Clarifying the Interpreter's Role

Making Clear to the Israeli Client That the Interpreter Is Not Their Friend — and Why It Matters for Counsel, Court Reporters & Judges

Attorneys routinely encounter clients whose language and culture differ markedly from their own. When that difference is significant enough, an interpreter becomes essential — not merely to convert words, but to convey meaning. Israeli clients are a frequent example. Many speak limited English in daily life and, in the high-stakes environment of a deposition or courtroom, prefer to communicate through a Hebrew-to-English interpreter.

Once a Hebrew interpreter is present, however, a recurring cultural misunderstanding can arise: the client may begin to treat the interpreter as a personal ally or friend rather than a neutral officer of the court.

Note on terminology: Professionals reserve "interpreter" for spoken communication and "translator" for written work. Lay usage often confuses the two. This case study uses "interpreter."

The Phenomenon: Viewing the Interpreter as a Friend or Ally

Many Israeli clients experience genuine relief at finally having someone who speaks their language. That relief can quickly turn into a mistaken belief that the interpreter is "on their side" — a confidant, advisor, or even a shoulder to lean on. Clients may fail to grasp that the interpreter is an officer of the court, bound by strict impartiality.

This misunderstanding can lead to repeated attempts by the client to:

- Ask the interpreter questions or seek advice
- Request that the interpreter suggest wording that might help their case
- Involve the interpreter in improper or even unethical requests

It is the interpreter's professional duty to make the boundaries clear — repeatedly if necessary. The interpreter must remain impartial at all times and is obliged to:

- Interpret statements made as part of the proceeding accurately and completely
- Disclose any clarification or response the interpreter makes as part of the proceeding

Privileged attorney–client communications must remain confidential and are not reported to the court.

When Culture Collides with the Record

Without clear boundaries, the client's attempts to treat the interpreter as a friend or ally can create ethical problems, disrupt the proceeding, and place the interpreter in an untenable position. Counsel who understand this cultural dynamic can support the interpreter in maintaining proper role boundaries from the outset.

Key Takeaway for Legal Professionals

If you represent, depose, or examine a native Hebrew speaker — or interact with Israelis in any formal setting — be aware that clients may initially view the interpreter as a personal ally rather than a neutral officer of the court. This is a cultural misunderstanding, not deliberate misconduct.

An experienced interpreter does far more than render words. In courtroom, deposition, hearing, and meeting settings, a skilled Hebrew interpreter serves as a cultural disambiguator — preventing misunderstanding among client, attorney, judge, and court reporter. It is not the interpreter's role to be the client's friend.

Ready to eliminate cultural blind spots and communicate with precision?

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