



Linguistic Justice Division

Research Consortium on Gender-Based Violence

Negotiating Meaning in a Second Language

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Negotiation of Meaning

■ Overview

This brief document provides a) an explanation of the concept of “negotiation of meaning”, b) the relevance of this concept when conducting research with survivors of gender-based violence; c) a list of helpful tips to keep in mind before, during, and after the data collection process and d) a vignette illustrating the importance of negotiation of meaning in interviews with survivors.

■ What is ‘negotiation of meaning’?

In the context of two or more people having a conversation, negotiation of meaning can be understood as “a communication breakdown that triggers some kind of clarification of a speaker’s intended message” (VanPatten & Benati, 2015, p. 150). In common terms, this means that one of the parties involved in the conversation is unsure –or simply does not follow– the idea that their counterpart is trying to convey.

Imagine the following scenario. You and your partner are at a party. The music is loud, and the lights are dim, therefore conversation is short and difficult. In a romantic gesture, you want to tell your partner “I love you” and after doing so you hear, instead, that they yell back “Olive shoes?! Where?!”. This is a case where meaning is unclear, and clarification of the intended message is required. It happens in everyday life, even between people who are fluent and native in the same language.

Now, imagine you are in a scenario where the other person speaks a different language: negotiation of meaning, which is something completely normal and recurrent in any communicative scenario, is now even more evident. In a communicative setting, this is, when we exchange meaningful information with others, we rely on different tools to understand a message. Consider another person’s pronunciation or regional signing, facial expressions, body language, cultural differences, and yes, even silences. All these elements come into play when exchanging meaningful information. When you are unfamiliar with one or more of these elements, it is likely that you might need to engage in further negotiation of meaning.

■ Why is ‘negotiation of meaning’ relevant when interviewing survivors of gender-based violence?

When working with someone who does not share the same language, the interviewer must try to compensate for their lack of “cultural intelligence” (Ghanbarpour et al., 2018, p. 530). This means that, when interacting with someone for the very first time, interviewers are likely unaware and unfamiliar with abstract things such as a person’s norms, traditions, priorities, history, and trauma. Additionally, they might also struggle with linguistic elements, such as a person’s preferred jargon and slang and the way they are most comfortable describing their feelings and experiences.

In an interview, interviewers can easily fall into their own panic and focus on these perceived shortcomings. However, through active listening, interviewers can actually determine which of these moments in the conversation require clarification, and then calmly proceed to negotiate.

Interviewers are likely to face more than one of these “confusing” moments due to: lack of expertise in a different language, some pronunciation mishaps, interviewee’s use of abundant jargon, etc. All of these issues, as well as many others, are perfectly normal. In these situations, negotiation is key for communication and interviewers will need to find a way to intervene in the conversation, pause it, reassess it, reframe it –if necessary–, and proceed until both points have been made. Further, when interviewing in a second language, negotiation can take up more time than the simple clarification within linguistic terms, so it is important to remember that some non-linguistic tools, such as body language, drawings, and signaling, can also help.



Tips for Negotiation

Prior, During, and After an Interview

■ Prior to the Interview: Check your materials

1. *Make sure that you are familiar with the questions in the interview:* Are you able to understand each and every one of the questions? Can you rephrase them in the desired target language, if necessary? Are there any words or expressions that seem odd to you, or that you don't fully comprehend? Make sure to carefully review the entire interview protocol, including response options. Practice your pronunciation of words or phrases that might be hard to say. Finally, ask as many questions as necessary to make sure you feel confident in your ability to conduct the interview.

2. *Are the questions of the interview culturally appropriate?* Despite our best intentions, sometimes a phrase or word can have multiple meanings when translating it into a different language. Use your expertise in the language to double-check some of the words that might seem off or unclear, but especially those that might be potentially offensive or harmful when heard by the person you are interviewing.

3. *Do you know how to phrase a question in order to clarify meaning?* Sometimes we tend to forget how to ask for certain things in a second language, particularly if we are conducting an interview in a language we don't use on a daily basis or that we are not fully exposed to. Before your interview, make sure you are familiar with how to pause and ask a clarifying question respectfully. For example: What would be the equivalent of "I am sorry, can you explain that?" or "Can you explain this word to me, please?" in the target language?

■ During the Interview: Take your time and listen

1. *When asking a question, what do you do if you don't understand the answer?* There is nothing wrong when lack of clarity occurs. If you ask a clarifying question, then make sure to follow culturally relevant protocol, intervene, and assess the situation. How relevant is the part that you do not understand? This is a process; therefore, more than one attempt is also likely to happen.

2. ***What happens when/if an interviewee does not understand you?*** If a particular idea remains blurry, then resort to close-by ideas and concepts to narrow it down. Circumlocution is a great way to go around a complex idea or concept that might be unclear. Circumlocution is a process commonly used as part of daily communications without even knowing it. Think, for example, how would you describe the animal “cat” if this specific word would not come to mind. Circumlocution would kick in at this moment, and then you would proceed to describe, perhaps, a furry domestic animal that has a long tail and always lands on its feet. Something similar can, and should, happen during an interview if a concept is unclear.

3. ***There are too many expressions that you may think belong to jargon/slang. What can you do?*** Again, there is nothing wrong with not being fully aware of all of these words or phrases. This is an excellent opportunity to expand your understanding of a particular community’s jargon or slang. Pause, ask for clarification, and –when satisfied with the answer– proceed. Using humor is an excellent way to decrease tension, as well as making the evident statement that one of you is, perhaps, less familiar with a phrase. Commenting on how important it is for you to understand everything they are sharing will reinforce your stance as a caring interviewer committed to establishing a meaningful exchange.

4. ***You tried to negotiate, but it is taking too long and it is happening too often during interview:*** Effective, meaningful, and trauma-informed communication with survivors during an interview **will take time**. You need to assess not just the quantity of the answers, but also their quality. Remember, communication is based on more than just sharing the same language.

■ **After the Interview: Take note**

1. ***Do you think the interview was successful/unsuccessful? Why? Depending on what factors?*** Communication is not a homogeneous, “clean” process. An interview might be unsuccessful only if you were not paying attention at all to the interviewee’s answers, or if one of the parts shut down all attempts to engage. Silences can have meaning too. Emotions can have meaning too. A balance between language and non-linguistic factors is necessary when conducting these types of interviews. If you are committed to that balance, you are on the right path.

2. ***Take note for future interactions:*** What were some of the things you have learned from talking with a person that may or may not share your same culture, values, language, trauma, and experiences? Keeping in mind these qualitative elements will provide you with tools to deal with the situation in a different, more informed manner next time. This can include having vocabulary lists, cultural checklists, avoid certain expressions that you have learned are unsuccessful, and altogether, feel more confident when facing the next challenge.

Vignette

Meaning Negotiation in an Interview with a Non-Native Spanish Speaker

■ **The following vignette depicts an interview conducted in Spanish between a Spanish-speaking interviewer and an indigenous survivor from South America who speaks Spanish as a second language.**

During the initial section of the interview, the interviewer asked general demographic questions to the survivor. The survivor was engaged and enthusiastic about the interview. However, some questions in the subsequent sections referred to historical events and personal experiences. The survivor seemed confused and asked several times for clarification. Although the interviewer was responsive, the interviewer did not know exactly how to rephrase the questions. Given that, the interviewer simply restated the questions, leaving the survivor confused.

As the interview progressed, the survivor became increasingly frustrated by her lack of understanding of the questions. She slowly became disengaged from the interview, giving short and often monotone answers. The interviewer completed the interview and thanked the survivor.

Discussion Questions:

- What dynamics did you notice in this vignette?
- What could the interviewer have done differently?
- How could have the interviewer engaged in a meaning negotiation process with this participant?
- What are the risks of not engaging in meaning negotiation in an interview like this one? For the participant? For the research?



References

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