



Role of the interpreter in the asylum procedure

“Are you for it or against it?

Or, are you Swiss?

I'm an interpreter.”

Hans Durrer, author and interpreter

The task

The interpreter's task is to render a correct and complete oral translation of the spoken content.

As an official interpreter, you are an active participant in the asylum procedure prescribed by law. The statements you translate are documented in the interview transcript and form the basis for the decision on asylum.

Performing the task

Interpreters are expected to act with impartiality, in a reflective, reserved and discreet manner. We aim to work with individuals with mature personalities.

What is meant by “impartiality”?

Impartiality *per se* does not exist: it is a goal that needs to be pursued. In practice that means that interpreters are expected to be in control of their feelings and to exercise restraint. They do not take sides nor interfere in the discussion. Impartial interpreting results in an interview transcript that reads as if no interpreter had been present.

What is meant by a “reflective manner”?

A reflective manner means that feelings are subordinate to reason. In practice, that means that interpreters should not do what they feel urged to do, but rather fulfil their task.

What is meant by a “reserved and discreet manner”?

The primary objective is to render a correct and complete oral translation of what has been orally communicated. Interpreters' conduct is always subject to this goal. Their body language and tone of voice must not be tainted by their personal opinions. They should exercise restraint at all times and fade into the background.

Interpreters must receive whatever is being said and ensure that they do not get emotionally drawn into the dialogue. They must also refrain from volunteering their expert knowledge.



How to perform the task¹

Conduct

As an interpreter for the asylum procedure of the State Secretariat for Migration SEM

- I understand that my task is to render a factually correct and complete oral translation of what is being said;
- I understand and accept that the interviewer is in all respects and at all times in charge of the interview;
- I can keep myself emotionally detached;
- I am conscious of my own emotional register, tendencies for psychological projection and blind spots;
- I recognise when someone is trying to project their personal views on me and I do not allow this to undermine my impartial and neutral conduct;
- I know my limits and, should it be – physically or mentally – too much for me, I will not hesitate to inform the person in charge.

Before, during and after the interpreting session

- My appearance is well groomed, appropriate and discreet, and this shows in how I dress.
- My body language signals controlled distance.
- I interpret using the first person singular and I adopt the same language register as the speakers. I use the same expressions as the speakers (including slang or insults, etc.).
- I convey the message without adding or omitting anything of my own accord and I refrain from modifying anything that is said. In addition, I do not impose my own slant on the content.
- I do not ask questions on my own initiative.
- If I need to interrupt my interpreting for some reason², I discreetly inform the interviewer. It is up to him to clarify the issue and ensure a smooth and comprehensible continuation of the discourse.
- It is my right and my duty to have any relevant non-verbal signals and gestures noted in the minutes if they are clear to me but possibly not to the interviewer.
- I refrain from any verbal or non-verbal expression of my opinion or feelings, I keep my views to myself and I do not participate in any conversations or discussions during or after the interview.
- I acknowledge my duty of confidentiality and my obligation to remain discreet.

¹ Binding guidelines. The list is not exhaustive.

² For example, to look up a word in the glossary; if I am not sure I have correctly understood the speaker; if the speaker is talking too quickly or quietly, or unintelligibly; if the interlocutors are cutting in on one another, etc.