

DIFFERENT AND SEPARATE: INTERPRETERS OF AFRICAN LANGUAGES

Hailu Gtsadek

In September of this year I was asked to speak to a group of African immigrant community members who received a 40 hour community interpreting course provided by Cross Cultural Communications (www.cultureandlanguage.net). The course was sponsored by the Ethiopian Community Center in Washington, D.C.

I thought long and hard about what to share with the course participants. In preparing my speech, the need to share how different and separate the experience of interpreters of African languages is from that of other interpreters became clear to me. The following is a summary of my remarks.

As interpreters, the number one tool we work with is the languages we interpret in. To understand the different reality an interpreter of African languages finds himself in, I compared a European language (Spanish) to an African language (Amharic). Due to historical factors, your typical African for centuries has been systematically denied the ability to express and articulate his or her thoughts, ideas, feelings, emotions in his or her native language. Even though today we are no longer persecuted for using our native languages, no matter which side of the Atlantic Ocean we find ourselves on, Africans are still suffering from the hang-over effect.

What is the status of those two languages today: which language is blooming by acquiring, borrowing, creating, and adapting new vocabulary and terminology, and which one is decaying and dying due to neglect? In most African countries higher education is not provided in native languages; rather, students are subjected to study in non-African languages. In today's Africa the language of business, medicine, technology, and culture is a non-African language. There are no efforts to develop native African languages by introducing or incorporating new terminology and vocabulary, and this has a direct effect on African language interpreters and a community seeking the service of interpreters, because there are limited linguistic and cultural equivalents in vocabulary, terminology and concepts.

The limited-English or non-English proficient African immigrant community is the one we provide interpretation services for. What is their understanding of the role of the interpreter? For an African language speaker, an interpreter is anyone who is bilingual. Unlike your typical Spanish speaker who expects nothing more or less than professional interpretation service, African language speakers believe the role of the interpreter is to assist them by providing counseling, that an interpreter is someone to provide advice and

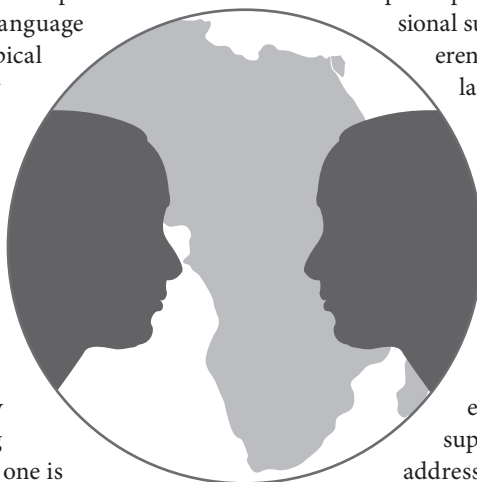
advocate on their behalf. When they encounter a professional interpreter who tells them that his or her only role will be to interpret, they consider that person as one who has betrayed his culture and heritage.

One factor that prevents African language speakers from using the service of an interpreter is that they are the last persons to realize their English proficiency is limited. They often choose to conduct business in their limited-proficient English, and we all know what the consequences are: a lot of room for errors and misunderstanding. African language speakers have frequently been exposed to mediocre interpretation services, because the typical African language interpreter most likely did not get a chance to benefit from formal training in the profession, is possibly not even aware of the interpreter professional code of conduct, and has no professional support group, with little or no access to basic reference materials or dictionaries. In addition, African language speakers may be hesitant to use an interpreter as they fear judgment from someone of their own culture and community and are concerned about confidentiality.

In response to my talk, the course participants had several questions: What steps can be taken to create awareness in the immigrant community? How can one develop and share reference materials? What needs to be done to educate oneself and others? They expressed their desire to form a professional support group to share information, strategize and address the issues discussed.

We interpreters of African languages who choose to practice interpretation as a profession work in a difficult environment. We don't have the best tools to work with and are expected to deliver professional service. Against all odds, some of us actually do just that. ▲

[The author, an active NAJIT and ATA member and an Amharic/English interpreter/translator since 1994, is a managing partner with African Translation. (www.africantranslation.com)



For regularly updated information on meetings, conventions and other events, go to www.najit.org and click on "Calendar of Current and Future Events."