



NAMASTE OR ASSALAAM-ALAIKUM? CULTURAL DIFFERENCE BEGINS WITH HELLO

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The challenges I have encountered in interpreting Bengali and Hindi stem from the religious and cultural differences of our people and languages. Hindi and Urdu are spoken in northern India, approximately the northern two-thirds of the country, as well as in Pakistan, our neighbor to the west. Pakistan is a predominantly Muslim country, as are pockets of areas in India (India being the second largest Islamic country in the world after Indonesia). Bengali is spoken in Bangladesh, a predominantly Muslim country, and in Bengal, also known as West Bengal, to the east of India, where the predominant religion is Hindu. Both languages, Bengali and Hindi, are influenced by the religion of the land and each language has its own nuances and customary usage. As reference works such as *The Languages of the World* will explain, "India has the unenviable distinction of being the most linguistically diverse country in the world. More than 150 languages are spoken, including twelve major ones, and none by more than 30 percent of the population."

As a Bengali and Hindi interpreter in the legal and medical fields, for police and other general services, I still sometimes find myself at a loss for the most appropriate words to communicate with. As we all know, good interpreting consists of two essentials, listening and speaking. What we say is up to us, but what we hear is not in our control. In order to aid our hearing and comprehension, however, we have to consider factors such as whatever information we can glean about origin, background, religious/cultural persuasion, level of literacy, and what disabilities, if any, the principal has. All of these become apparent with his use of language. Using the example of the Indian subcontinent (India, Pakistan and Bangladesh) I will explore the three W's: where to look, what to look for, and why.

My first dilemma is how to greet the person, whether I should say *Namaste* or *Assalaam-Alaikum*.

Speakers of both Bengali and Hindi come from the same part of the world, and not so long ago were all from the same country, India. Our ethnic origin is the same, our food habits are similar (all our foods are referred to as Indian food) and we have an implicit understanding of each other's ways. Bangladesh and Bengal are similar to George Bernard Shaw's remark about England and America: "Two countries divided by a common language." For example, even though there are no dietary restrictions for widows in Bangladesh as there are in India, people in both places refer to bland food as "widow's fare."

Given such shared understanding, I have been disconcerted when faced with glaring silence after greeting people with *namaste*, the equivalent of "greetings," or "hello, how are you?" Greetings are certainly not meant to displease, nor do they generally elicit negative responses. However, the reason for such silence later became clear when it came out that the principal was a Muslim. I had greeted him out of habit in a Hindu manner.

For interpreting in a courtroom or medical office, the interpreter prepares vocabulary and over time acquires an arsenal of words, correct manners and appropriate attire. I can speak with equal ease now about "stellar orbits" or "deportation without benefit," but that does not give me a clue as to what version of my language I am about to hear or whether I will understand it fully. India alone has 28 states, 7 union territories, 16 official languages and thousands of dialects.

I first look for cues and clues that will give insight into the person's place of origin. The interpreter is seldom privy to this information before beginning the interpretation, but a repertoire acquired over time gives one an intuitive edge that helps ease panic and makes the task easier. Dialect, accentuation, intonation and rhythm of speech vary within the smallest pockets of land area and are good indicators of origin.

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of police business. Although in this case the charges were later dropped, the fact remains that an interpreter can be charged with obstruction of justice should the interpreter lie or withhold important information in police work.

In another case, interpreters provided language assistance to non-English speakers seeking to obtain phony driver's licenses who were using false identification to obtain such licenses. The interpreters knew what was going on but assumed they were immune from criminal charges since they were merely providing interpretation. They were charged with conspiracy to commit fraud against a government entity. One interpreter was sentenced to two years and the other to five years of incarceration.

In these cases as with any other case dealing with the justice system, be it in a legal or quasi-legal setting, the interpreter's role is fairly simple in terms of protocol, procedures and ethics. The interpreter's task is to place a non-English speaker in the same position as an English speaker. It is not the interpreter's role to make sure that the non-English speaker understands the content but only to interpret what is being said. It is up to the judge or the attorney to explain and help the person understand. A legal interpreter should not on his own convey affectionate or intimate discourse to a non-English speaker or advocate for a defendant or victim, but should maintain the distance of an impartial and disinterested party. An interpreter cannot practice law without a license. The interpreter cannot permit himself to be used in the commission of fraud or any other crimes.

A non-English speaker and all parties involved in a judicial process are dependent upon the interpreter to provide a faithful and precise rendition of what is being stated. This puts an interpreter in a unique position of trust in the legal process. Thus, by virtue of the role the interpreter plays in the administration of justice, the constitutional implications of the profession, the fact that interpreters work to assist all other officers of the court, be it established by state statute, court rules, or by practice, the interpreter must necessarily be considered an officer of the court.

When interpreters step out of their appointed role, the integrity of the judicial system is put in jeopardy. Any departure from accepted practice leaves the interpreter open to challenges and may result in unfair convictions or dismissals, let alone diverted investigations. Judiciary interpreters, as well as any entity utilizing interpreter services or providing them, must understand the interpreter's role. Only then can each person and judicial official fulfill their role and perform the duties dictated by law, thereby safeguarding due process, equal access and equal protection under the law. ▲

Disclaimer: The information in this article was obtained through research, discussion with attorneys and judges, and personal experience as a consultant. It is not the author's intent to interpret the law.

[The author is a member of the NAJIT Board of Directors and a member of the NAJIT Advocacy Committee and the ATA Public Relations Committee. This article was prepared in response to a recent debate on the NAJIT listserv about the meaning of the term "officer of the court" and its application to interpreters.]

CULTURAL DIFFERENCE *continued from page 1*

Familiarity with all the geographic areas where a language is spoken makes one follow clues and mentally file them away for future use. I believe these minute variations hold true for almost every language; I have been told that no two Spanish-speaking countries have the same word for "green beans."

One helpful piece of information in determining which variety of Hindi or Bengali the speaker will use comes from the name itself. Even though most first names amongst Hindus are much the same, they are pronounced differently, depending on the state the person comes from. In Bengal a woman's name is *Bharoti* whereas a woman from the Northern Hindi-speaking states will be called *Bhar-ti*. In Punjab, however, male and female names are the same, except that among Sikhs, female names end in *Kaur* and male names end with *Singh*. Punjabi names bring to mind another anecdote. A Punjabi lady was once asked her mother's maiden name. She replied "*Kaur*." "What was *your* maiden name?" asked the interrogator. "*Kaur*," answered the lady. He then tried asking her name before she got married. The response again was "*Kaur*." "Very well," said the interrogator, "Do you know your maternal grandmother's name?"

"I do. It was such-and-such *Kaur*." And so it went.

Islamic names are difficult to render into English as well, in that they have only the one true name. How many of us know that "Osama" is really the son of "Laden"? Or for that matter, know whether "Laden" is the name of "Osama's" mother or father? And if we were to address him politely, for example in a court of law, would we be addressing him as Mr. Laden? That might come out sounding the same as if we addressed the author as Mrs. Ratna.

Another name-related confusion occurs with names like Mohammed or Ali. I have had five defendants in one hearing and all of their first names were Mohammed. As could be expected, general confusion prevailed until the last names were used. These people were named after someone, in this case, in honor of the prophet.

In my languages, recognizing names facilitates distinction between male and female, especially when doing telephone interpretation, when I am given names and expected to start the conversation with a greeting.

Knowledge of names of principals and the language variant also give insight into cultural norms and practices. For instance, it would be as offensive for a Hindu-named person to be offered beef as it would for a Muslim to be offered pork. Respondents in jail are usually never offered these choices, but one detainee asked the judge to please make sure he was not given ham or pork in jail. This incensed the judge, who retorted, "Next you will be telling me you only like the pillows at the Ritz Carlton." The detainee lost his head and replied in a very profane manner and even called the judge an infidel. I hear echoes of this even today if a Muslim woman is told to go to a male gynecologist, or a Muslim or Sikh person is asked if he drank any alcohol prior to the automobile accident. This information may not seem pertinent, but can help the interpreter to put out ensuing fires, for instance, when an insurance company adjuster asks, "Why was he so mad, and rambling on and on when I asked him if he had had a drink?"

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CULTURAL DIFFERENCE *continued from page 5*

Knowing a person's name and thereby his religion can also lead to better understanding the prescriptions and prohibitions of the person's culture, such as *Jumma*, Friday prayers, or *Ramadan*, the fasting period, when one is unable to perform certain kinds of work. These terms may come up in pre-trial sessions and sidebar conferences.

Proper manner of addressing people is another area for confusion. Both Bangladeshis and Bengalis of India address even strangers as "sister," "brother" or something familial in place of Mr., Ms., Sir or Ma'am of the West. However, the terms themselves are different and interestingly, this difference stems, once again, from the difference in the language of origin. With the partition of India at the end of the British Raj, what is now Bangladesh was then incorporated into Pakistan and was known as East Pakistan. The Bengali of Bangladesh have a large Urdu vocabulary, since Urdu was the language of Islamic Pakistan. Bangladeshis refer to elders as *amma* and *abba* (mother, father) *bhai* (brother), *appa* (sister). In contrast, the Bengalis of India say *ma*, *baba*, *dada/bhai*, *didi*. A respondent close to my age once addressed me as *appa*—a term I was not familiar with. I somewhat randomly assumed he meant "mother" given that it sounded close to *amma* and very much like the Indian *ma* or mother. The respondent, who was not so young himself, addressing me as mother? Luckily, good sense prevailed and I did not respond, "I am not old enough to be your mother." I was under the mistaken impression that all Bengalis spoke the same language and it is this kind of insular thinking that can get one into trouble.

Note to translators: the written Hindu name often starts with a *Shree/Kumar*, *Shreemati*, or *Kumari*. This is not an integral part of the name but represents the Mr., Mrs. and Miss in English. You will often hear a person's name followed by a *Jee*. This is an honorific address, especially of someone in a formal situation, and is not gender-specific. The same term *Jee* is also used for polite acknowledgement and affirmation (*yes*), as well as query (*what?*) by Urdu-based Bengali and Hindi/Urdu speakers.

To illustrate the hazards of dialect, once I interpreted for a man who was talking about his drunken father covering his head with a nap. I went around it several times but really had no idea what he was talking about, until I realized that the respondent was from the same district of Birbhum in Bengal India that I come from (which I left behind many years ago). I realized later that he meant the word *lape*, meaning quilt, but said "*nap*." People from Birbhum are notorious for their inversions of l's and n's.

Accent and intonation may vary considerably from one area to another. On that subject, let me tell you about an aunt who went on a pilgrimage from Bengal to Badrinath in the Himalayas. When the bus stopped at a roadside rest area, she heard other people asking for *samosas*, or stuffed pastry, a common Indian snack. But she asked for *shomosya*, a word that existed in her vocabulary and was a close approximation to what she had heard. However, this word means "problem" in both Bengali and Hindi. I imagine the vendor got the gist of it and gave her the problem of her choice.

Rhythm of speech can also help identify a person's home territory. A Santhal, that is, a tribal person speaking Bengali, will always have a certain rhythm and cadence impossible for a non-Santhal to reproduce. A person from Silhet in Bangladesh will not be easily deciphered by a person coming from as close as Dhaka—that's because Silhetis, by and large, have no faith in the "ch" or the aspirate "chh" sounds and prefer to replace them with the simple "s". In standard Bengali one would say *chole-chhey*, whereas a Silheti would say *sole-say* to mean "I'm fine." Similarly, the Hindi of Bihar has no similarity to the Hindi spoken in Punjab or Bengal, even though these states share the same prime minister, currency, and national pastime of cricket. For example: When asking, "Where have you been?" a person from Bihar will say, *kahan gaiil ba?* whereas a person from Punjab might say *kiththey gaya si?* and yet both will be speaking Hindi; one a Bhojpuri-Hindi and the other a Punjabi-Hindi.

Word usage is another key factor to observe. Even though Bangladesh and West Bengal are like East and West Germany, there are marked differences in common lexicons. For example, a judge once asked a respondent, "What did you slip on? Was it water?" I repeated the question twice and the respondent gave no sign of having understood it. I then repeated it slowly in the hope that he would surely understand that way; to no avail. The judge finally said, "Well, was it water or oil that you slipped on?" It was only then that the respondent's face

grew radiant as he said *pani*. I should have known all along that Bengalis of Bangladesh use *pani*, the Urdu word for "water" whereas the Bengalis of Bengal use the Sanskrit word *jawl*. Something as elementary as water was not being understood! I was using a standard word instead of one he would have more readily understood.

The parameters of Sanskrit or Urdu root will dictate a speaker's choice of words. There are a vast number of cognates, but also very different words and sounds, as well as hybrids. A Hindi speaker from Bihar will not understand if I speak to him in Lucknow or Urdu-Hindi. Take for instance the word "use": a Sanskrit-based Hindi speaker will say *vyabhar* and the more literary ones *prayoge*, while the Urdu speaker will use *istaymal*. Thus, an interpreter can sometimes tell by a person's word choice approximately where he is from and what his religious persuasion might be.

Besides the thirty-four varieties of Hindi, as a legacy of the British Raj Indians now also have to contend with English, which I might add, also needs translation. A person once said to me in Bengali, I have to *takkar* my mother, meaning I have to "take care" of my mother. *Takkar* means "hit" or "jolt" in Bengali and you can imagine my dilemma in interpreting such an extreme statement and a non-sequitur. Another favorite expression amongst Bengali and Hindi speakers is *jaaab* meaning "job" and is used like a place name — "I have to go to *Jaaab*" — much as one would refer to a park or a shopping mall.

In addition to knowing about the principal's mother tongue and cultural origins, social conventions are also a matter for consideration. For purposes of identification, a person is asked address, date of birth, mother's maiden name, etc. A respondent

*Insular thinking can get one
into trouble.*

who has lived in this country for a while has learned to answer these questions if not by education, then certainly by rote. But some respondents only repeat what someone else is prompting them to say from the background. This of course is not acceptable to the person doing the identification. For example, a seemingly simple question is the date of birth. Nowadays, with the advent of birth certificates, people in India have birthday celebrations and remember birthdays as well as the rest of the world. But prior generations went about it differently, such as by saying "Oh, so and so was born shortly after Navin's middle child, therefore he must be this old." In situations like this, one frequently hears the date of birth given as the first of January. Under these circumstances I would imagine that the year of birth is also an approximation. And there is an added complication when the respondents use the lunar calendar rather than the Western calendar to remember dates.

As for the mother's maiden name, why would a respondent know that? He has only known his mother's name as *Bhabi* meaning "elder sister-in-law," or "the mother of so-and-so." Given this set of mental attitudes, how can anyone give his exact date of birth or mother's maiden name? If not, can the person really exist in the eyes of the authorities? All too often the person not only does not know these things, but he considers them irrelevant. He then may turn confrontational, aggressive or non-cooperative. If the interpreter can assess the reason for this behavior, she may be able to dilute the intensity of the confrontation.

Legal language such as "voluntary departure," "cancellation of removal," "change of status," are expressions lost on an English speaker, let alone a speaker of a different language. The interpreter can only render them while the respondent is left to assume dire consequences. One hopes that the respondent's attorney will explain the process in detail at a later time.

Similarly with medical terminology, although in my experience, doctors can devote more time to explaining the names of the illness and the tests. The non-English speaker does learn the words but only with difficulty can he pronounce them or write them down, or spell it for someone else to write down. This is when interpretation becomes futile because the principal knows even less about the Hindi words of *jigger* or *yakrit* than he does about what he calls *leewar*, also known as "liver" (bearing in mind that "v" is pronounced variously as "bh" and "w" in both Hindi and Bengali, and "W" and "Z" are non-existent in Bengali.) If the respondent's entire exposure to anatomy has been conducted in English, it is best for the interpreter to leave it that way.

Disabilities, whether mental or physical, must also be taken into account. For example, many times I have interpreted in the required language or even changed languages mid-stream, but met with no understanding. Then, after ten minutes of consulting charts and tables, medical personnel discover that the patient has had a stroke and is incapable of either comprehending or speaking the language she has spoken for the past 70 years.

Lastly we have the challenges of English spoken with an accent. One instance of a quite serious gaffe on my part occurred at a hearing when I was following the movements of a respondent very closely. I saw her make a rolling motion with her foot as she narrated police brutality by saying, "And he stepped me, and

he stepped me." Everything in this sentence was said in Bengali except the word "stepped" and I rendered her statement as, "he stepped on me." In fact, what she had been really trying to say was, "He stabbed me. He stabbed me." Unfortunately, an interpreter can only render what she hears.

Being able to see the principal is a definite advantage for the interpreter, unfortunately impossible over the phone. I recall one instance when I had to emphasize all the directives to a woman giving birth by breaking down phrases over the phone. Happily, she gave birth to a healthy baby and I never forgot to say *pani* for water at any time during this assignment.

While these observations are intended to aid other interpreters, sharing this knowledge with monolinguals will help in the larger goal of promoting cultural understanding and tolerance. But to interpreters, I conclude with this: know as much about the principal as you possibly can, have a few gigabytes of memory to store all the information you learn, and have instantaneous recall ability. **Namaste and Assalaam-Aleikum! ▲**

[The author is a California registered court interpreter; there is currently no certification testing in her languages. She holds an M.A. from the University of California, Berkeley, in comparative literature. This is an edited version of a paper read at New York University's Second International Translation Conference, June, 2004.]

MESSAGE FROM CHAIR *continued from page 2*

SSTI continues to develop its plans as outlined by President Peter P. Lindquist in the Spring *Proteus*. Of particular note are the remarkable training sessions offered by MVOITI Executive Director Janis Palma and Professor Dagoberto Orrantia; see p. 10 for the next events.

Much is going on in association with other like-minded organizations. NAJIT has joined the American Council of Teachers of Foreign Languages. Teresa Salazar and Gladys Segal will be presenting on judiciary interpreting to the American Bar Association Tax Section at its May 2005 meeting in Washington, D.C. NAJIT members in Washington state provided input to the Department of Labor and Industries as it implemented new requirements that included professional qualifications for interpreters. Isabel Framer coordinated an extraordinary effort to provide entries for an "I Speak" booklet to identify language needs of non-English speakers, prepared by Ohio Criminal Justice Services, the Summit County Sheriff's Office, and the City of Loraine Police Department.

Welcome new members! The Board is very pleased to have so many judiciary interpreters and translators joining NAJIT. We welcome your energy, interest and contributions. Thanks also to everyone who has renewed. Member support is the bedrock of our activities.

Alexander Rainof, Ph.D.
Chair, Board of Directors