research, the researcher must account for her role in the process. The researcher’s knowledge and culture, among other characteristics, influence the way she obtains and interprets the data. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) state that “research is an interactive process shaped by [the researcher’s] personal history, biography, gender, social class, race, and ethnicity, and by … the people in the setting” (p. 6). The researcher must be consciously reflexive in all stages of the research and demonstrate that reflexivity to the reader. In short, the most significant responsibility of the researcher is to be able to account for her influence on the data and results. Because the whole process of research – from interest in the studied phenomena, to the way a certain method is employed, to the analysis of the data developed – is influenced by the researcher’s individuality, it is imperative for me to provide the reader with any characteristics that may have influenced the research process.

My personal culture is constructed within the mainstream national Azerbaijani culture, my family culture, the co-culture of my friends, and my professional culture, etc. Being a religious person, my personal culture is largely influenced by Islam, which is the dominant religion in Azerbaijan. Being a traditional person, my identity includes characteristics of my national culture, Azerbaijani culture, which encompasses both Eastern and Western cultures. Azerbaijani culture is one of those unique cultures which reflects both Eastern and Western influences, but maintains its own version of these two seemingly contradictory philosophies. Another part of my identity is constituted in interactions with my family, in which my father is conservative regarding the influences of Western culture and my mother is very liberal.
Through my early and late childhood, including my teen years, I have been friends with boys mainly my age or younger. I have many male cousins of similar age. At school, I used to have stronger friendships with boys than girls. These friendships influenced my gender construction. I am less feminine than is expected for an average Azerbaijani female, but still feminine in the view of Western culture.

Since my school years I have been interested in languages and felt confident about acquiring foreign languages. At the moment, I speak fluently in three languages – Azerbaijani (my native language), Russian, and English – and have interpreted from and to all of these; I also have a good command of French and Persian. I completely understand and moderately speak Turkish because of its closeness to the Azerbaijani language. This interest in languages encouraged me to apply to the Azerbaijani University of Languages and I have both B.A. and M.A. degrees in Translation and Interpreting. I have worked as a translator for more than four years and as an interpreter for more than two years. Despite having studied the profession at the graduate level, I learned about most of the “rules” of interpreting in practice. I have faced many challenges and had to deal with them on my own, based on my experience with previous challenges. It was in practice that I learned about cultural differences, although they were mentioned in both undergraduate and graduate courses.

Despite all these challenges, I enjoy my profession, especially interpreting. One of the reasons is that I view myself as an interpreter as one of the significant parties in the communication process, if not the most significant. The role that interpreters play as facilitators, intercultural mediators, representatives of one and/or the other party, etc., is
undeniable, even though, in my view, the interpreter’s importance has been underestimated. This is what drove me to research the challenges interpreters face in intercultural communication, and how they deal with them.

As I have already mentioned, I have interpreted for four years in various contexts, both in terms of the subject of conversation and the number of speakers/listeners on either side. I have worked mostly in the field of mass media, interpreting in seminars held for journalists, camera-people, and officials from different regional media establishments on one side, and expert trainers from the USA, Europe, and Former Soviet Union countries on the other. Other work contexts include official public presentations, conferences, negotiations, and elections.

The challenges I have faced in my job can be explained by and related to the incompetence of one of the parties in the interpreting situation, and/or to my cultural beliefs, values, and attitudes. In most of my experiences, one of the parties did not have any skill in working with interpreters, let alone with communication with members from other culture. In some cases, the meeting was unorganized in terms of providing the interpreter with needed information beforehand. For example, there were cases when I was unexpectedly called for and “dragged” to a meeting to interpret. I did not know who the parties were, I did not know the subject, and I might even not know which languages were the working languages of the meeting.

Other challenges I have faced can be related to my culture. Being from Azerbaijan, which is significantly influenced by the Islamic culture, there are some expectations in regard to me being female. In my culture, the social difference between females and
males is dramatically diminishing, however, still exists and was definitely apparent when I worked as an interpreter. These expectations influenced my attitudes and principles. Being aware of the differences between Western culture and my culture, there were moments when I perceived that I had to choose between my cultural and my professional principles. For example, in my culture, females do not usually shake hands with males, they definitely do not hug or kiss a male, and the appropriate female-male distance in Azerbaijani culture is more than the average interpersonal distance in, for instance, American society. Professionally, I would try not to create any discomfort in a situation to avoid drawing attention to myself, which produced a clash between my professional culture and my mainstream national and/or family culture.

All these cultural beliefs, values, and attitudes may have influenced my interviews with my co-researchers. Given my biases, I drew attention to certain issues, one being the influence of the interpreter's sex on the possible challenges she/he might face. However, my co-researchers provided other examples of challenges that helped me to re-construct my perception of the influence of sex on the process of interpreting and its challenges. My expectations and the direction of my specific interest may have influenced the analysis process as well. I might have paid more attention to issues that interested me and unconsciously skipped other issues that might need scrupulous analysis. It cannot be expected that a researcher cover all emergent issues in one study, and because the subject is a relatively new focus in intercultural communication, it will need more research in the future.
Chapter 3

Narrative Perspectives

3.1 Banu’s Conversational Interview

Banu and I have studied together at the University of Languages Azerbaijan in both our undergraduate and graduate programs. Although she joined our class one year later than I, she integrated well into our company, becoming one of my closest friends. I share some characteristics with each of my friends. With Banu it seems that I share a similar approach to a number of different issues, which became apparent during interviewing. In most cases she would say the words already going through my mind and there seemed to be little, if any, need for me to add something. Banu works for United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). She has interpreted in various interpreting contexts. However, her most recent experience has been interviews with asylum seekers under UNHCR.

I asked Banu to be a co-researcher long before the actual interview and sent her the Informed Consent Form via e-mail to provide her with basic understanding of the study. Before we begin the interview, however, I describe the general purpose of the study and the procedures and ask if she has any questions related to the whole process. I start the interview by telling her that I would like to talk mainly about the cultural aspects of our interpreting experience rather than the linguistic aspects. I asked her what experiences she has had with cultural differences between a member of another culture and herself. To help her better understand what kinds of lived experiences I have in mind, I give her an example from my own experience: I was challenged when a trainer from Russia
entered the room and started to greet everybody, including females, by shaking hands and kissing them on their cheeks. Not having been exposed to such greeting practice before, and thinking about the audience, who consisted of journalists from various regions of Azerbaijan that are more traditional and conservative than the capital city, I was faced with a difficult situation because I did not want to go against my religious culture, and also did not want to lose face in front of my future audience.

Banu replies that she never had “such a difference, I mean..., the things that I don’t want have never been applied to me.” Regarding hand-shaking she notes that “The women were first stretching their hands, I refused to stretch my hand once and that was normal[ly accepted].” Yet,

There were other cases, for example, when the other side first stretched his hand to me, for example, Ambassador [name omitted] stretched his hand towards me, I did not know what to do, I was seated next to him.

She reflects, however, that “interpreter is an interpreter, the interpreter may sit next [to the client], the interpreter may whisper to her/his ear. In interpreting, it is impossible to overcome the [cultural] difference.” Banu repeats that if the initiation depends on her, she manages that situation by not initiating the greeting by stretching a hand “but there were cases when initiation was from the other side, and in order not to be extreme, I responded to it.” When I ask how she understood the absence of a noticeable cultural difference she replies that “maybe, because he [the client] worked in Azerbaijan. In any case all diplomats have general rules and they must follow them.” They “must consider that she/he is in Muslim country or in Christian country.” Banu notes that we are not speaking
about complete observance of religion, "still, there is some observance of religion" in Azerbaijan. Describing professional diplomats, she adds that, "he could not be completely relaxed, he could not behave the same way he does with his friends, his family." At this point Banu pauses and then adds that "It may stem from his inner personality, as well, but in any case his position [played] the most [important role]."

I ask Banu to tell me about challenges she has encountered because of cultural differences between the speaker and the listener(s). Having worked mostly with refugees from Asia, Banu has interpreted from and into Azerbaijani as the refugees' second language. She tells me about a Western interviewer working for UNHCR and a refugee from Afghanistan, and about the difference in the attitude towards women between members of Western cultures and Afghani culture. Banu notes that "as they [Afghanis] are Muslims they do not allow women to take part in the meetings [in UNHCR]," adding that "in interaction with others [the members of the other western cultures] they [the interviewers] do not have this prescription among themselves, but "in meetings with Afghans they [the interviewers] don't touch upon personal intimate issues." However, when the interviewer spoke to Afghani males themselves, "there were words related to those people's personalities, which sounded very rude. But the person for whom I was interpreting said that 'just translate it as I said' [Banu says these words in English]." In other cases, before Banu starts to interpret the interviewer says 'Banu, there may be some phrases that you don't need to interpret actually.' When I started to interpret it was difficult to me to understand what he wanted, whether or not I should interpret certain words. But after I interpreted for that person
five or six times, I already knew what he meant..., when he is harsh he says to interpret it as it is.

In such interviews, sometimes both sides ask for confirmation “whether I interpreted their words accurately or I communicated them in a milder form or changed them.” She adds that recently the interviewer has been informing her “what I should interpret and what can be omitted.”

I shift Banu’s attention to her experience during the presidential elections, where she interpreted for an English-speaking, Romanian woman. She mentions that “the Romanian woman could say to herself that ‘this looks like a circus, elections are not held seriously, it is far from democracy’... it was her personal viewpoint.” Taking into consideration her emotional state,

it was pointless to interpret it at that point, because it was this person’s mistake, ... she came here as an observer, and without ... submitting any official report, ... to express her thoughts like this [was a mistake].... I am sure she would not like it to be interpreted.

Banu says it is common that a “person cannot hold her/his emotions... and such words are not considered for the listeners,” and repeats again that “it is needless to interpret them because it can make the situation even worse. But if the person deliberately says to convey her/his words ... in such cases I interpret.” I nod and Banu provides another example about cultural differences between the speaker and the listener(s). She says, “I was interpreting for an [Azerbaijani] MP [Member of Parliament], and there were guests from England, all ladies. The woman [MP] was
speaking with irony.” While describing the good relationships between Azerbaijan and Great Britain, the MP added, “we have known the English since 1918 [the year when the English troops entered Baku].” Banu observes that probably the woman “said that to me, relying on me, because without doubt I would not interpret it in a cultural meeting with the sole purpose of friendship and peace.” Banu explains that the English woman would not understand this irony because “it is related to us, we remember it as a negative event.” Hence, “I didn’t convey it as irony,” but “as a historical fact... I said it very emotionlessly.”

Judging that I had enough examples related to cultural challenges, I ask Banu about her experience of working with clients who have worked with interpreters and those who have not. Banu tells me,

There is a perfect difference. The chief of the organization where I work, he always waits for me to interpret; any Afghani keeps speaking without any periods or commas and that person stops him saying that ‘let her interpret.’ She calls the former “perfect” and says that it “makes my work easy.” The chief also “always says ‘Banu, there might be certain words that you don’t understand, do not hesitate to ask me several times, and do not think that it is your incompetence,’” because “‘if you don’t ask me, it can cause misunderstanding.’ I like it. He is very professional and knows how to work with a person in front of him.” She further describes his speech:

He says a phrase, a sentence, and stops, and I interpret. Even if I ask two or three times he answers, or if he sees that I am giving him a look of misunderstanding, he
repeats, or paraphrases, or simplifies the sentence, or explains that term to me saying that ‘you don’t know it and let me explain it to you.’

She pauses and I take the opportunity to shift the topic to aspects more related to the culture than to linguistics, to whether or not the speaker is aware that “the interpreter is between two cultures.” I share the conclusion I have come to through my experience, that people who did not have experience in working with interpreters speak freely without taking into account the situation into which they put the interpreter, “they think that it is the interpreter who must make sure that there isn’t any conflict.” Banu shares her experience that sometimes the speaker “is not interested what the interpreter said or did not say, she/he is more interested in the results, in how relationships are established between that visiting person, the guest” and herself/himself. Banu remembers a case when in a meeting with a foreign woman

one Azerbaijani woman said that ‘Azerbaijani men like blonde women’ [Banu pauses]. Another Azerbaijani woman said that ‘... it is impolite to say that... we should not say that.’ At last the two agreed to say that ‘your women are beautiful and take care of themselves and our men... appreciate beauty.’ In that case, I did not hurry... to avoid making it sound rude, and to avoid the loss of face of Azerbaijani men and women. Banu concludes that “the person who has not worked with an interpreter enough does not think about the interpreter.”

I pursue her discussion of the difference in giving and/or receiving compliments between members of Azerbaijani and other cultures. Banu says “In Azerbaijan...
stranger says compliments to a woman again and again, especially to a married woman, it is not right.” I ask her if she has encountered a situation when a male compliments an Azerbaijani woman. Although she has not encountered such a situation herself, she tells me, “The woman will get embarrassed, and she will not respond to that.” But if she has to interpret compliments, “if it is not an obscene word, … and simply and generally says something about the beauty of a person, I will interpret it,” however, if the compliments are rather specific and, “for example, says that ‘you have beautiful eyes,’ I will probably change it. We can generally interpret it as ‘you are a beautiful woman’.” I ask Banu if the client must be made aware of this action, and she replies that “actually, when I interpret the utterance I say to the person that I interpreted it this way,” and adds that “so far no one has told me that ‘you didn’t do right.’” She provides another example when an American said something that could offend a Chechen: “I don’t remember exactly what he said, but I said to that person that in the Muslim world it is not a correct approach.” Without any interruption Banu continues with another example and describes interpreting for a Muslim woman and an Italian who spoke English. The woman “said she was divorced and … the Italian … asked with some irony ‘how did you divorce?’ She said ‘we say ‘I divorce you’ three times…”” Banu recalls that

He said something like ‘it is ridiculous… in UNHCR, we do not deal with abstract religious, or holy things, we need specific law.’ I explained to him that you cannot apply law to everybody’s religion because it is holy to them and it exists and you should not look at it like this through your fingers. Actually, in our office I have explained [Islamic culture to people with] different approaches to Islam. For instance,
foreigners cannot understand polygamy. I am not saying I accept it, but ... it is not the end of the world. I know it is strange, and shocking, but that is how it is.

I build on Banu’s involvement in explaining differences in cultures, by asking her about her perception of the interpreter’s role, her/his challenges, and problems. She replies that,

There may be cases when emotions are boiling, and both sides may utter inadequate words. The interpreter does not have the right to cut it off, or to edit it and then convey it, or to deliver it completely as it is if it is like throwing oil in the fire. It is not correct. It depends; if she/he is asked to translate exactly that’s a different case. If the person wants the battle, it is not the interpreter’s obligation to calm down the battle; her/his main obligation is to interpret. However, she/he also has the role of a mediator, a peacemaker.

Banu also observes that “If the people don’t consider the different cultures, ... I know from others’ experience, that at the end, ... the interpreter is blamed.” Hence, the interpreter “must have more responsibility than the parties, although it is they who say the word.” She goes on listing possible challenges:

undertaking more responsibility [would be one challenge], then, the accuracy of delivering cultures, and then, the fact that the interpreter is not ideal. She/he may be unaware of certain things in a culture, it is the main challenge. She/he may cause mistakes if she/he does not ask the word.... She/he may be unaware of the context to some degree.
Going back to blaming the interpreter, I share an experience in training. The Russian trainer asked the Azerbaijani journalist a question to which the journalist did not respond seriously and was saying nonsense. After I warned the journalist that I would interpret what he said, he would not say anything relevant. After I interpreted what he said and the trainer got upset, the journalist said that “maybe, the interpreter interpreted it incorrectly,” and only this time answered the question. I interpreted his words and the trainer said to me that I should respond to the journalist myself. Banu responds that “Then [there is either] absolute professionalism, or you will have betrayed your religion, your faith, your people.” But “I think it is not correct to choose one of these. One should not say anything contradicting her/his principles, religion, culture, neither should she/he throw away professionalism and be subjective.” However, she adds to this,

[If] the interpreting is for individuals, then it is different. It is not my duty to cover, to correct mistakes or faults of those individuals because it is the problem of that individual, and by changing it I put a line across my professionalism. No! … I have come here to interpret. But if she/he represents Azerbaijani culture and says something generally contradicting our Azerbaijani culture or religious culture, then I can explain to that person.

Banu describes her experience when once an Azerbaijani female journalist asked a foreign woman “what do you think about women in Islam, they must sit at home, women should not do anything, women are slaves, they are secondary” and asked Banu to interpret it. Banu admits that “yes, there are such things in Islam …, but at least it is not
to the extent she depicted. Maybe it is the woman’s [view point].” Banu decided to explain to the journalist that

‘Islam is not like you say, think properly, because [it is wrong to put it] that way. If you have facts speak them, because this lady [will have] wrong impression about our religion.’ In this case, I could not stay indifferent... I thought it’s my obligation to do so. I said ‘have you seen a slave woman? Women have equal rights with men.’ I explained these nuances in simple language... I conveyed it as ‘surely a Muslim woman differs from a Western woman.’ I generalized it like this because what she said was absolutely wrong.

I sense Banu starts to speak about the interpreter’s “interference” with the interpreted conversation and I ask her, “to what extent can the interpreter’s presence in conversation be ignored?” Banu replies, “It is not right to be a robot.” She also remembers that at University we learned that

the interpreter may be thirsty, no one will remember that there is an interpreter, everybody may have a meal and no one thinks about the interpreter. It depends on the situation. The interpreter’s being absolutely invisible [she moves her head and draws up her face in an expression I interpret as skepticism]. Maybe, there are such people [who see themselves invisible]. It totally depends on an individual’s personality. I can be an interpreter but it does not change my personality. I protect my professionalism, my objectivity.

At this point Banu introduces a person who may consider herself invisible:
When somebody offends her mainstream national Azerbaijani culture she says that ‘everyone may have her own opinion,’ or if you insult her religion she says ‘everyone may have her opinion, we must be democratic.’ However, as I am not like that, my character shows itself during the interpreting. The interpreter is not a robot that must translate from this person to the other.

After making a short pause, Banu continues, “Actually, if we speak about being a robot and not interfering with anything, then you have to interpret everything as it is and nothing can be interpreted.” She clarifies that “Literal interpreting causes a lot of misunderstanding. It is not clear.” She refers to her own experience when she “was interpreting for a person who spoke endlessly, and I was told to interpret literally. I did it and the other side did not understand anything.” Banu says that although she suggested to ask the speaker to express his thoughts in a more specific form,

the client refused: ‘let him say what he wants and interpret whatever he says.’ I interpreted everything literally. That person did not understand anything and said, ‘ok, just ask him to be to the point’ [said in English]....

Banu reflects that I always first suggest, I never initiate first, and that’s how it should be. But I never was as a robot and I don’t think I will be able to be like that. The interpreter can be an interpreter, but she/he has her/his sex, her religion, principles, and her culture. Generally, it is not real to make the interpreter a wooden robot. I must guarantee my professionalism as an interpreter. But at the same time, if the speaker says a wrong thought about the culture or religion..., and if I don’t say [interpret] what she/he said
then it shows my competence or my professionalism because if I don’t interfere, unknowingly many things may happen, it may cause many misunderstandings.

Picking up on Banu’s discussion of one of the elements of professionalism, I ask her “in what do you see the interpreter’s professionalism?” Banu answers that “she/he must be calm…, she/he shouldn’t be very noticeable…. Her professionalism would involve balancing out emotional situations.” She adds to this list the interpreter’s “having background, I mean, if she/he is interpreting she/he must be informed at least a day before,” and to have “general knowledge about the subject. It is better to get prepared before the interpreting … and also not to omit words.” Banu pauses and then goes on

She/he must also be able to know when to convey the content, and when to interpret literally, when to convey … the fact literally, or to deliver it generally. In that process [interpreting], no one waits for me, no one gives me time, and in that process, I have limited time and must be able to use it properly. And also the interpreter should not be afraid to ask questions, to ask for repetitions. There are moments, when she/he must take the thought through the filter…. [Professionalism is] the combination of all these, but none of them should be excessive.

I move the topic from expectations for the interpreter to the expectations for the clients using interpreting service. Banu suggests that a professional client “must know how to work with the interpreter…, be patient, must express thoughts clearly, must not use abbreviations, must understand the other person [be empathetic towards the interpreter].” She observes that such people
are actually very helpful to the interpreter. Even a nervous person feels support in this case. It creates such an emotional situation that you know the person for whom you are interpreting is supporting you, I mean if you forget a word she/he helps you, or to stop the other person if he speaks too much [and you can’t do it] because she/he is older. Absolute professionalism would be considering that this person is an interpreter, considering both relationships between employer and employee, and relationships between two people.

I ask what if she/he is not professional. Banu contemplates that even if the client is not competent in working with an interpreter, “as you work with her/him you help her/him to understand it, she/he gets used [to working with you].” She observes that it is possible that the person I am working with for the first time is competent enough and I don’t have problems with her/him. It is also possible that I meet her/him for the first time, I interpret for her/him for the first time, and I get disappointed and will never interpret for her/him again.

Banu emphasizes the role of experience in working with the same person and adds that “I see the difference in my interpreting for the person when I first started to work with him and now.” She feels more comfortable in asking the client “to give short utterances or explain a term for me, as I may not know it, I am not a lawyer. I am open in these cases.” After working with that person for some time, Banu reflects that “now that person does not wait for me to ask” to repeat what he said, including numbers. Banu adds,
While a month ago when he said a word he used to say ‘well, I am saying so and so
[she repeats his words in English, with a facial expression I interpret as arrogant].’

Now, he does it [says things] normally.

Banu adds that

it also depends on the person…. In our office, I know interpreters who interpret for a
government official, they have interpreted for this person for more than a year and
this person has not changed because this person has her/his rules, her/his manners.

She/he does not … consider the interpreter…, she/he does not accept the surrounding,
she/he just says his thoughts and does not think about other things.

I ask Banu to reflect on the benefits of using an interpreter. She notes that “It depends
on how well they [the speakers] know the language.” If they both know the language of
their communication and “they are sufficiently aware of each other’s cultures, of the topic
they are to discuss … it is easier to communicate with the person directly than through
the interpreter.” However, she also mentions that in refugee interviews, “it is not enough
to know the language on a satisfactory level because here they decide on a human life.

Even any period or comma may play a role.” She says, “It is good to have an interpreter;
maybe, specifically in terms of responsibility, it is comfortable. She explains this point as
follows:

I say my thought easily because a human thinks in her own native language, … then
you put the thought in another language, [for example] she thinks in Azerbaijani and
puts it in French or English. It is a more complicated process. And you should also
consider that you are representing a country, an institution. Suddenly you may utter
such a word that it can cause agitation. When there is an interpreter there is less responsibility and you have less work load.

Banu further elaborates on the "individual character" of the situation pointing out that if the diplomat finds that the interpreting is not correct she/he can interfere. However, "if the diplomat does not know the language she/he cannot be 100% sure about how well the translation is made." But Banu accentuates that

It is possible that the interpreter is more aware of the reality and knows in what way to introduce the thought to the foreigner for better understanding. And that depends on how much the interpreter is competent.

Reflecting back on Banu’s words about “the interpreter ... knows in what way to introduce the thought to the foreigner,” I ask what it is she thinks the interpreter is actually interpreting. She contemplates that the interpreter “may interpret the thought, she/he can interpret a fact, and she/he can even interpret a bunch of words. She/he cannot interpret the culture, she/he can introduce the culture.”

Pondering over Banu’s words regarding how the interpreter introduces “culture,” I ask her to think how different cultures have different attitudes and/or approaches to the same phenomenon and how this can influence the interpreting from the interpreter’s viewpoint. To clarify my question, I give an example that occurred when I was interpreting for an American expert shortly after the September 11 events. The expert mentioned these events with deep sorrow in her voice. I was not able to convey that sorrow, just like I would not be able to convey the deep sorrow we have regarding the Khodjali massacre to a foreigner. Although both sides understand it as a tragedy, the
degree to which they feel it differs. Hence, I wonder in this context when the interpreter belongs to one or the other culture “how well can the interpreter manage her/his emotions and stay neutral?” Banu agrees and adds that “I include history into the culture, I include the mentality stemming from Azerbaijani reality, views [into our culture].” At this point we digress to discuss issues related to how we see our culture which are not relevant to the subject of the study. I shift the topic back to the interpreting situation asking “what if the interpreter feels emotional about the subject of the negotiation.” I give a hypothetical example of the negotiation process on the issue of Daghlig Garabagh, the occupied territory of Azerbaijan. Banu says, “I cannot even imagine how I would feel there” if they say something that

seems unreasonable, like giving the aggressors absolute citizenship in that area. I would just leave.... If they say something offending our martyrs, I would simply leave.... She/he [the foreign speaker] is the visitor... [besides, his position] puts on her/him more responsibility... she/he must think before speaking” and take the other party’s emotions into account.

I ask Banu to specify whom she sees as “the other party,” the interpreter or the other speaker. She replies, “As another party I mean the member of the culture to which the discussed issue is related.” If the speaker says something unacceptable to the interpreter I will use the third person that ‘according to Mr. …’ and may add some emotion to it like irony, or on the contrary interpret it in a very dry manner.... I am an interpreter and I have some personality.
We continue to discuss the examples not directly relevant to the subject of the study. I sense a need for closure when Banu concludes that the interpreter is a mediator..., she/he plays the role of a bridge..., for example, I cannot be a simple bridge, I could be a catalyst, a reactor..., it is impossible to be indifferent, the interpreter may play partly the role of a filter, partly the role of a transmitter, partly the role of a bridge, and partly the role of a clarifier.

I thank Banu for her time and we stop the interview.

3.2 Khadijah’s Conversational Interview

“Khadijah” is a pseudonym for an Azerbaijani female interpreter living and working in Azerbaijan. She has worked as an interpreter for more than two years, and has never been outside Azerbaijan. I have had a very strong friendship with Khadijah since our University years. She is one of the few friends with whom I share strong understandings. In communication terms, we share a very strong network of overlaps in interpretations and meanings of the reality outside the human mind. At University we took the same courses with a group of other friends. Khadijah has always differed from the others with her stronger involvement in Islam, and has worn a veil for more than six years. She married a month before the interview. In our communication we seem to prefer to interrupt each other often and finish each other’s sentences to show our closeness and our understanding, and that understanding showed itself in the interview. We decided to meet in our University. She came after work as I was finishing my interview with Banu. We chatted all three – friends from University – and then Banu left and we began the interview. Khadijah always seeks to confirm that she is “the closest” to me in terms of
understanding. After Banu left she asked how the interview went. After our interview she asked if her interview was the same as Banu’s.

I had sent the consent form to Khadijah via e-mail, when I asked her to participate in the study. Before we start the interview, I briefly explain the procedures and the subject of the study. Being aware of the usual emphasis among interpreters on the linguistic aspects of interpreting, I also ask her to focus on the cultural aspects of the interpreting setting. We start with a discussion of clashes between the culture of the interpreter and that of the speaker from another national group. I provide her with an example from my own experience of a training session in which I saw the trainer shake hands with everybody and kiss them on their cheek. I was shocked because in my Islamic culture, a female cannot shake hands with a male, let alone be kissed by a male.

Khadijah describes a similar example. She was to interpret for two guest experts, one from New Zealand and the other from Australia, although she was not sure about the homeland of the latter. She mentions that the expert from New Zealand was “the first sincere foreign expert” she has worked with and emphasizes how she enjoys working with him even now. However, the second speaker, presumably from Australia, “had very strange characters,” as she puts it; “he seemed very strange to me as an Azerbaijani.” Khadijah says that sometimes she would interpret for him outside the official interpreting setting, in conversation with staff, and she was shocked by his behavior: “he would tap my shoulder with his hand and once he even tapped my head, I was shocked, I wanted to cry.” The expert from New Zealand, “who was aware of Azerbaijani culture was also
shocked.” Khadijah notes specifically that she was “shocked,” first of all because “I am an interpreter,” second, “I am from another culture,” and third, “I am a female.”

In another example, Khadijah speaks about the attitude of a foreign expert from Holland: “I felt how he was looking down on the interpreter.” Then she generalizes this fact, noting that usually foreigners look down on our people. She refers to a case when this foreigner was speaking to an audience, in which there was one female who spoke English. The two were talking in English and the rest of the audience looked at Khadijah, waiting for interpreting. When she started to interpret their conversation, he interrupted her and “in a rude manner told me to interpret only what he asked me to interpret.” She says he should have told her before he started the conversation with that particular lady that the conversation was personal, that there was no need for interpreting, and that audience should not have been informed. She observes that there were other cases when ethical rules regarding the interpreter were violated.

She mentions interpreting for consultants who acknowledged beforehand that Azerbaijan was a Caucasian and Islamic country, and asked whether women would shake hands or not. Khadijah would say “I don’t shake hands” and the consultants would just verbally greet her. Other foreigners she worked with would not only shake hands but also kiss the woman next to Khadijah, but because of her veil they did not stretch their hands towards her. There is a smile on her face as she mentions that it was because of her veil. However, there were also foreigners who would stretch their hand towards her and she felt obliged to shake hands. She explains this saying that “if I don’t respond they stress out – those who don’t have any clue [about our culture].”
We turn to discussing the difference between the culture of the speaker and that of listener(s). Khadijah says there are differences and starts with an example of how people sit. “Foreign guests come and sit on the table, and there are elderly in the audience,” emphasizing that “it is highly unethical” for the generation of the former Soviet Union. Her other example concerns two female experts from Norway. They used a lot of gestures and were very lively in terms of non-verbal behavior. There was one elderly man in the audience who observed them for a while, then asked Khadijah to translate to them that “there is no need for them to come here and behave like clowns.” He added that “we know more than they do.” Khadijah observes that “without even getting to know their knowledge level,” based on their behavior he formed an impression that “they were two clowns.” Although their lively behavior had “negative impression” on the older generation, “there were female teachers in the audience who had participated in such trainings before,” and “such behavior enlivened the training.” I share my experience with a speaker who wore shoes without socks and how that shocked me. We both smile.

As another aspect of cultural difficulty, Khadijah mentions the stereotypes a foreign expert may have about Azerbaijanis. She goes on with an example, where, in the course of a discussion of curriculum and how it should be student-oriented, an expert from Holland had said that

when they say a teacher, what first comes to my mind is white haired man with harsh voice, who knows a lot, but cannot always understand students. She/he … describes how everything should be and ‘that’s it’.
The Dutch expert mentioned this to emphasize that teaching should not be like this. She notes that the stereotype was applied to our teachers, and “the reaction of the audience was a little [defensive].” She adds that “we also don’t like petty jokes and they [people from some other cultures] do it.”

Without giving an example, Khadijah mentions that if you are an ethical interpreter you must convey both the speaker’s words addressed to the audience and the words of the audience members to the speaker in a mild form, and in a form that they will be able to accept.

Khadijah refers back to the example of the experts from Norway: “Although that old man said very rude words, like clowns, I did not interpret them in the same manner.” I ask how she did interpret it. “I interpreted that we know you are young” and we will learn a lot from you, but there is some information that we already possess and all we need from you is to create a climate where we can improve that knowledge.

Then she adds, “I was obliged to say so because, otherwise there would be tension.”

Khadijah goes back to the example of jokes and notes the difference in sense of humor between cultures: “I know an interpreter” who says to the foreign client, “Don’t ask me to interpret jokes, they cannot be interpreted.” But Khadijah translates them “as they are, because I cannot tell to every foreigner not to tell jokes. She/he can say that you are an interpreter” and “must interpret whatever I am saying.”

My next question shifts the focus to the level of difficulty of interpreting to one or the other language. I say that it is easier for me to interpret into Azerbaijani because I know
what is allowed and what is totally inappropriate. Khadijah shifts the answer to the linguistic level describing how difficult it is for her to interpret when she does not have background knowledge, however, when the speaker and the listener(s) are both specialists "they understand each other even if I interpret literally, word-by-word ... without understanding the text myself," adding that "this is the aspect of interpreting that I enjoy most; as if I play the role of an audio recorder." She then mentions another difficulty in interpreting that appears when the speakers speak English as their second language: "in any case, I distort the message in English when I transmit it to the audience," and "it gets worse if I don’t get the message myself.” When I ask what she does in those cases, she answers that she asks for explanation, paraphrases the utterance, asks if that was what was meant, and only then interprets the utterance.

Khadijah describes Azerbaijani culture as being sincere and respecting professionals, and as stereotyping visiting foreigners as people who know everything. She finds that foreigners from western cultures are often “stereotyping local culture as lower culture, ... they think that we came here to teach, they know less than we do.” She tells me that the nuances of respect that we have, like offering a seat or something to a foreigner – we have it, they don’t. But we don’t have their characteristic of listening to a person in front of you ..., we don’t wait for the other to finish her/his thought ..., we are used to express our own thought and go around it.

I describe my perception that the reason for interruption in Azerbaijani culture is that most people think they already know what the other means after a couple of sentences
and don’t see any need to let that person finish. Khadijah smiles and says she has “difficulty because of this character.” There were cases when she was well aware of the subject matter. I already know what the audience wants to say. When the foreigner asks a question I answer myself on behalf of the audience. And sometimes the foreigner would say, ‘I did not ask you, I asked the audience.’ However, “there are some foreigners that don’t interfere, they say ‘do whatever you think is necessary.’” For example, the expert from New Zealand “was discussing different subject-related issues with me, he accepted me as a member of the staff, not as an interpreter.” Khadijah adds that “there is subjectivity within everybody, and everybody has the expectation to be accepted by the others.”

I shift the topic from expectations on the side of the interpreter to the expectations of the interpreter, to her/his professionalism, and Khadijah says that she “respects most” simultaneous interpreters because “they are always out of sight.” She adds that “but there are consecutive interpreters who are respected because of their relationship to the audience, because of their behavior with the foreigner.” She says that prior to the actual interpreting she tries “to establish relationships with the audience…. I want them to get used to me so that they accept my sentences positively and are tolerant to my negative characteristics.” Although Khadijah praises simultaneous interpreters because of their “talent,” when it comes to the matter of utterances that may violate her personal culture and principles or values, she says that I will not interpret them, and will explain to the speaker why I did not interpret, and will ask her/him not [to say such utterances] in the future. If she/he wouldn’t listen to
me, I will follow my own principles, I am not afraid that the client will refuse me as
an interpreter.

She closes the topic by noting that “although before I was valuing my profession more,
now, my national and religious values are more important for me.”

After discussing the service characteristics of our profession, Khadijah mentions that
as an interpreter

you are not yourself in the audience, you lose all your values in the audience... you
should not react to anything, you simply play the role of an audio recorder, you are
conveying the message.

When I raise doubt about the possibility of such detachment, she says that

it depends on experience. You are more capable in doing it as time passes. There
were times when after interpreting I came home and cried because of the shock I had
experienced there [in the interpreting setting], but I am used to them already.

We talk about our confidence in understanding the speakers’ meanings and Khadijah
mentions two points, “with time you start to understand the person better ..., and their
relationship also helps you,” for example, one speaker may be “interested in one subject,”
and the other speaker in another, but “in the exchange of thoughts, they reach common
ground.” She also adds that the relationship established between two speakers helps her
“to speak in one ‘language’ ['language’ is used to mean speaking on one common
subject, with the same focus, the similar style], in the ‘language’ that the both can
understand.” She says that “mostly in interpreting I had difficulty” because “our people
don’t like to speak directly/specifically.... As soon as I get” clear understanding of “the
subject matter, I understand what one side wants from the other, that’s it; I get” what language to use.

I ask Khadijah to compare the relationship between the interpreter and speaker from the different cultures with the relationship between the interpreter and the speaker from the same culture. She indicates that

it depends on the speaker’s attitude towards the interpreter, if she/he sees you as a tool, one cannot speak of relationship; she/he is expecting you to convey what she/he said.

Then she adds that “our people will always consider you theirs,” however,

during elections, there was a tension, and foreign experts always tried to protect me, they would not let me go to aggressive places, they were afraid for themselves mostly, but also protected me. Then I felt closeness with them.

She looks thoughtful as she adds that “there is always distance with the foreigner, I always feel that coldness.”

Khadijah also admits that “there are cases when the speaker will ask the interpreter’s advice, like ‘it will probably be better if we say so and so’.” But in other cases “the speaker alienates me, sees me as a member of the other culture,” and even in one-to-one communication “she/he speaks to me as to a member of that culture.” She gives another example from the election context. There was a moment when

our young men who worked in election district did something inappropriate, I don’t know if it was because of me or not, and one of the foreigners looked down on him,
as if thinking that this is the character of this people. It is evident that I was included there.

It was one of the moments when she “could not say anything because the foreigner was right” in his attitude toward that young man, “but not in including me there” as a member of the same culture or in generalizing to other Azerbaijanis. She notes that “The only case when I could interfere would be if the foreigner gets misinformed.”

In order to probe the place of the interpreter, I ask Khadijah to compare intercultural communication among the same people with and without an interpreter, and she says that it depends on whether or not the interpreter is a member of the culture of one of the speakers. If the interpreter is not a member of either person’s culture, then it would “complicate” the communication process because there is difference “between cultures,” the difference in the languages is not as problematic because “it is only expression.” If the interpreter is from one of the speakers’ cultures then “there would not be a problem, I think… at least the interpreter is aware of one culture.” In this case, the speaker “knows that I [the interpreter] know the language better than she/he…, I can better understand her/his partner and explain it to her/him in a better way.”

I return the conversation to Khadijah’s discussions with speakers when she is not sure about the meaning of the utterance. She tells me she gets into discussions because “this is my profession, and my not understanding means I convey the wrong information.” That is why “there are cases when I” add explanation to the translation. The conversation comes to the point when we discuss the unit of interpreting. Khadijah says that she interprets “meaning… I mean I convey what this person wants to say.” She also describes
culture as being reflected in the language saying that “doubtless, culture is the sentence structure, culture is also the way of expression of the thought. If I convey his thought as it is, then, I am conveying culture.” She continues “I convey to the audience, whether they got it or not is not my problem,... I try to protect loyalty to the speaker.” When I ask about the speaker’s noticing whether or not the audience understands her/him she says that:

if the speaker sees that there are questions in the audience, there is confusion in the audience, misunderstanding... the speaker her/himself begins to explain and I begin to interpret his words, ... or sometimes when I understand that some people in the audience did not understand I ask [the speaker] if she/he could explain so and so.

But Khadijah says that speakers can see if the audience does not understand. Discussing the nonverbal aspect of communication in the interpreting setting, we go back to our experiences when one side says something inappropriate. When I mention the members of our culture sometimes not speaking seriously, Khadijah replies that “I convey it mildly, I must convey something because she/he is a foreigner, I cannot construct a negative impression about our people.”

I draw our conversation to a close by asking Khadijah which is more difficult – interpreting or communicating. She considers it “more difficult to interpret, because communication does not occur from nothing, you don’t get acquainted from nowhere, but in interpreting you may interpret for that person from nowhere.” The culture of the other person “may shock you and you think it is not like this in my culture,” one may decide whether or not to continue to communicate,
but in interpreting you must communicate in two cultures. That is why the beginning of the interpreting process is always difficult... It is even worse if you know neither the speaker, nor the audience.

We end the conversation with a couple of jokes not relevant to the subject of the study.

3.3 Aisha’s Conversational Interview

Aisha was my teacher at the University of Languages. Although I was not able to contact her directly, I asked my friend Khadijah to contact her and ask if she would be available for an interview. As Khadijah was already aware of the study, she briefly explained the purpose of the study to Aisha. I contacted Aisha to confirm her willingness to participate and to schedule a time and place for the interview. We decided to meet at the University. Aisha’s strong educational and experiential background showed itself in the interview. Because culturally there is a hierarchy between us, as she was my teacher, I did not interrupt her much during our conversation. However, I did express my thoughts at times, and specified the focus of the study when necessary. To avoid confusion, at times she used English terms for specialized words rather than Azerbaijani.

I introduce the Informed Consent Form and explain the procedures to Aisha. As we start the interview, I discuss the subject of the study and what encouraged me to conduct it in somewhat more detail than with previous co-researchers. Aisha notes immediately, “in intercultural communication I have always been interested, if you remember, even when I taught you..., in nonverbal communication. Nonverbal communication is sometimes different... for members of different cultures.” She notes that because “we [interpreters] do not work with the speakers of one language, [we take part in] inter-
lingual communication, in intercultural communication, and here, these facts must be considered.” Aisha mentions her article *The Role of Nonverbal Communication in Translation and Interpreting*. She reflects that during her research on the topic “I came across..., for example, the different meanings of gestures of the Japanese.” Her example is about presenting business cards:

when they [the Japanese] present their business cards to one another, we just look at it and put it somewhere in the notebook, but they must read it, express their reaction to it, and then shift to another issue.

I ask, “is it a sign of respect?” Aisha confirms and relates it to the interpreting setting: “the interpreter must wait for this moment before starting to interpret so as not to distract her/him [the speaker/listener].” I nod and Aisha mentions that other possible cultural differences can be related to proximity, using perfume, or dressing. I remember her teaching it to us and nod, smiling.

Aisha continues to remind me how she told us about the narration of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* in an African tribe and how “they had an unusual reaction to it.” I shake my head trying to remember, and Aisha reminds me, when

the narrator tells it in their own language, Hamlet’s struggle against his uncle and mother, his accusation of his mother and uncle of disloyalty to his father makes a negative impression on the tribe. Why? – because according to the customs of this tribe, if the owner has a brother, after his [the owner’s] death, he [the brother] must appropriate his property and his widow wife…. This is the difference between
cultures. If one culture with its customs and traditions accepts it positively, the other culture perceives it negatively.

Without any pause, Aisha provides another similar example, when an author’s novel in translated and he is invited to the debut of the novel in the translated language. During the performance, “he sees that his novel has been completely adapted.” I interrupt Aisha and confirm that the work was adapted to the culture of the translated language. She nods and continues, “He gets angry, and after the debut..., he almost wants to choke the interpreter.” After the author was calmed down he “was told that ‘if your novel was translated as it was, it would not be effective.’ However, here we speak not of a translation, but an adaptation.” She describes three types of translation, literal, idiomatic, and free translation, which is adaptation.

We go on discussing different issues in translation which are not directly related to the subject of this study. Then Aisha shifts to an example of a potential challenge for an interpreter, “if we pay attention to the number of words with which Eskimos express the whiteness of snow,” one can see how challenging it can be to interpret that word from Azerbaijani to their language. “Which whiteness is considered, that is the whiteness of which snow, old, new...? There are different kinds of it [snow].” Aisha also mentions the important role horses play in Arab life.

Without interruption Aisha continues, “How much does the culture influence translation and interpreting? Can translation and interpreting benefit from it or does it have a contrary impact on it?” Aisha asks if this is related to my subject. I confirm that it is, and specify with a hypothetical situation of negotiations between members of two
different cultures: “for example, one member in the negotiations loses her/his temper and says something inappropriate, the responsibility lies on the interpreter whether to interpret it as she/he said it or to correct it.” I elaborate on the dilemma the interpreter is faced with: “On one hand, the interpreter is afraid to correct it, on the other hand, that person might have said that under the influence of her/his emotions, and it contradicts her/his interests.” Aisha agrees that “it is a very sensitive issue.” She says that about three years ago, Azerbaijanis living in a northern country visited the University of Languages. They were interpreters and translators. “We had a very interesting scientific discussion for several hours..., I did not say anything and listened to them as they were older than me.” But in the second half of the conversation, questions were addressed to Aisha. She remembers that “I tried to prove that the interpreter’s role is to create communication between cultures, between languages, not to disturb it.” But Aisha also adds that “At the same time, there is an issue of loyalty..., the interpreter must stay loyal to the speaker... That is why there was also the issue of rotating sides,” that is, the interpreter is primarily loyal to whichever side is taking a turn, thus, her/his loyalty is rotating. But the visitors, who were experienced interpreters

noted that ‘If we say a word in a milder or a ruder form [than the speaker], and if it is revealed, then, we can be deprived of our translator/interpreter certificate.’

Aisha continues that “I gave an example in which the interpreter’s intuition can help her/him.” She accentuates that “there is a rule that the interpreter should not be interested in the position of any side.” But she admits that in her situation “to be honest, the issue
was related to a financial resource coming to Azerbaijan.” She says that on the Azerbaijani side was an old gentleman who wanted his requirements to be met, and at that moment he said to the lady very roughly that ‘you don’t know, go and learn, you will know when you reach my age.’ From his intonation and tone the woman knew that he was not saying very pleasant words. I interpreted, “he says that ‘I have more experience. You are still very young.’”

I nod and smile at the choice Aisha made at that moment. She goes on, “There was a psychological moment. It probably was pleasant for a fifty year old woman to be called young by the person speaking to her.” Aisha remembers that after the meeting, the woman approached her and said, “‘My dear, I understand what he meant. Thank you. I know you did not want to hurt me.’” Aisha reflects that although she was in the role of an interpreter, “both sides knew that I was there to create communication. And at the same time, I tried for the interest of our side and did not want the other side to get offended.” However, she also adds that “but, as a matter of fact, the interpreter must be neutral, that is, to not put the interests of one side above the interests of the other side.”

Without any pause or interruption, Aisha shifts the topic to the US Code of Court Interpreting:

in the ethical rule of the interpreter…, it is also said that the interpreter must not answer the person who enters the courtroom and asks about who is the judge or other people…. The court interpreter… must inform [the court] about any relationships [to people in the courtroom] before the trial.
I add, “whether or not the interpreter has personal bias.” Aisha agrees and continues that everything “should be considered [to guarantee] the interpreter’s neutrality.” Aisha goes back to the previous issue of whether or not the interpreter has the right to soften utterances, calling this “a very sensitive issue.” She recalls how once she asked a famous scholar in the field of interpreting, “what if during negotiations there is a rude joke, to what extent [may the interpreter soften it]?” to which he responded “in a rather subjective way..., ‘sometimes all participants are males and the interpreter is female. In order to create a favorable climate they may even say an anecdote.’” Then he said, “‘in that case the interpreter has the right to make a little maneuver if the anecdote... refers to her.’” I nod and Aisha remembers another example about an omission made by the interpreter, at the end [of the meeting] there are several sentences of praise..., pleasant words addressed to the interpreter, if those words are only addressed to me, I try to give up their translation and generally say that ‘the interpreter is being thanked’ and I thank the speaker.

Sensing that Aisha feels a little uncomfortable having to mention that she was praised, I smile. She explains, “Maybe, in my culture to praise yourself used not to be a positive thing” although now, sometimes candidates try to praise themselves if there are some alternatives. She acknowledges that “based upon our former values, I [omit that part of the speech]. And I think that here I am not violating the interpreter’s loyalty [principle].”

The next example Aisha reflects upon is from the parliamentary elections. She asks if I was in Baku during these elections. I say I was in the USA, and she explains that very
young, active interpreters worked during the parliamentary elections and she enjoyed “their quick-wittedness, their decision-making skills [said in English], fast interpreting.” However, one interpreter interpreted that “the elections do not meet any of the international standards,” something like this, I don’t remember exactly though.” After this speech, “it was repeatedly announced on TV that the interpreter made a mistake. Even the president’s press secretariat commented that ‘it seems that the interpreter had a bias.’” But Aisha says she did not watch that particular interpreting and was not sure “to what extent the interpreter made a mistake. However, it created a big resonance” because “it was really politically significant; the right or wrong interpretation could or could not put the parliamentary elections under suspicion.” Thus, Aisha concludes that “the interpreter must be very careful, she/he has a big responsibility.”

Admitting that my experience is small compared to Aisha’s, I raise a question that “I wonder to what extent it is impossible to avoid bias.” I give an example from my interpreting experience during the presidential elections and admit that I was biased; I was on the side of the opposition. I also remember that I encountered behaviors by Azerbaijanis that were “unexpected for my culture.” I tell about my difficulty in that emotionally tense situation. I did not like, for example, how males were talking to the female observer I was interpreting for, because first of all “she was a female and that had to be respected,” and second, “she was a guest, a status which is also highly respected as far as I have known all my life.” Aisha adds that “at least he should have considered you.” I agree and continue, “I put it aside and did not think about the respect for myself, I
worried about the lady.” There was a moment “when the lady asked a serious question,” but he was not speaking seriously and was being irreverent.

I did not interpret immediately because I didn’t think it was right. This person does not understand, he thinks that I am … [from the same culture] and will not interpret that. These people have not worked with the interpreter. I told him that ‘I will interpret everything you are saying. Please be more serious and … answer specifically.’

Aisha notes that “you did the right thing… I have also observed such cases.” She provides an example she shared with our country people from Southern Azerbaijan:

we were seeing off [our guests]. One of the employees seeing them off said to one of the leaving ladies that ‘did you like it [Azerbaijan]? You should have stayed, I would marry you.’ Now, I must interpret it so that, as she is leaving they are saying words, smiling to one another, so that she is not offended, and he is insisting ‘are you interpreting, are you saying [my words to her]?’

Aisha remembers interpreting that “‘he says if you liked the city you could stay here.’ But I had to omit the words ‘I would marry you.’” She stresses that “that person, who speaks the same language that I do, who is from the same culture with me, should have at least considered me.” She adds that “I had worked with them for several days and he should have valued my behavior…. I had tried to introduce our culture to both cultures in positive way.” She indicates that “such cases happen and I am not surprised by the example you described. And you did the right thing by saying to him that ‘I will interpret it.’” She goes on that sometimes
they [the speakers] would say, 'don't interpret this part, it is only for our group' and they start to say several sentences.... And if I don't interpret for the other side, the foreigner gets suspicious that 'what is it that they are talking about and you are not interpreting.' First of all, maybe they [the foreigners] employed you and demand hundred percent loyalty. That is why you find yourself in a desperate situation.

I confirm by nodding.

I ask what the interpreter may or may not do in the process of interpreting. Aisha describes:

in the process of conversation the interpreter may not add anything because her/his added thought can be perceived by the other party [listener(s)] as if this party [speaker(s)] says it.... And they [listener(s)] may start asking questions related to this comment, and the other party may say 'I did not say it, the interpreter made a mistake.'"

Aisha clarifies that “if it is necessary, the interpreter must say that ‘the interpreter wants to add’ [said in English] because ... you should mention that it is the interpreter’s words [all said in English].” Aisha mentions Roderick Jones’s (1998) article, Conference Interpreting Explained and says that there are “very useful practical questions and answers.” One of the questions is that “'if in her/his speech the speaker makes a mistake may the interpreter correct it?'” to which the author responds,

‘if she/he is 99 or 100 percent sure that she/he knows the right variant, and that the speaker made the mistake by accident, she/he gives it in the correct form; if she/he
has a little doubt she/he does not undertake the responsibility and says 'the speaker says' and then gives the translation.'

Aisha adds to this that

Otherwise, you, the interpreter must not be visible. There is a saying that 'a good interpreter is the one who is noticed only when she/he is not in the room.' When she/he is in the room, she/he must not be noticeable. It is very strange profession. You exist, you are there, but at the same time, you are invisible.

Having said this, Aisha reflects on the role an interpreter might take:

I have read that what if the interpreter could feel herself/himself in the place of the speaker, for example, if she/he is interpreting for the queen, why not say ‘I’ and feel herself in the place of the queen? And it is also mentioned that when you interpret using ‘I,’ the thought sounds more effective.

Aisha elaborates on note-taking during interpreting, which is not relevant to this study, and so I shift the topic back to the issue of the interpreter's invisibility: “I understand that … each profession has its requirements,” but then I mention the different perceptions of individuals. Aisha responds, “in other words, you take the thought through your own filter.” I add that “there must be distortion,” and she agrees, “no doubt.”

Pointing to the complexity of the interpreting situation, I observe that the interpreter deals with two languages. The first question that comes to mind is “do I understand the thought correctly?” and secondly, “do I express it understandably? Here the place of the interpreter comes to the surface.” Aisha agrees that “if the third party [the interpreter] is taking part she/he will use her/his own filter. The [participating] sides must understand
it.” She points out that “experienced people understand it.” On the other hand, Aisha says that “I have also observed that after working with them [client(s)] for several days, you start to think like they do…. Their problem is your problem; their pleasure is your pleasure.”

Aisha asks what we started from and I remind her “the interpreter’s role as a filter.” She pauses for a moment and continues, “the experienced individuals must know that the interpreter must somehow [make a contribution],” but she also asserts that “that distortion cannot be significant.” She explains that the interpreter plays “the role of mediator, language mediator in implementing a big project, and your responsibility is big.” She continues reminding me of the components of translator expertise that we had learned. As the first component she mentions, “the interpreter must know … the working languages, both active [into which the utterance is interpreted] and passive languages [the language in which the utterance is said];” the second component is that “the interpreter must know the subject she/he is interpreting,” and is the reason “why you [the interpreter] will not distort much.” So, Aisha advises that

before you go to interpreting…. you can find information on the Internet about the person you are going to work with, her/his activities, and if she/he is visiting an organization and/or a person. If you get information about the hosts, as well, you will feel yourself in the context, you will know what the thought, the conversation is about.

Aisha continues that the third component of translator expertise is “the techniques of translation; one must have interpreting technique, skills, and so on.” The fourth
component she calls attention to is “the one that has not been proven scientifically or theoretically ... the interpreter must have some [wider than ordinary person] worldview.” This worldview may include her/his musical education if she/he is taking guests to a ballet or a concert, knowledge of Latin if it is medical interpreting, and so on. Aisha also recommends that the interpreter “must be aware of what is happening in the international world and within the country,” for example reading the newspapers of “both the ruling party and the opposition, not because you are siding with either one, but because you must be aware of what processes are going on.” She concludes that “it always helps you, additional knowledge and worldview.”

I ask to go back to the issue of the interpreter’s professionalism and give an example from my experience of interpreting in seminars. I have interpreted mostly for journalists, camera-people, and video-editors. There were cases when, from the facial expressions of the seminar participants, I understood that they did not quite understand what the trainer said. I took the responsibility to ask the trainer to elaborate more on some issues because the participants did not seem to understand. In this case I emphasized my role as mediator, more than my role of interpreter. I add that “I was also a training coordinator, which might have added to it, and I wanted the participants to get as much as possible from these trainings.” Aisha reflects, “it depends on the agreement and cooperation, to what extent there is cooperation between the interpreter and the speaker.” However, Aisha also contends that “in any case, whatever you add you must inform the other side. It must be clear that it is not yours but the speaker’s thought or [vice versa].” She remembers her own experience when she interpreted in the field of economics about the
products of an organization: “By the end of the day, that person [the client] entrusted me with explaining [everything] myself… If this right is granted to you that’s okay.” But overall, “the interpreter’s mere role is to interpret what is said.” Aisha also adds that “the expression of the thought by the interpreter … must not take more time than the expression of the thought by the speaker herself/himself.”

I raise a question that if the speaker, seeing that I understand everything and can explain everything myself, gives me the right to explain it all myself “am I considered out of the status of an interpreter?” There is a little pause. I add, “Where is the line between my being an interpreter and doing additional work?” Aisha repeats that “whatever you add you must inform the speaker about it.” She hypothesizes an example when the interpreter has already interpreted from English “you can say to her/him in English that ‘I explained it this way, was I correct? Do you mind?’” She further reflects “Doubtless, if you are going to explain more than to interpret, then you are half interpreter, half coordinator, or half participant.” At this point, Aisha mentions several guidelines for communicative interpreting like “What should the person employing an interpreter expect from her/him?” or “Before the seminar starts the interpreter must be given an opportunity to introduce herself/himself. But have you ever encountered such a thing in an Azerbaijani setting?” I sadly smile and reply, “Only if the foreigners give the opportunity.”

She continues, “in our [Azerbaijani] environment, the invisibility of the interpreter finds itself a literal meaning,” that is the interpreter is totally ignored. Aisha suggests that the interpreter must introduce herself/himself and “say ‘my function in this seminar is
only to interpret; I am not a participant.” She goes on describing the specifics of communicative interpreting, or dialogue interpreting, where “the interpreter cannot prepare beforehand. If the speaker, the guest, asks a question, you never know what the members of the audience will answer,” then the speaker raises another question based on that answer. Thus, “the interpreter faces a situation she/he does not expect beforehand.”

Aisha shifts the topic to changes that have been made in the Azerbaijani educational system. I ask if the program includes any course teaching the cultures of the people speaking our working languages. Aisha says that these issues are included in the Basics of Professional Translation/Interpreting course. I shift the topic back to intercultural communication and how cultural differences can create tension. Aisha smiles and says that

such things will always happen…. Because I interpreted for the guests, when we say goodbye to one another, they stretch their hands as a sign of gratefulness and I have to respond. I also don’t like to shake hands, but I have to…. As long as there are different cultures [challenges] will exist. We may cover some issues here [in the University], but you can never predict what will happen in real life. You will see it all in your own experience….

I agree by nodding and Aisha provides another example from her experience, when a foreign woman

saw an Azerbaijani male, who shook hands with males when they visited the regions, but not with her. The other foreigner who had been here before said that ‘don’t take it negatively, they don’t stretch hands to females.’ I heard it.
Aisha continues and smiles, "The woman even joked 'but my hand remained in the air.' The other woman said that 'don't worry. You see even the interpreter does not greet [shake hands].’"

At this point another woman with whom Aisha had an appointment entered the room. Aisha brings the discussion to a close by observing that "You must create some balance [between two cultures, your own and the guest’s].” She advises that “By the end of the event, make sure that both the guest and our side recognize you as a bearer of Azerbaijani values and traditions.” Then she gives me her contact information, introduces me to the visitor, and the interview is finished.

3.4 Javid’s Conversational Interview

I first contacted Javid through friends who had worked with him. These friends were also co-researchers in this study and informed him briefly about the study. I e-mailed him confirming his willingness to take part in the study, and later sent him the Informed Consent Form. He signed it before the actual interview. He has interpreted from and to Arabic, English, Russian, and Azerbaijani. When I interviewed him he was working in UNHCR Azerbaijan, but he has since received a promotion and been transferred to Sudan.

I met with Javid in his office. I described the procedure and the subject of the study before we started. As we began I provided Javid with the same example of a cultural challenge that I provided to my previous co-researchers. As it turned out this example was one of the few instances in the interview when I was able to speak much. Javid elaborated on each of his examples, and spoke in long segments, which is natural taking
into consideration the scale of his experience. If there had been any distraction from the subject of the study I would have interrupted him and asked questions relevant to the study. However, all Javid’s examples were related to the subject, hence, there was little need for me as researcher and interviewer to intervene.

Javid starts the interview by saying that “the most interesting interpreting” he had been involved in was between the high ranking government officials and the high ranking diplomats from the United Nations, and “the most interesting ones were” when there were conflicts. Javid differentiates between the Western way of thinking, or Western style of approach to issues, and our Azerbaijani, “or rather Soviet” style of approach to issues. He thinks “many clashes stemmed from this.” Westerners are always more specific in the process, but Azerbaijani government officials’ answers are always vague.

They always avoid giving decisions independently and always keep some room that ‘I will ask for advice from higher instances,’ or she/he [the Azerbaijani official] thinks that ‘I should say something that will leave me reserve space.’

Javid also sees the difference in the educational and intelligence level of the members of the different cultures, “And in most cases, this influences the interpreting.” To clarify what he means I ask for an example. Javid describes an example from his own experience, “in the process of our work, in interviews with refugees, the difference between the attitudes towards notions becomes evident.” He says that there is a common belief that people seeking asylum in other countries are the members of some political opposition groups in their own countries. He remembers an interview where a refugee used words that [meant] “‘I have hid among mountains’ and so on, and his interviewer,
the foreigner for whom I interpreted," came to the conclusion that what this person – the
applicant – said was a lie "because in the area he [the applicant] lived, there was no
mountain." He had looked at the map. Later "it became clear that it was a
misunderstanding between the two people because the applicant was a Kurd from
Turkey" for whom even a hill 300-400 meters high is a mountain. The interviewer
himself was from Switzerland. For a person growing up in Alpine mountains 300-400
meters is not a mountain; for him it is a hill. Javid remembers other examples from the
time when he used to work in Sudan: "They would say a river. When I went and looked
at it I saw that it was a creek, something they would call the lake was a little pool,"
something they called a forest consisted of ten to fifteen trees. He concludes that
depending on each person’s living environment, "she/he formalizes a certain thought,
position regarding certain notions and that position ... does not overlap with the thought
of the members of the other culture." I go back to the example of mountain and ask Javid
whether or not he could describe that difference in perception on both sides and thus
avoid the misunderstanding because "you knew what that refugee meant." Javid says that
"As an interpreter I cannot distort what they say, I reply as they say."

Javid continues talking about challenges caused by the difference in communication
styles:

There is a correspondence between the Soviet and the Eastern mentality.... In the
East, people mostly use beautiful words as poetry, but with the purpose of avoiding
the subject. And if the Westerner does not comprehend it, then ... [in] most cases,
she/he is not satisfied with the response she/he gets from the interpreter and she/he can think that the interpreter is interpreting something not accurately.

He notes at the same time that when you interpret the Westerner’s very “sharp, specific words” to the Eastern person she/he “can feel herself/himself offended.” Javid admits that “in some cases, very rarely, as an interpreter I have had to soften the [Westerner’s] utterance a little bit.” But generally he contends “one should know the limit for softening [utterances].” He considers it

a very big mistake to always soften such an utterance … because the other person must be able to comprehend specifically the position expressed by the Westerner. The interpreter does not have the right to deprive her/him [the Azerbaijani or any other person] from this opportunity, this right.

Javid notes that from his experience, a lot depends on the context of the interpreting.

If it is an official meeting, or an interpreting through a TV broadcast, or a press conference, “it is impossible to give [additional] explanations.” He provides the example of simultaneous interpreting where “there is no time and opportunity for explanation.” Within the time limit the interpreter has, she/he has to express that meaning “as clear as possible.” He mentions that there are other contexts, where the two cooperating parties are negotiating. In these cases, “it is easier to give additional explanation.” Javid adds, “I think this additional explanation stems from the trust, that is, if this person trusts the interpreter, then she/he gives her/him the right to give additional explanation.” I nod to signal agreement with him.
Javid shifts to his experience in UNHCR where he has worked for eight years, and “only in the first four months out of eight years, I worked as an interpreter.” Then he was employed by the Legal Department. Because he has worked in that department since that time “I am closely aware of the legal issues” and he is comfortable speaking about them. He observes that he sees himself partly as a client for whom he is interpreting. His being the employee of the Legal Department “gives me the right, the opportunity to understand beforehand what the speakers mean.” According to Javid, “the interpreter’s superiority is the awareness of the subject matter. It is rare in case of professional interpreters.” He says he would never interpret on other subjects:

I don’t think I can do high-quality interpreting in an oil-related field. But the high quality, I can say this without any modesty, of my interpreting on issues related to asylum, to conditions of refugees, of internally displaced people is related to my working as a lawyer in this field.

That is why whenever Javid’s management “holds meetings with their partners, or government, or NGOs,” they express their thoughts “in a laconic way,” or in some cases, they let him “answer the questions myself without their interference.” In such cases Javid notes that the interpreter becomes a participant of the meeting more than an interpreter. Without any hesitation Javid continues that it is up to the interpreter and the client to determine the level of the interpreter’s interference. He assumes that if they “have been working with each other, have known each other for a long time” then it occurs naturally. “The interpreter must not feel uncomfortable to discuss” what the client expects her/him to do in certain situations, “because there are people who have a negative attitude towards
the interpreter’s interference.” However, “the interpreter should not interpret it as something negative towards her/himself, as distrust.” I smile sadly and say that sometimes this happens on an unconscious level.

Javid adds that having worked as both an interpreter and an interviewer in asylum hearings helps him to better understand the interpreter’s problems and challenges, “I know very well what the interviewer expects from the interpreting,” and from the interpreter. This awareness of the client’s perspective allows Javid to avoid “the standard interpreter’s mistakes, and if I start the interview and I have an interpreter, I explain in detail all these issues to the interpreter.” Without my asking what mistakes he is referring to, Javid elaborates that commonly interpreters try to interpret:

the person’s utterance immediately. In interpreting it is taught that… if you [the interpreter] don’t know the word, you must try to catch the meaning from the context and express the meaning. But in a conversation with a refugee this is not the right approach.

Javid suggests that in this context the interpreter should be provided with freedom to use a dictionary, to pause, and even to take breaks when tired, because for him, as the interviewer, what is most important is the interpreter’s

conveying to me what the applicant wants to say…. If the applicant uses simple words, I must hear simple words, if she/he uses complex words, I must hear complex words.

Javid insists that the interpreter must put aside the demonstration of her/his skills of interpreting with nice sentences and she/he “must interpret what that person says
immediately, as an automat, as a machine, as a robot.” I nod, trying to understand what he specifically means.

Javid continues with an example from his experience in Sudan: “there was a bright young man among our interpreters. He spoke five or six local dialects, languages” and he had higher education in his profession. “He always would use beautiful phrases, interpreted well.” Once during an interview with a refugee he did this standard mistake and “I explained to him, ‘you said a beautiful sentence to me in English, but he [the refugee] could not say this using these words in his dialect … because he has only two years of elementary education, but you have University education.” Javid had to explain to the interpreter that his words could confuse him and raise in him suspicion about the truthfulness of the refugee’s words. Javid contends that the requirements for interpreting in the refugee context differ from those in political, government meetings, meetings between organizations, and conferences: “Here the most important thing is accuracy.” Javid says that “the interpreter’s [fear that] ‘I felt embarrassed, made a mistake..., did not know a word’” is secondary. I smile, agreeing that some interpreters have that fear. Javid goes on “If you don’t know a word … it is a big mistake to replace it with other words, deceiving the interviewer, because it can have a direct impact on the applicant’s petition,” and he refers again to his example of different perceptions of “mountain” and “hill.” Javid says he believes that during an investigation of a foreign person who committed crime in the country, the same approach is being employed. In this case, the accuracy of the utterance and the words used are more significant.
But in official meetings, Javid says, “the approach it is completely different.” Here, the interpreter has the freedom to use “beautiful words.”

Without any pause, Javid returns to the earlier issue of one of the parties expressing her/his thoughts in a very sharp form: “the inexperienced interpreter hesitates to interpret the utterance accurately to the high ranking government official or to the diplomat, and thus, they [the interpreters] may soften the word.” Javid calls it “a mistake … because if the speaker said this word … the interpreter is not responsible for this word.” Javid continues with a specific example from his own experience when his former director had a meeting with the deputy prime minister:

After the meeting, my hair stood on end because I had said such words to both sides that [Javid raised his eyebrows and opened his eyes wide]. They were not my words, the parties were actually in those positions…. It was a difficult test, but still none of the parties reproached me later, and even if they had reproached me it would have indicated their being unprofessional.

Javid poses a rhetorical question: “What else?” and then continues himself. He describes another example of how sometimes Azerbaijani government officials “leave you without an answer by answering you with … a beautiful sentence.” Javid insists that the interpreter must remember that “both parties have more responsibility than the interpreter.” He notes that the professionals must have the competence to work with the interpreter and should not put the interpreter in difficult situations: “The interpreter does not have the right to solve the existing problem and cannot do this.” I completely agree with this statement and nod to him. Javid observes that “based on the other party’s
reaction," and "on the response they get," each party must be able to "judge how accurate or inaccurate the interpreting was."

Because Javid's examples are relevant to the subject of the study, I don't interrupt him. He continues to other issues related to challenges in the interpreting situation and remembers how he once interrupted the interpreter in the middle of a meeting and said that "the meeting cannot continue like this, it is useless, it is waste of our time." He asked the Ethiopian government official to stop the meeting at that moment and meet another time: "'I will bring another interpreter and we will continue.' In such cases the interpreters feel a lot of tension." Javid points to another issue that may cause tension. He says sometimes the foreigners ask to the interpreter to go with them to interpret, "and when the interpreter says, 'I am not ready,' they say, 'it is not a big deal, we will figure out something there.'" Javid believes that the interpreter "must insist" on not going because if she/he is not familiar with the subject and is really not ready, and if she/he is sure that if she/he goes there will be embarassment, she/he'd better not to go.

Javid goes on describing the effects such cases may have on the interpreter and again remembers Sudan: "there were people speaking Arabic, but in their own dialect." Javid knows Arabic, but not the dialect people were using there, "although I did understand some parts of his [the refugee's] utterance." In some cases, Javid "was able to notice the incorrect interpreting and would correct him [the interpreter]. After that, the quality of his interpreting decreased dramatically. The interpreter was at a loss." Javid had to stop the interview and "talked to him [the interpreter] for two minutes saying that 'everybody
makes mistakes, pull yourself together, it is not a big deal.’ It is also necessary to encourage [the interpreter].”

At this point Javid stops, which I interpret as a need for direction in the conversation. I describe a situation in which one side is less professional and speaks in a shallow manner, expecting me to interpret in a more diplomatic form. I ask Javid, “what should a professional interpreter do?” He suggests two approaches:

It is difficult for the beginner interpreter to say to somebody older than herself/himself or to a high ranking government official, or to the representative of the significant organization [to quit such speaking and to be specific]. In this case, she/he either should do what is expected and to interpret in a correct form, and after the first meeting approach that person and ask ‘please do not do this; otherwise, I will interpret what you say as you say it.’

As a second approach, he provides an example from his own experience when interpreting for his director and an Azerbaijani MP. The MP said something to Javid’s director as a joke and Javid says, “I turned to our MP and said to him in joke…, ‘should I interpret all that you said?’ He saw from my face that I could do that.” Javid says that by that time he had interpreted for four or five years, people from this sphere knew him, and “sometimes they knew my sharp temper, and that is why he [the Azerbaijani MP] said ‘Okay, okay, if you want official I will speak official,’ and after that the conversation was official.” Javid also notes that “not every interpreter dares [to do this].” I nod and smile sadly knowing from my own experience how true this is. Javid goes on, saying that the interpreter must be psychologically stable and says the word in Arabic and in Russian. He
suggests that the interpreter “must be ready in any situation, for any difficulty.”

Regarding possible difficulties, he talks about his interpreting for an Azerbaijani military instructor and a foreigner: “Our military instructor would say one sentence and three out of five words in that sentence were swearing words.” Javid says he understood what the instructor meant with those words in Russian, “but if I had interpreted it in English like that, there would either have been a fight there or my condition would have been hard.”

So, he “interpreted his words as I understood.” He adds that:

many of our interpreters had such difficulties in Afghanistan..., when drunken
Russian military instructors, while describing equipment or a weapon, were using
such words that the interpreter would change in color.... One must react depending on the situation.

Hence, Javid says, “a lot depends on the interpreter, but not everything.”

Considering this aspect exhausted, I shift to another aspect of the subject, the role of the interpreter’s gender in the challenges of interpreting. I relate some of my challenges as a female and the expectations of me as a female. I reflect, “Although I may sound biased, I tend to think that it is more difficult for female interpreters than for male interpreters.” I ask if he has had any difficulties because of being male. Javid says, “I would not say that it is more difficult for a female than for a male.” He asserts that there are situations when it is really more difficult for females than males, but there are such situations when it is vice versa. I nod and wait for a specific example. Javid describes a situation when the applicant was a female refugee: “she has faced some violence, maybe even sexual violence.... As some time has passed, she now can freely speak about it.” On
the other side he puts the male interpreter: “Now, imagine the male interpreter’s state.”

Javid says he was asking ordinary questions as an interviewer, she described how and when she was arrested, and the “interpreter interprets it all.” But Javid says when he asked

‘how did they treat you in the prison?’ The woman said four or five sentences one after the other, her facial expression also changed, she was sad…. The interpreter turned to me, he was very uncomfortable…, I asked what she said, and he said ‘she was tortured.’ I said, ‘she said five sentences and you say she was tortured? Can you interpret what five sentences she said?’ At that moment, the interpreter said that ‘I cannot interpret this, and please dismiss me from this interview.’ I said ‘okay.’

Javid adds that although before the interview each applicant is offered the choice between a male and a female interpreter, this woman said “‘it doesn’t matter for me.’ There were cases when males from Eastern countries belonging to sexual minorities said that ‘I don’t want a female interpreter.’” Javid reflects that in this particular case “the interpreter did the right thing” and they postponed the interview. He continues

the interpreter may think that the client will be offended, or will have a negative impression about her/him. A lot depends on the client, I would even say, more than on the interpreter. The client must create a climate with the interpreter that she/he does not abstain from being open, sincere with the client, because, actually, it is to the client’s own benefit, because … anything that can damage the quality of the work is the client’s problem.
Without any pause and interruption on my side, Javid remembers another example from his experience in Sudan related to the approach to the interpreter’s work. He talks about how he started to work in an Eritrean refugees’ camp in East Sudan. He says that as soon as he arrived he asked about the interpreters. There were five interpreters, two females, three males. He met with them to assess the level of their knowledge and skills. He observes that “I immediately understood that they were not ready for specifically this kind of interpreting, they would not give me what I need.” Javid remembers postponing all interviews for two days and training them “from A to Z.” He organized simulations of different situations and explained to them “what they were expected to do in certain situations. Although it probably was very useful for their future careers, it was more useful for me.” There were several camps and all interviewers were members of the Western world. Javid recalls that he was the only Muslim and the only person from the Soviet Union.

There was some Soviet style competition between the camps on who would complete the plan first. Because of this two day deferment our work in our camp was lagging behind. But in the next month we did almost twice as much work as in other camps. Why? Because in those two days we addressed for once all the problems they faced with their interpreters during each interview.

Javid concludes that when “employing an interpreter, before taking her/him to meetings…, one must explain to her/him the specifics of the work, the terminology, which fields she/he must be aware of.”
Without my prompting, Javid takes the topic to people who employ interpreters:

"Always the client herself/himself [should inform] the interpreter about the terminology, the specifics of the work, the client’s style." He notes that in most cases, "the interpreter gets information about this [the client’s] style indirectly." It is only after several meetings that "the interpreter understands what kind of person the client is..., when I [the interpreter] should and should not speak." However, Javid contends that

the high quality client, I think, should say it herself/himself first, for example, ‘I will or will not give you freedom, that is, interpret what I say accurately, I don’t like when you give additional explanations,’ and so on.

Javid recommends that if the client does not inform the interpreter beforehand, the interpreter should initiate the discussion of expectations:

she/he should ask the client ‘what do you expect from me, if there is an additional question do you want me to explain myself or should I ask you…?’ The reason I give these examples in the context of intercultural communication is because usually the interpreter and the client are from different cultures. Before the conversation between the two parties [of the meeting], there might already be problems between the interpreter and the client because they are the members of different cultures. If there are problems before the communication with another party, imagine what the other party receives, that is, it [what the other party receives] can be in distorted form. That is why the interpreter must initiate herself/himself.

I lead the conversation in the direction of focusing on the interpreter’s culture. I give an example of the type of cultural difference I have usually encountered: “as an Eastern,
or Muslim woman, or because of my national culture, I don’t like kissing with male
strangers.” I ask Javid if the interpreter should put aside all her/his “complexes or I would
say principles.” Javid argues that if the interpreter meets the client or the other party, who
is from a different culture, for the first time and either of them “makes hugging gesture or
stretches his hand, not to stretch a hand or not to respond to that can be assessed as bad
manners,” and showing one’s position in such a specific situation “is not appropriate.” He
recommends taking the client aside after the meeting and asking him:

‘please, it is uncomfortable for me, it is not a normal behavior for me, please, don’t
do it again.’ I think it is not good to create such a situation when all the parties are
present.

Javid admits that it is difficult for him to understand these issues, as he is not a female
and hence, “I respond if somebody wants to shake my hands, I will shake his hands so
strongly that his hands may even hurt a little.” But then he speaks about his challenges as
a male:

I don’t get the kissing on the cheek three times. I have some difficulty related to this.
The woman puts her face forward one time, two times, three times, and because in
some cultures it is two times, in some three, sometimes I draw my face back after the
second time. Or sometimes, I keep my face there for the third time, but she withdraws
her face after the second kiss…. It is impossible to prevent all such situations in
everyday work. Actually, it is the beauty of interpreting. Always there will be the
unexpected, strange moment.

I smile and nod.
Javid goes on with another example of cultural differences he has experienced with an Afghani male: “you know, every person has a personal circle, or distance [he shows it with his hands] and if somebody enters that circle, the person unconsciously sees it as danger.” He says he witnessed the difference in this “circle” between different cultures in his practice and that Afghanis have a smaller intimate circle than Azerbaijanis. Javid admits that “I feel uncomfortable if somebody approaches me closer than half a meter [2.5 feet].” He describes “an interesting situation,” when an Afghani stepped towards me and I unconsciously stepped back, he stepped towards me, and I stepped back. After three such steps, I was set against the wall, I stretched my hands forward, ‘wait a minute, why are you coming unto me?’ I thought it was this person’s bad manners…. After two or three times, I understood that it is characteristic to them [Afghanis]. I started to accept it as normal. But there are people, especially females, they do not accept it as normal.

Javid recommends having an object between oneself and the other person: “If I greet a person standing… from behind the desk I will keep the distance that I need, and women use this technique usually.”

I try to remember whether or not I have applied this technique. Meanwhile, Javid shifts to another topic:

Sometimes you see that, especially when high ranking people meet with one another, there is an attitude to the interpreter as if she/he is not there, as if the interpreter is a machine, equipment put aside to interpret. They neither greet her/him [the interpreter], nor look at her/him. Some people [interpreters] accept it as normal, but it
may have a negative impact on some [interpreters], it may immediately affect the
quality of translation of some interpreters.

Javid maintains that he does not “pay any attention to this. I don’t want to be rude, but if
she/he does not greet me, I won’t greet her/him at all. Overall, I lose nothing.” However,
he adds that “as I work in the same field people know one another, and I have not
encountered this problem for several years.” Javid also observes that when the interpreter
is young, “it is quite natural that the minister will not shake your hand, will not greet you
each time; that is why the interpreter must be morally ready for such cases.” I sigh
thinking how difficult such interpersonal situations can be.

Javid describes another example involving Afghans in hospitals when the interpreter
could not explain to the Afghans that they should cover themselves because
they have a tribe that believes that they breathe through their big toe, and that is why
they thought that if they covered their feet with a blanket they would stifle.... The
doctor thinks that the interpreter cannot explain, the Afghani thinks that the
interpreter does not understand.... There comes a moment when you just have to turn
to the doctor and explain that ‘Man, this is their tradition.’ That is why in some cases
you just have to give a briefing or explanation. It is unavoidable in critical situations.

At this point Javid pauses and I ask, “what do you think the interpreter is actually
doing in the interpreting situation?” Javid observes that most importantly the interpreter
must be able to accurately express the client’s words, that is she/he “must transfer the
message to the concept system of the other party, and at the same time must say that in
the style and tone intended by the speaker.” He adds that “the same word can be said in
different ways..., which may result in war or in peace.” He provides the example of his former director, who “spoke very well, used metaphors, he had poetic speech.” Javid observes that “the interpreters always encountered many difficulties with him [his speech].” Javid says that once he and his director went to the Minister of Internal Affairs regarding the registration of the Chechens. Although Javid went to that meeting as an interpreter, they found out that the Minister had invited another interpreter, who was one of the well-known interpreters in Azerbaijan. Javid’s director told him to take part, to which he agreed. He notes,

Our director said that ‘but there are ten thousand unregistered people in the city, imagine that you wake up and,’ he says it to the minister, ‘see that there are ten thousand unregistered people in your city.’ As soon as he said it, because the interpreter was not able to express the description as a metaphor, the Minister sprang to his feet. ‘What? 10 thousand people will come? When? Who are they?’ The Frenchman did not understand why he [the Minister] reacted that way; he did not understand what the Frenchman said. The interpreter had to explain to the minister that, ‘no, he wants to say that, imagine and so on.’ And on this side I had to explain to the Frenchman why he [the Minister] did not understand his [the Frenchman’s] thought.

Without pause, Javid goes on with another specific example from the same meeting: “our director said... ‘pull factor’ [said in English],” which is a term meaning the factor attracting refugees to the country. Javid also explains “push factor,” the factor pressing refugees out of the country. He continues with his example:
the interpreter [name omitted] did not understand it at all..., there were other expressions in the utterance like the complexity of the issue and so on.... The interpreter paused and thought how to say it, and said that ‘you know, the work with refugees is like a pool full of water.’ He understood ‘pull’ as ‘pool,’ and had to think of something out on the spot, and said a very beautiful sentence in Azerbaijani. He said it, but the meaning was distorted.

Javid points out that “I don’t blame the interpreter, but ... the more experience the interpreter gets, she/he thinks that she/he does not need briefing,” she/he may think that “I know everything, and if I don’t I’ll think something out.’ It affects the quality.” Javid concludes that “a lot depends on the context. Specifically in our work [interviews with refugees]... accuracy is important.” He provides an example when

I ask a question, the person answers, fifteen minutes later I ask the same question, I have my own purpose, and the interpreter turns and says that she/he [the refugee] has already answered this question. ‘Hey interpreter, did I ask you what she/he said or did not say?’

He reflects on “why does this situation happen?” and explains the reason as not having a briefing with the interpreter beforehand, or if the client is not professional, “the interpreter did not ask for a briefing herself/himself.... I blame both sides.” Javid adds that “in this specific case, the interpreter was told about it, but she/he could not get used to this regime of work.”

I see no need to interrupt, and Javid goes on to describe other possible difficulties in interpreting, as when the interpreting takes place at a dinner table. He admits that “for me
as a person who has interpreted on the subject of refugees and internally displaced people, it is very difficult to interpret about Azerbaijani cuisine.” When Javid said to the government official that he could not interpret what he said, “they started to explain it to one another with gestures that indicated ‘you take it like this and eat it.’” Javid remembers that once during dinner I had been interpreting for an hour and a half about subjects I was not used to and I was very tired…. I was hungry and wanted to eat. And very nice meals were coming in front of me and going away because I did not shut my mouth for a moment. When one of the speakers speaks, the other listens, there is no problem for them, they eat at ease. The interpreter has that difficulty; you cannot drink a sip of water…. That is why I always avoid dinner interpreting…. Javid suddenly compares interpreting with chess, observing that one must be able to analyze her/his mistake like in chess…. Even the strongest players lose, but after losing, if you don’t learn from that mistake you will lose again the same way. As an interpreter, after every mistake, every challenge in each specific example, you must come to a conclusion for yourself…. I have not had a good breakfast this morning, I did not sleep well last night, I am tired overall, I am distracted and I cannot collect my thoughts, each of these has its training. One can develop them, as well.

After a pause Javid suggests describing one more example and I smile and agree by nodding. He speaks about how he was charged to interpret for the chairperson of the State Refugee Committee in a conference. He was informed about it only three days before the
conference and in that period, “I could not get any information about what this person was going to say.” The only information Javid could obtain was that the chairperson’s speech was on the implementation of the presidential decree. The deputy of the chairperson assured Javid that “you know it by heart.” Javid admits taking part in the preparation of that decree, “that is why I was aware of the conceptual issues. In that case I said ‘fine, I’ll think something out there on the spot.’” However, Javid observes that although he did not expect the speaker to “say anything, Oh, when he started, numbers, [the names of] the camps, and so on, it was ridiculous!” and he smiles: “I saw that the quality was not like I wanted.” He explains his main challenge as the mentioning of many numbers. But Javid also “had to skip a sentence because I was hardly in time. He [the speaker] leaned forward and looked at me, and I said ‘what can I do?’” and he raises his hands open. He was not able to write it down. Hence, he concludes that “the interpreter must be provided with all the numbers, dates, names, their pronunciations and so on.”

Javid pauses, smiles and says, “I spoke chaotically,” which I immediately negate. He adds, “I have an advantage over other interpreters, I know very well the discussed subject, sometimes even better than the speaker does,” and he mentions how sometimes our director is not aware of the details of the issue. But it is discussed in our department many times. That is why it is easy for me to express the thought quickly and accurately [he emphasizes and repeats the word ‘accurately’]. He adds that the people using interpreting services “have high expectations for you as an interpreter. Plus you must be partially aware of everything.” I agree with him.
Javid continues discussing the skills of the interpreter. Then, he asks me if I want to build my career as an interpreter. I say how interested I am in oral translation, and in consecutive interpreting more than simultaneous interpreting. Javid observes that "simultaneous interpreting is impossible," and explicates that "each language has its structure, Azerbaijani language has an absolutely different structure [than English]. Generally to simultaneously interpret Turkic languages is a torture" because in these languages the verb comes at the end, whereas in English it is in the beginning. "I don’t know if you will say ‘hate’ or ‘love,’ I have to adjust my intonation, my tone, to what you are saying.” Hence, the interpreter has to “wait until you finish the sentence.” However, Javid compares Russian and English and assumes that in simultaneous interpreting between these two languages “there is no problem.” I agree and say that their sentence structure is very close and all the interpreter has to do is to replace the words in English with the ones in Russian or vice versa. He concludes, that is why when somebody says that she/he is a simultaneous interpreter working with Azerbaijani, I say ‘you say a lie, you either omit something, or you make mistakes, or the quality is very low.’

I share my recent observation of interpreting between Turkish and English in the opening ceremony of a new pipeline: “I noticed how tense the interpreter was. She had to wait till the end of the sentence and then immediately interpret the utterance before the next sentence started so that she could hear it.” Javid notes that the complexity and low quality of the simultaneous interpreting is the reason why people prefer to use consecutive interpreting in conferences and events. He mentions an Azerbaijani official
who has worked with interpreters: “he says an utterance and waits for the interpreter. Why? Because … what he needs is to get the message across….” I mention my bias towards Azerbaijani clients. In my experience, the Azerbaijani side generally either lacked the competence in working with interpreters, or did not respect the interpreters. But Javid does not agree:

It depends on the person. I have seen so many jerk foreigners. I have worked with foreigners from different cultures. You cannot say that, the English is cold-blooded, the French is expressive, the Italian loses temper easily, the Arab, it is difficult to understand her/him…. I don’t like to divide members of cultures. I know two types of clients: either she/he is professional, or she/he is not….

I cannot disagree with this statement.

Javid continues to speak about the significant role the interpreter plays. He compares two cases of interpreting from his experience. In the first case, “The representative of the migration organization had such a beautiful speech…, the interpreter turned it to a disgrace.” In the second case, it was “the speech of our director,” which “was a shame, but because I am a lawyer I presented his speech in an organized form.” Javid recalls after the event receiving comments like “what a smart director you have. I said ‘it was not the director, it was me.’” Hence, Javid states again that “the interpreter has importance, but not everything depends on the interpreter.” We started to discuss interpreting as a career and how much it takes to be a neutral interpreter. He jokes about a common friend, who is an interpreter. The conversation gets further away from the
subject of the study and I understand that the conversation is over. After discussing some issues unrelated to the study, I thank him and switch off the recorder.

3.5 Fatima's Conversational Interview

Fatima is the most humorous of my friends, which made the interview process a little challenging in terms of focusing on the subject of the study. Like my other friends interviewed previously, Fatima also has strong Azerbaijani culture in her identity, but recently she has emphasized her Islamic culture more and more. Last year she began to wear a veil. I share certain characteristics with each of my friends and with Fatima it is the sense of humor and involvement in activities. She has worked as an interpreter almost entirely in the refugee context under UNHCR.

From the start of the conversation Fatima starts to joke about the recorder and mimics officials granting interviews to journalists. I ask her to leave the recorder alone and to focus on the subject of the study and get serious. Although I had sent the Informed Consent Form to Fatima via e-mail, I overview the process and the subject of the study with her before the conversation, and make sure she does not have any questions. She interrupts me with her mimics, and I start giggling and ask her to let me finish the introduction of the subject. I ask her about her experience as an interpreter. Fatima says that “in oral translation I started to work since 2003 August... [she uses Arabic words to jokingly make it sound eloquent], but since 2004 February, I have been working in UNHCR.” I ask her about the challenges related to the cultural differences between the interpreter and the client. She says, “there were [some], for example in UNHCR, there was an American, I will not say his name,” she giggles that if he finds out he will kill her,
he was using swear words a lot [here she frowns], after every couple of words he had an F bomb. It was embarrassing me because my ears are not used to these words [uses eloquent intonation and smiles].

She makes a long pause. I ask her for another example, she thinks for a while, and says, “I don’t have another example.” In order to clarify I give an example I gave in previous conversations about kissing as a greeting with male strangers, and point out to her that I am interested even in the smallest clashes between cultures; it does not need to be necessarily a huge conflict or fighting. She jokes that “I did not have any physical challenges,” to which I reply, “you made it sound like harassment,” and we both laugh.

She ponders and says that there were also cases, when

in the conversation between the client and the interpreted person, I was caught in the middle and had to interpret. For example, there was an impotent man, they were speaking about his problem, and I felt very uncomfortable because [we never discuss] such things

and she smiles. I ask her for another example, and she replies “get off my back.” We both start laughing. I try to give her a displeased look, but can’t stop laughing. I shake my head. She says, “I can’t remember,” and I ask her to think. She jokes, “imagine we spend all day here [thinking and trying to remember].” Reflecting that the challenges she had were mostly related to emotional issues discussed she notes that she “felt uncomfortable.”

In terms of cultural differences, she adds,
Once ... it was an Afghani, there was something between him and a girl and the girl became pregnant.... Those conversations also make you feel uncomfortable – what happened, how it happened – sometimes one has to speak in details.

I ask Fatima if she encountered any difficulties because of the ignorance of one or the other side about the culture of the other party. She indicates that in her experience, people with whom she has worked

always were aware of the culture of the person in front of them..., and the other person [a refugee] had a general stereotype that they [the interviewers] are Americans... not in details, but still the client behaved knowing her/his [the interviewee’s] culture, that is why there was not a problem.... The moments I hate most [are when] you see that the one on this side is shouting, roaring, and speaking very rudely. I don’t know to which degree I am right, whether or not the interpreter can do it. I convey it in milder form.

She also adds that “the interpreter feels whether this aggressiveness stems from the temper of the client or ... from the situation.” Fatima suggests that if the aggressiveness “stems from the situation you interpret it the same way, but ... if it is related only to one side [her/his temper], then you give it in milder form.” She adds,

It depends on the client, for example, sometimes she/he says that ‘I lose temper easily and so on, but don’t take it to yourself, I don’t say it to you, because it is [communicated] through you [as an interpreter] don’t take it to yourself.’ They warn like this.

I ask for an example of such a conversation and Fatima notes,
for example, she/he [the client] says ‘listen, calm down, I’ll ask you a question and you will answer, no need to speak lengthily,’ … and I interpret ‘we must speak a little briefly, let’s not speak lengthily’ and so on, in milder form.

I give an example of a situation when I had to warn the client about the cultural differences, however, Fatima says, “it was vice versa in my experience” and she smiles.

The client has always warned me. There are other interpreters in the office who know the differences better than I do, the client asks for advice from them. Or Jacob [name changed] knows Chechens better. They have advised me always.

In the midst of the joking I shift the topic to another context, the presidential elections where I know she interpreted, as well. She remembers she worked for a Serbian who spoke English. She says that although

he was aware [of our culture]… there were some differences, for example, they [the hosts of the house where Fatima and her client stayed] put kebab in front of us. He got confused and said, ‘What is this?’ and I explained that ‘it is a sign of hospitality..., it is normal.’

I remember that during the presidential elections “both sides, ruling party and opposition were very emotional,” and ask her “were there any aggressive conflicts between the representative from OSCE and our representatives and what did you do in such cases?” She notes that,

There were. I remember there was one confidential room, we sneaked there, although, the people there were the provocateurs [the members of the ruling party], they were … making changes. Then, I considered myself on the side of the expert…. We both
sat there and I was thinking that I am the local and he is the foreigner.... At that moment, I isolated myself from the Azerbaijanis, from those in that room ... and they wouldn’t see me as an Azerbaijani.... I was absolutely loyal to the client.

Fatima adds, “there was verbal argument, and I interpreted everything as they said [aggressively] because I was on the side of opposition,” and she smiles, “I was using the same aggressiveness, because the situation was like that I was doing the right thing!” She observes that our people would still think that Fatima is on their side and would work for their interest:

they would say, for example, ‘say it like this or like that’ ... if it was not correct, they would say ‘say that it will be improved or it should be like this, it is not incorrect’

they wanted me to deal with it.

I asked “did you,” and she smiled “I would do the opposite.” I ask whether or not Fatima said to Azerbaijanis that she was doing the opposite, to which she replies,

no, I did not, I was saying the reality. When I saw the lie, depending on the situation, [for example] I would say that ‘according to what I see it is 200, but they say 300.’

I confirm my understanding of the stance Fatima was taking by asserting, “you get involved.” She agrees and notes,

I don’t believe [in the possibility of not being involved]. My academic paper was on cultural issues in interpreting for refugees.... You convey what you have to convey, but also add your opinion. You don’t mix your opinion with what you have to convey...., you say what she/he [the client] needs to receive, to know, and then you
express your opinion…. I was repeatedly, almost always, asked ‘what is your opinion?’ … I worked with Azerbaijanis as clients and they also asked my thoughts. She describes the refugee context: “I interpret and the client asks ‘what did you feel, is it like this or that [whether the interviewee says the truth or lies]?’ … because she/he [the client] cannot feel it her/himself.” Then, she describes interpreting a dialogue between an Azerbaijani and a German. She remembers that the Azerbaijani “client asked me ‘how do you think it went; what impressions did we leave on the guest?’” She continues that the interpreter’s role

depends on the context … the field I am working at is such a field that I must have my own opinion…. Maybe in some contexts invisibility is [does not know what to say]…. I personally think that … the invisibility – I don’t agree with it. Maybe I don’t agree with it because of the context I was writing about [in her academic paper], because I was writing in the context of granting refugee status, and did not take a wider perspective. In that context, the conclusion was that the interpreter has her/his own place in that triangle, and when necessary must [she nonverbally shows what I understand to be boxing].

I shift the topic back to the first example of interpreting the conversation when the refugee was describing being impotent, wherein the interpreter felt uncomfortable. I ask Fatima if she made the parties aware of her discomfort, and generally, whether the interpreter must negotiate such cultural issues with the client. Fatima says that she interpreted the conversation and did not allow either side to see her discomfort. She adds, “But then, because I regularly communicated with the client, [in one of our
conversations] I told him that 'in this kind of conversations [pause] I get uncomfortable.'” She also admits that “I felt the context itself was tense” and “the client himself got confused and didn’t say anything” because “the refugee asked ‘what would you do if your brother had such a problem?’ It was very difficult to interpret that sentence to him [the client].” She says that to an observer it may not look difficult, “but it was very difficult to interpret.” Nonetheless, “I interpreted it…. I told him that it is difficult to interpret such things, but I did not mean that it should never happen.” She refers back to the client with swear words and indicates telling him, “it is better if such things don’t happen again, I can’t take it.”” She wraps up the interview with,

there are such things that even if it is not comfortable to you, you still must interpret…. Actually, the quality of the interpreter shows itself in such situations….But if it is going to have a negative impact on the quality of the interpreting, then it is better if she/he [the interpreter] leaves.

At this point, Fatima started to joke again. Feeling that the conversation has provided a great deal of useful insight, I closed our conversation by thanking her in our own manner, joking.

3.6 Abdullah’s Conversational Interview

Abdullah and I obtained both our Bachelor’s and our Master’s degrees from the same University in the same years. In our Master’s program we took the same classes. When I was looking for co-researchers, Khadijah advised me to contact Abdullah because they had worked together. I contacted Abdullah after I returned to Azerbaijan, he agreed to participate in the study, and we scheduled a time, agreeing to meet at our University. He
came from work and had a friend with him. Abdullah asked whether his friend could sit
with us during our conversation, and I did not see any problem. Throughout the
conversation his friend was quiet, though at times would react nonverbally. When we
smiled, he joined us.

I had explained the subject of the study briefly over the phone. As the conversation
begins I give Abdullah the Informed Consent Form. He reads and signs it. I ask if he has
any questions regarding the procedure and the conversational interview in particular. He
shakes his head. I describe my study and purpose of the interviews more fully, and I
emphasize that I am interested in my co-researchers’ lived experiences of cultural
challenges. To help him better understand what kind of information I need, I give the
example of kissing as part of greeting during my seminar interpreting, the same example
I provided to other co-researchers. I ask Abdullah whether he has had such difficulties
with a client. He replies, “Because I am a male, I don’t know whether I should greet a
female, how to greet them, and whether or not to greet them.” He adds that he had not
had any problems in terms of kissing: “I don’t have the intention to kiss them, and when
they see that I don’t approach them, I don’t lean forward,” they understand. Observing
the pause after his words, I ask if he had difficulty in interpreting “when the speaker says
something that is contradicting your culture.” He observes that there have been such
cases in his experience: “You know yourself that the Americans call one another ‘dog’ or
‘puppet’ instead of ‘friend’ [to show friendship].…. Although it is acceptable for them, it
is not acceptable for us.” Abdullah remembers a case when
an American said that ‘you are like an old military horse’ [said in English] [to an
Azerbaijani], when you translate it to Azerbaijani [he gives the literal translation]....
[in English] It means that ‘you are a very conservative person, you don’t agree with
anything.’ I said [to the client] ‘if I interpret it literally it will sound incorrect,’ ... but
she/he said, ‘no interpret it [literally].’ I interpreted..., then the person to whom I
interpreted it approached to me and said that ‘tell her/him that the Azerbaijanis don’t
like it when they are addressed with animal names.’

Abdullah adds that he mostly interprets for Americans, and when he interprets, “I give
some introduction and tell them ‘don’t address people with animal names.’”

I ask for other examples and Abdullah says that “the translation of jokes is very
challenging,” and the Americans themselves are aware of the fact that jokes are the most
difficult to interpret because something “funny for them” can be “not funny for us. That
is why I advise foreigners not to use jokes or to decrease them to a minimum.” As
another option, Abdullah notes speaking “with foreigners beforehand about what jokes
they are going to use, [because] something that is a joke for them can sound offensive to
us.” He also mentions that it is difficult to interpret poems, as well, and remembers:

There were cases when [the speaker] said a poem in English and I myself did not
understand its meaning. In that case, I said ‘I cannot explain it, explain to me
generally what it is about. I won’t be able to interpret it as a poem.’

He summarizes that jokes, poems, and using animal names “are difficult to interpret,” and
adds to them, “the slogans.... Once, one [American] told me a slogan of a state, and when
I said it to the other person she/he did not understand.”
Sensing a digression towards the linguistic aspects of interpreting, I raise the issue of culturally difficult situations. I point out the interaction between the interpreter and the client who is from another culture. Abdullah pauses for a while and then observes that: “Before, these cultural issues seemed difficult to me. But the more I work with them [the foreigners], I get used to them [the issues], I Americanize, I ‘foreignize’.” I ask if he thinks that he has adapted to that culture and thus, does not feel the difference. He agrees that “I have adapted. It is difficult to sense it [the difference]. For example, our people say that, ‘tell her/him not to do so,’ but for me there is not a problem with the client.” But Abdullah remembers that sometimes, for example, they speak about their wives, or it is better to say spouses, about their [their spouses’] former boyfriends [not favored in Azerbaijani and Islamic culture]. And sometimes they ask me about it. It does not happen during the interpreting; it usually takes place when we meet before or after the interpreting....

When we talk they say that their daughters already have boyfriends, for example. I ask whether or not it seems strange to him. He notes, “no longer. Before, it seemed very bizarre when they talked about their spouses’ ex-boyfriends.” But Abdullah explains to foreigners that this is “not acceptable in our culture, and I ask ‘do you want me to interpret it or no?’ For example, if she/he says ‘yes’ I interpret, if ‘no,’ then I don’t.”

I ask Abdullah to concentrate on giving advice by asking “do you give advice to anyone, even the person you are working with for the first time, or only to those with whom you have regularly worked?” He responds “to any person.” Having mentioned that he usually does not have regular clients, Abdullah continues that “When they say
something... I tell her/him that it is not acceptable in our culture,” or “it is a swear word for us, and I advise her/him to express her/his thought differently.” Mentioning that we have come to a disputable issue, I ask Abdullah for his personal view on whether providing an introduction to another culture is included in the interpreter’s responsibility or function. He replies, “Yes, based on my experience, I say yes. Why? Because there is no one to inform the client about these issues beforehand.” He says he would expect the same if he went to the USA: “the interpreter must know that I am unaware of that country’s culture and if I say something [she/he must let me know if it is wrong].” Abdullah also points out that sometimes the client “says to me that ‘if I say something that may sound offensive in Azerbaijani, don’t interpret it, let me know, I’ll change it a little.’”

I take the topic back to the issue of adapting to another culture’s customs. I express my opinion that it is better for the interpreter to work with the members of one and the same culture because then they become more and more aware of that culture. I reflect, “you say you work with Americans and you adapt to their culture. You start to accept what they say. When you interpret you must consider also the other culture.” I ask Abdullah if it is difficult for him to be on both sides. He agrees that...

It is a little difficult.... I try to adjust it to Azerbaijani culture.... It is difficult to think of an example right now, but it is difficult to adapt their culture to Azerbaijani culture.

Abdullah goes back to the example where members of American culture freely speak about their spouses. He adds to this, “But it seems to me that the Azerbaijanis have gotten
used to it, now they understand.” I nod and specify that it is mostly those in the capital who are used to it. He agrees. Abdullah remembers that “in the regions when the foreigner wore shorts..., I advised him that ‘people there [are not used to it],’ as you know, it draws their attention and they stare at you.” I smile and add, “They point to you.” Abdullah continues, “When I walk with foreigners in the regions, everybody turns and looks at us.” We both smile.

I go back to the responsibilities of an interpreter and ask Abdullah what responsibilities he undertakes. He replies, “basically, to deliver the meaning of what the client … has said. It is not vital to interpret it as she/he said; the most important is to deliver the meaning.” He adds that,

I think the interpreter is a means for communication and the interpreter must interpret not only the meaning, but also the gestures, the emotions of the speaker. And, of course, we must adjust it to our culture to a certain extent. For example, she/he may say a word loudly. If we say it loudly that will sound inappropriate or rude. That is why, considering all these, she/he [the interpreter] must interpret the emotions as well.

In terms of creating communication, I wonder if Abdullah has had any problems with the Azerbaijani side of the interpreting situation. He observes that “very big problems occur” with Azerbaijanis because “Azerbaijanis, you probably know yourself, start to use certain words and then they say, ‘don’t interpret it.’” I agree with him by nodding. He continues with a specific example
when Americans speak about their experience, Azerbaijanis say that ‘our experience is better than theirs...’ and they finish the utterance saying that ‘don’t interpret it.’ And the foreigner looks at me waiting for the translation. The biggest challenge occurs here. Now I must ... interpret it not as that person said, but in milder form. For example, when they [Azerbaijanis] say that ‘they don’t know anything, we have wider view, they concentrate only on one field,’ I interpret that ‘the difference between your system and ours is that you concentrate only on one sphere, but we encompass several fields.’ I give it in milder form only if the Azerbaijani does not intend to offend her/him [the foreigner]. If she/he [Azerbaijani] intends to offend her/him [the foreigner], if she/he does it deliberately, then I interpret it as she/he said it.

However, in Abdullah’s experience, “in most cases the Azerbaijanis say it as joking, or making fun, but they don’t want her/him [the foreigner] to know it,” and they ask the interpreter not to interpret what they said. In that case, Abdullah admits that “I explain it in a milder form.”

I note that I have had the same problems, and that “I have had to explain to them [the Azerbaijanis] that I must interpret what they say.” I ask if he has had the same experience. He replies that “not with Azerbaijanis because I don’t believe it will influence them.” Abdullah also emphasizes the class of the people for whom he interprets and remembers, “once we were interpreting for the employees of the highway police patrol, those who suppress demonstrators during demonstrations.” He identifies them as “low class,” hence,
they used swear words a lot. The Americans understood that they were swearing and demanded me to interpret what they were saying. I told them [the policemen] a couple of times that ‘she/he [the client] wants me to interpret what you say and I won’t be able to replace it with other words,’ but they did not care and continued [using swear words].... The American was insisting that I interpret everything. In that case, I interpreted the swear words. Next time when they used swear words, the foreigner asked what they said, and I asked ‘do you want me to interpret again what they said?’ She/he understood and said ‘No.’

I describe the speech style of Azerbaijanis as close to an Eastern style and as eloquent, whereas Westerners are more specific. I ask if he has had difficulty in interpreting between these two styles of speech. He observes,

Usually in such cases I interpret as she/he said, and then briefly give the meaning, because if I interpret it as a brief sentence the American will dispute that ‘she/he spoke so much.... Why did you interpret only one sentence?’

He admits that he does not know why Azerbaijanis speak that way,

maybe they want to show off; ... when they speak unofficially the meaning is clear, but when they present information to somebody, when they speak to foreigners, they end up with irrelevant issues.

I add my opinion that “it is characteristic to Azerbaijani culture” and I have observed it mostly with journalists when they try to use a lot of words as if to show their knowledge.

Sensing that the conversation is getting less productive, I think for awhile what else to ask and present Abdullah a question about conflict between the client and the other party,
or other extreme cases. Abdullah says that most cases he has experienced have been arguments, but remembers that

There was one case. The speaker was from Scotland and had visited Armenia before he came to Azerbaijan. He was speaking against Azerbaijan’s interests… and the Azerbaijani did not agree with him. In this case there was some tension…. But then the Azerbaijani understood, and told me that, ‘they [Armenians] have brainwashed him, it is meaningless to speak with him.’

I solicit Abdullah’s position in this argument, and he says, “to interpret.” I ask if the subject matter influenced him, to which he replies, “it influenced me, but not my interpreting,” although Abdullah felt strong annoyance with what the person said and was “ready to argue with him, to prove him wrong with facts and so on, but still I tried to only interpret and I interpreted what he said [as he said it].”

Considering this aspect exhausted, I shift the topic to the difference between females and males in Azerbaijani society and how it influences the interpreting situation. I compare the attitude toward the different sexes in our culture with other cultures and ask if Abdullah has interpreted between different sexes from different cultures. Although he has done so, he says, “I mostly interpreted for people from the capital city, and they have already gotten used to it [to Western culture].” He mentions Azerbaijani women being more aware of their rights than women in the regions and concludes that “I think because Azerbaijan is being Westernized there are not such difficulties in Azerbaijan.”

I ask Abdullah in what contexts he has generally interpreted and how many years of experience he has. He responds “mostly on defense and military related subjects,” and
that he has worked as interpreter for about five years “since 4th year [bachelor’s degree program].” Although Abdullah mentions that “I wish I had not started to work so early... because I miss University” life now, he also adds that “I did not learn much at University..., I learned mostly through experience.” I ask about what the University curriculum lacked. He emphasizes the language courses, and we continue to discuss the education system and the courses we had. For me this is the sign that the conversation needs closure. After discussing what kind of changes we would like to have in our University, I thank him for his time and help, and turn off the recorder.
Chapter 4

Human Science Research Analysis

My own experience as an interpreter was a starting point for this research, for each conversational interview, and for the analysis. I brought my own meanings for the intercultural challenges faced in interpreting, but was also open to the co-researchers’ meanings, hoping that they would help me better understand intercultural communication in the interpreting situation. In the thematic analysis of the conversations with the co-researchers, four broad themes emerged regarding the challenges arising from intercultural communication in the interpreting setting: 1) “the interpreter is not a robot,” 2) “the interpreter has her/his sex, religion, and culture,” 3) “the interpreter is between two cultures,” and 4) “it depends on the situation.” Each theme underlies a variety of specific experiences of challenges the co-researchers encounter when they are interpreting. All four themes are intertwined, so that there is no clear line between them.

4.1 Theme One: “The interpreter is not a robot”

In the conversations with all six co-researchers, the issue of the interpreter’s supposed invisibility emerged as topic. Under the rule of invisibility that is taught to most interpreters, the interpreter is required to stay unnoticed, neutral, and to not interfere in any way. Being invisible and neutral is seen among scholars in translation studies as one of the criteria for professional interpreting. Some of the co-researchers contend that invisibility is assumed to be one of the requirements of the profession. Aisha mentions that “a good interpreter is the one who is noticed only when she/he is not in the room.” There is a point in the conversation with Khadijah when she mentions being an “audio
recorder.” When she does not know the terminology of the subject being discussed and is not sufficiently aware of the subject itself, she tries to interpret literally and is amazed how both parties understand what she is interpreting because she sometimes does not understand the utterance herself. In effect, the assumption of invisibility implies that the interpreter operates as a translating machine, or “robot,” or “audio recorder.”

However, all the co-researchers mention either directly, or describing their experiences, the impossibility of staying invisible. Banu argues that “the interpreter is not a robot” and “it is not right to be a robot.” The interpreter has to make decisions on the spot while communicating each party’s messages. She also emphasizes that her professionalism cannot interfere with who she is. The violation of the expectation for the interpreter’s invisibility is evident at various levels. At a fairly basic level, the interpreter stops being invisible when she/he separates herself/himself from the negotiating parties. When the speaker says something the interpreter does not agree with, Banu says she changes to speaking from the third person singular, as in “she says or he says;” or, according to Aisha, if the speaker makes a mistake and the interpreter suspects that it is a mistake, then she/he may use the third person singular to emphasize that it is the speaker who says so, not the interpreter. Aisha mentions a suggestion from Jones’s (1998) article Conference Interpreting Explained in response to the question of, “if in her/his speech the speaker makes a mistake may the interpreter correct it?”:

‘if she/he is 99 or 100 percent sure that she/he knows the right variant, and that the speaker made the mistake by accident, she/he gives it in the correct form; if she/he
has a little doubt she/he does not undertake the responsibility and says 'the speaker says’ and then gives the translation.

Can a robot make this decision and change to the utterance? If the interpreter corrects the utterances is she/he still invisible?

More explicit violations of the principle of invisibility arise with regard to the interpreter’s supposed neutrality and/or non-interference. Although Aisha, Abdullah, Khadijah, and Banu all mention the necessity of being neutral, through their examples and my experience it is obvious that the interpreter may consciously or unconsciously interfere. Banu remembers a case when an Azerbaijani female journalist asked a foreign lady about women in Islam, and in asking the question labeled them as “slaves” and as “secondary.” Being a Muslim female herself, Banu immediately reacted, “in this case I could not stay indifferent.” Banu said to the Azerbaijani journalist “have you seen a slave woman? Women have equal rights with men.” Banu interpreted this part of the utterance as “surely a Muslim woman differs from a Western woman.” Banu reflects that “I generalized it like this because what she said was absolutely wrong.”

Aisha was asked to interpret in the negotiation process between a foreign country and Azerbaijan on financial resources coming to Azerbaijan. Understanding the importance of this process, Aisha decided to interpret the Azerbaijani side’s rather rude and sharp words in a milder form. She believes that “the interpreter’s role is to create communication between cultures … not to disturb it,” thus, she tried to mediate this process. Can such a role be ignored? Can a person playing this role be invisible?
Being invisible or being a robot also implies the absence of the interpreter’s influence on the communication. However, in my own experience, and in the experience of all my co-researchers, the interpreter’s role is vital in establishing the climate of the interpreting situation. Javid did not hesitate to show his character to an Azerbaijani official, when the latter was making fun of Javid’s client. After Javid’s serious question, “Do you want me to interpret it all?” the Azerbaijani official gave up and started to speak on an official level. Javid also observes that inexperienced interpreters might not dare to do this.

Banu, Javid, and Fatima all mention that in the refugee context the interpreter can never be considered invisible. Although at one point in his interview, Javid mentions that the interpreter must interpret “as an automat, as a machine, as a robot,” he also mentions that depending on the situation the interpreter can be entrusted to explain, elaborate, or even answer the question herself/himself. Fatima observes that she has constantly been asked for her opinion as an interpreter. All three of these co-researchers work in the same organization, UNHCR; however, Banu covers a wider range of contexts for interpreting. In our conversation she mentions that “my character shows itself during the interpreting.” My co-researchers are ambivalent regarding the expectation of the profession that the interpreter will be invisible, because in their actual experience they see themselves becoming visible to a certain extent. One of the reasons for breaking the rule of invisibility is the interpreter’s own personal culture.

4.2 Theme Two: “The interpreter has her/his sex, religion, and culture”

In this study, “culture” has been defined as “the set of overlaps in perceptions and meanings that a group of interacting individuals conjointly co-constitutes within the
network of people with whom they regularly interact” (Arundale, 2006, p. 2). Each individual brings her/his culture to the communication process, and the interpreter is no exception. Each interpreter’s personal culture has been co-constructed within many different communication networks, so that as Banu put it, the interpreter “has her/his sex, religion, principles, and her/his culture.”

In Azerbaijani society, there are established expectations for the behavior of females as well as of males. Before the conversational interviews, my bias was that females experience more challenges related to their gender and/or sex than males do. After the conversations with Javid and Abdullah, I came to the conclusion both sexes may encounter challenges related to their gender/sex. For females the challenges involve how to respond to hand-shaking, proximity, and kissing on the cheek. I started almost all conversations with my own experience of the challenge of being kissed by a foreign male. This way of greeting, which can be seen as normal by an average Westerner, challenged me in two ways. On one hand, it was against my religious and national culture, which I did not want to violate. On the other hand, because greeting males by kissing was against my national culture, I could lose face in front of the members of my culture if I responded.

It appeared that all the female co-researchers encountered the same personal cultural challenges. Banu and Khadijah said that, so far, they have mostly managed to avoid hand shaking. Fatima and Aisha admitted that although it is undesirable for them to shake hands, they are interpreters and have to do it. Khadijah also mentions feeling “obliged” to do so: “if I don’t respond [to a stretched hand] they [those who stretch their hands] stress
Several factors to avoid hand shaking and/or kissing were suggested. Banu said she puts her hand on her chest and bows a little. Khadijah smiled and said that her veil usually makes people more conscious of the possible cultural difference. Javid mentioned having objects like a table between oneself and the other person to take care of both the proximity issue and kissing.

Yet the conversations also show that males encounter some personal cultural challenges. Both Javid and Abdullah were aware of possible differences in patterns of behavior between same sex and different sex individuals. However, in interpreting situations they did not know how they were expected to behave. Abdullah observes that “because I am male I don’t know whether I should greet a female, how to greet them.” Javid also mentions his difficulty related to greeting women:

I don’t get the kissing on the cheek three times. I have some difficulty related to this.

The woman puts her face forward one time, two times, three times, and because in some cultures it is two times, in some three, sometimes I draw my face back after the second time. Or sometimes, I keep my face there for the third time, but she withdraws her face after the second kiss.

My co-researchers perceive their culture as Azerbaijani culture, which has been influenced largely by Islamic culture, and they see the influence of their perceptions of sex/gender expectations in their work.

As Khadijah puts it “everybody has the expectation to be accepted by the others.” That is, even if one is interpreting, that individual has a personality and has her/his culture, which she/he expects to be respected. Khadijah says “my national and religious
values are more important to me” than her profession. Ignoring the personality and culture of the interpreter is not to the benefit of the negotiating parties. Javid observes how the quality of interpreting goes down if the presence of the interpreter is ignored. He also mentions that “it is necessary to encourage [the interpreter].”

Fatima mentions the challenges she encountered when a refugee was describing a topic that is avoided in Azerbaijani culture in conversation between females and males:

Once … it was an Afghani, there was something between him and a girl, and the girl became pregnant…. Those conversations also make you feel uncomfortable – what happened, how it happened – sometimes one has to speak in details.

In another experience she had to interpret for a male refugee who was describing his problem of impotency. Fatima says “I felt very uncomfortable” because we never discuss such issues. Javid also provides a similar example, when a male interpreter asked for a dismissal during the interview with a female refugee. She was describing the kind of tortures she had to endure during her imprisonment. Javid observes that the interpreter “was very uncomfortable.” He interpreted the refugee’s utterance, which consisted of five or six sentences, simply as “she was tortured.” When Javid required him to interpret accurately, he asked to be dismissed from the interview.

If the subject of conversation is related to the national culture of the interpreter she/he may feel sensitive regarding it. Khadijah mentions her frustration when foreigners denigrate her culture, and thus by extension her. Such disrespect can result in tension on the interpreter’s side. Banu gives a vivid example when she interfered because of the misrepresentation of her religion. Abdullah described the negotiation of Azerbaijan’s
territorial integrity, and how he tried to manage his strong feelings of revulsion with the speaker, who spoke against it, taking the side of the aggressors.

The interpreter’s bond to her/his culture also shows itself in the interpreting situation. When we discuss the issue of interference, Banu makes clear that if the speaker represents Azerbaijani or Islamic culture in an incorrect form, she will interfere. Khadijah admits that sometimes she conveyed what the Azerbaijani side said more mildly because “I cannot construct a negative impression about our people.” Aisha describes her challenge when an Azerbaijani male said something irrelevant to a foreign woman and how she omitted certain parts of the utterance. She felt frustrated because she had tried “to introduce our culture to both cultures in a positive way.” Clearly my co-researchers do not consider the interpreter to be “an audio recorder” or “a robot” deprived of culture or personality.

4.3 Theme Three: “The interpreter is between two cultures”

Culture is a socially constructed reality of a group of people, and each individual brings that reality with her/him to the communication encounter. One’s culture is the basis for one’s expectations for patterns of speech and action. Each side of a communication event, as well as the interpreter, will have such expectations, be they conscious or unconscious. When the parties in an interpreting situation are from different cultural groups, the expectations for speech and action they bring with them will often be quite different. The violations of expectations that result present the interpreter with intercultural communication challenges.
Is it the interpreter’s responsibility to deal with the cultural challenges arising in communication between the parties? In both the scholarly literature and the experiences of my co-researchers it is evident that the interpreter continually mediates cultural differences. When necessary the interpreter explains cultural differences to either side. Abdullah mentions that “when they [the foreigners] say something… I tell her/him that it is not acceptable in our culture…. I advise her/him to express her/his thought differently.” When I ask him if this is the interpreter’s responsibility, he responds positively and explains “because there is no one to inform the client about these issues beforehand.” But in Fatima’s experience, as she says, “it was vice versa…. The client has always warned me” about cultural specifics of the other side. Banu expects a professional client to be aware of the cultural differences. She thinks they must consider that they are in a Muslim country, and there will be some differences.

Sometimes, one party knows the culture of the other side, but ignores it. One reason, evident both in what my co-researchers explain and from my own experience, is that the interpreter is considered an ally of one of the parties. Azerbaijani culture is collectivistic compared to American culture, hence Azerbaijanis will consider the interpreter as a member of their group, notwithstanding who has hired the interpreter. In our experiences, Azerbaijani speakers joked, spoke irrelevantly, and sometimes were rude, expecting the interpreter to communicate to the other side something rather neutral and appropriate. In her example of an Azerbaijani female Member of Parliament who spoke with irony, Banu notes that perhaps the MP said that “relying on me” to present it in a more politically correct form. Javid also provides examples whereby Azerbaijani government officials
would joke, not expecting the interpreter to interpret the jokes. In the case of such an expectation for the interpreter, Javid thinks that the interpreter “either should do what is expected and to interpret in a correct form, and after the first meeting to approach that person and ask ‘please do not do this; otherwise, I will interpret what you say as you say it.’” As another option, he describes his experience when an Azerbaijani official joked about Javid’s director and Javid “said to him ‘should I interpret all that you said?’ He saw from my face that I could do that.” In my own experience there were many cases when I had to warn an Azerbaijani who would speak irreverently or joke that I have to interpret what he said. Aisha also mentions such a challenge in her experience, when the Azerbaijani side would ask her not to interpret certain parts because “it is for only our group.” Fatima provides an interesting example. When I ask her about her being perceived as a member of the Azerbaijani side, she remembers the presidential elections. The Azerbaijani side would ask her not to interpret certain things, or they would say, for example, ‘say it like this or like that’ … if it was not correct, they would say ‘say that it will be improved or it should be like this, it is not incorrect’ they wanted me to deal with it…. And I would do the opposite.

The interpreter may also be perceived as an ally of the non-Azerbaijani side. Sometimes foreigners asked my co-researchers for advice or confirmation about the impression the Azerbaijani side had about them. Banu cites an example from the presidential elections, when an observer from the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe lost her temper and used words like “this looks like a circus, elections are not held seriously, it is far from democracy.” Banu did not interpret these
words because she considered this the observer’s “mistake,” and Banu was “sure she [the observer] would not like it to be interpreted.” Khadijah also mentions a situation when:

there was a tension, and foreign experts always tried to protect me, they would not let me go to aggressive places, they were afraid for themselves mostly, but also protected me. Then I felt closeness with them.

Khadijah also felt closeness with the non-Azerbaijani side when “the speaker will ask the interpreter’s advice, like ‘it will probably be better if we say so and so.’” Fatima also mentions foreigners asking for her opinion during or after interviews with refugees.

When she worked with Azerbaijani clients, “the client asks me ‘how do you think it went; what impressions did we leave on the guest?’” In both cases, when the client asks the interpreter’s opinion, she/he used the word “we,” which may encourage teamwork between the client and the interpreter. Khadijah observes that although she felt at times that the foreigners considered her on their side, she says that still “there is always distance with a foreigner, I always feel the coldness.” However, based on what she teaches student interpreters, Aisha maintains that the interpreter must be neutral and loyal to the speaker. Each time the turn shifts to another speaker, the interpreter becomes loyal to that speaker. Nevertheless from her experiences it is obvious that the interpreter is pulled and pushed in both directions. This ambivalence between what-it-should-be-like and what-it-is-like is something that each of my co-researchers experienced.

Another issue that all co-researchers mention is the challenge in interpreting between two very different communication styles. I have experienced this challenge myself and I raised a question about it in every conversation. Being closer to Eastern cultures in terms
of communication style, Azerbaijanis are considered high context. We tend to use a lot of eloquent words and to speak rather vaguely. We may be indirect to avoid any kind of direct personal attack or seek to show our ability and mastery in speaking beautifully. Javid describes Azerbaijani government officials as leaving you “without an answer by answering you with … a beautiful sentence” in order to avoid the responsibility of their response. On the other side, being considered low context, members of Western cultures use a rather direct style, asking specific questions and expecting specific answers.

In my own experience, both sides can be unaware of this difference in styles, creating a challenge for the interpreter. When the interpreter tries to interpret everything that the Easterner says, the Western side gets confused and does not understand. When the interpreter, having understood what the Easterner means, interprets in a condensed and specific form, the Westerner can get suspicious or even unhappy that the other side spoke for so long and all she/he hears is one or two sentences. Abdullah says that “usually, in such cases, I interpret as she/he [the Azerbaijani] said, and then briefly give the meaning.” Aisha also contends that the interpreter should stay as accurate as possible to the utterance. Khadijah and Banu mention that they interpret the utterance by the member of an Eastern culture in a more specific manner only when the client asks to do so. On the other side, Javid explains that when the interpreter translates the “specific,” “sharp,” and/or direct utterance of the Westerner, the Easterner “can feel herself/himself offended.” That is why Javid admits that “in some cases, very rarely, as an interpreter I have had to soften the [Westerner’s] utterance a little bit.” One other important difference in communicating styles between Azerbaijani and Western cultures is the tone of
speaking. As Abdullah admits, sometimes the Westerner “may say a word loudly, [but] if we [Azerbaijanis] say it loudly that will sound inappropriate or rude.” Hence, the interpreter “must adjust it [the utterance] to [her/his] culture to a certain extent.” If either party is unaware of the communication style of the other party’s culture, they may mistrust the interpreter, blame her/him, and assign the vagueness or rudeness to her/him.

4.4 Theme Four: “It depends on the situation”

I asked all my co-researchers to elaborate on the role of the interpreter and the responsibilities she/he undertakes in the process of interpreting. With what roles are we charged and what responsibilities do we take on as interpreters? Is our role to simply interpret between languages or is there more to it? In the scholarly literature in Translation Studies, the responsibilities of the interpreter are not specifically determined. Several attempts have been made to establish a Code of Ethics for interpreters in specific contexts such as court interpreting or interpreting during natural disasters. However, even having the code of ethics in their pockets, interpreters encounter difficult situations when, as Aisha observes, they have to react “intuitively,” because one can never know beforehand what will happen in real life situation. Even in the discussing issues such as invisibility, the co-researchers mention different situations in which the role of the interpreter was or should be addressed differently. When I ask whether it is possible to ignore the presence of the interpreter, Banu says, “it depends on the situation.” She describes a situation at a dinner table, when an interpreter is hungry or thirsty, but no one pays attention to her/him. Javid had such an experience. Nevertheless, in certain situations the interpreter cannot be simply “a robot.” She/he has gender, religious and
national culture and it shows itself in the interpreting encounter. For example, several co-researchers admit that sometimes they interpret the utterance in a milder form because it can sound offensive in Azerbaijani culture. In my own experience, I interpreted in softer form because I would feel uncomfortable to speak to elderly people in a rude manner, although we both knew that those were not my words.

Most of my co-researchers hesitated in discussing the interpreter’s roles and responsibilities in a given situation. Is it our role to soften an utterance that is very sharp or can be offensive? All of the co-researchers agree that it depends. It depends on whether the client uses the words deliberately or unintentionally. It depends on the purpose of the meeting, i.e., whether it is a confrontation or a negotiation. It depends whether or not the client is aware of the offensiveness of her/his words. It depends on whether the interpreter perceives herself/himself as expected to change the tone of the utterance? If so, should the interpreter make these changes in tone and manner?

My co-researchers experience themselves as tending to soften the utterances to a certain extent. For a younger interpreter it can be very uncomfortable to say rude words to a person older than herself/himself, even if she/he is only interpreting what the other person has said. But Javid says that he does not avoid interpreting rude and sometimes offensive words, although he mentions that once when he came out of the meeting his “hair stood on end because I said such words to both sides.” He insists that he should not be blamed for what the other person says, because “they were not my words.”

Other co-researchers decide on the spot whether or not to interpret offensive or rude utterances. In her example of the Romanian observer sent by the Organization for
Security and Co-operation in Europe, Banu decided not to interpret the woman’s words, even though the woman herself did not specifically ask her not to interpret them. She notes, “to express her thoughts like this [was a mistake]…. I am sure she would not like it to be interpreted.” Banu describes how she did not hurry to interpret an Azerbaijani woman who “said [to a foreign female] that ‘Azerbaijani men like blonde women’ … to avoid making it sound rude.”

Khadijah links the softening of utterances to interpreter ethics:

If you are an ethical interpreter you must convey both the speaker’s words addressed to the audience and the words of the audience members to the speaker in a mild form, and in a form that they will be able to accept.

In her example of an elderly Azerbaijani male who spoke harshly to Norwegian female experts, she mentions that “although that old man said very rude words, like ‘clowns,’ I did not interpret them in the same manner…. Otherwise, there would be tension.” Aisha also did not want to offend the other party in a situation involving financial resources coming to Azerbaijan: an old Azerbaijani gentleman “wanted his requirements to be met…. He said to the [foreign] lady, very roughly, that ‘you don’t know, go and learn, you will know when you reach my age.’” Aisha contends:

both sides knew that I was there to create communication. And at the same time, I tried for the interest of our side and did not want the other side to get offended.

She believes that “the interpreter’s role is to create communication between cultures, between languages, not to disturb it.” Fatima also says “I convey it [the utterance] in a milder form,” although she is not sure “to which degree I am right.” She adds that
If the aggressiveness stems from the situation you interpret it the same way, but if not, if it is related only to one side [her/his temper], then you give it in milder form. Whether Fatima softens or not therefore depends on the client.

Of all my co-researchers, Javid was perhaps most clear in acknowledging how the role of the interpreter depends on the situation. At different moments in our conversation he observes that “a lot depends on the context,” “a lot depends on the interpreter,” and “a lot depends on the client…, more than on the interpreter.” The level of the interpreter’s interference may depend, for example, on whether the event to be interpreted is an official meeting, a refugee interview, or a training/seminar. In discussing intercultural challenges he contends that “There is not any one prescription… each time you [the interpreter] have to react in one way.” Here he makes clear that the level of interference depends on the interpreter, but later in our conversation, Javid concludes that it depends on the client … more than on the interpreter. The client must create a climate with the interpreter that she/he does not abstain from being open, sincere with the client because, actually, it is to the client’s own benefit, because … anything that can damage the quality of the work is the client’s problem.

4.5 Conclusion and Implications for Future Research

As has been mentioned, all four themes are intertwined. The interference of the interpreter occurs in part because she/he cannot be deprived of her/his sex/gender, religion, principles, and national culture. These inseparable parts of the interpreter’s personal identity become salient in interaction, particularly in intercultural contexts. In these contexts interpreters have to decide how to communicate and how to behave, and it
seems how they do so depends on many factors. As Aisha observes in our conversation, “you can never predict what will happen in real life.”

Accessing the lived experience of interpreters reveals that although theoretically the interpreter is required to be invisible, she/he has to find a ways to address the challenges presented by her/his sex/gender and culture in the communication situation in which she/he is interpreting. The interpreter does not interpret languages like “a robot.” She/he is the one who, in the first place, has to deal with the challenges arising from the intercultural character of the interaction. These challenges arise between herself/himself and the other parties from the cultural differences between the other two parties. These challenges were part of the lived experience of all six co-researchers, which suggests strongly that the conceptualizations of interpreting developed in Interpreting Studies must be extended to incorporate conceptualizations of intercultural communication found in Intercultural Communication Studies. The profession of interpreting cannot be limited only to a good command of working languages. The interpreting setting must be seen as a process of intercultural communication, and studied and taught in accordance with this view.

This study sought to better understand the challenges faced by interpreters in the intercultural contexts in which they operate. I considered these six interviews with professional interpreters to be sufficient for the purposes of this study because the final conversational interviews did not add new insights on the issues. However, interpreters are not the only persons involved in the process of interpreting. It would be very productive to explore the perspectives of the clients who use interpreting services. What
kind of intercultural challenges do they experience in interpreting setting? How do they see the interpreter? What role do they assign to the interpreter?

This study also focused specifically on intercultural challenges faced by the interpreters, but it was evident from the conversations that my co-researchers also faced linguistic challenges. Linguistic challenges can be directly related to differences between cultures, but a study of these challenges could also be very productive. In order to gain deeper insights on the interpreting process, the conversations involved during interpreting need to be analyzed as well. Conversation analysis would provide a much better understanding of the processes going on between all three participants in the interpreting setting. Such analysis would also aid in the scrupulous exploration of the interpreter’s role in a conversation, and how she/he makes decisions on the spot for dealing with intercultural, as well as linguistic challenges.
References


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Appendix

Informed Consent Form

Interpreters’ perspectives on intercultural communication

IRB #____________ Date Approved ______

Description of the Study:
You are being asked to take part in a research study about challenges arising in intercultural communication and how translators deal with them. The goal of this study is to learn translators’ perspectives on their role in solving possible problems in intercultural communication. You are being asked to take part in this study because you have work experience as a professional translator. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before you agree to be in the study.

If you decide to take part, you will be interviewed in an initial session of 1-2 hours. If appropriate and needed, an additional session will be arranged. The interview date and location will be your choice so that you feel most comfortable. The interviews will be audio recorded and kept in my own personal computer for the purpose of transcribing, analysis, and reporting for this study. My thesis advisor, Dr. Robert B. Arundale and I will be the only persons allowed to access to the information. All information will be kept in secure files. Your name will not be used and you will not be asked to give your names on any form unless you want to. You are assured that all your responses in this study will be anonymous.

Your decision to take part in the study is voluntary. You are free to choose not to take part in the study or to stop taking part at any time without any penalty to you. If you have questions now, feel free to ask me. If you have questions later, you may contact me at (+994 50) 370-7903 (before 08.20.06) and (+1 907) 474-1876 (after08.20.06), or via e-mail at ftgfs@uaf.edu; or my thesis advisor, Dr. Robert B. Arundale at (+1 907) 474-6799 or via e-mail at ffrba@uaf.edu.

If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, please contact the Research Coordinator in the Office of Research Integrity at 474-7800 (Fairbanks area) or 1-866-876-7800 (outside the Fairbanks area) or fyirb@uaf.edu.

Statement of Consent:
I understand the procedures described above. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been provided a copy of this form.