Nonverbal Communications & Cultural Differences in Courtrooms and Depositions

Understanding the Israeli “Tongue Click” — 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.

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: The Israeli Tongue Click

There is a culturally specific nonverbal response that every attorney, court reporter, and judge who works with native Hebrew speakers should recognize: the “tongue click” — a soft tsk or nsk sound. In Israeli and Hebrew-speaking culture, this click is a clear, colloquial way of saying “no.” It is not hesitation, not a verbal tic, and not silence. To the speaker it is a complete, affirmative negative answer.

Question	Israeli Response	Intended Meaning
“Were you there at the time of the incident?”	Tsk / Nsk	No
“Did you know the victim?”	Tsk / Nsk	No
“Can you describe the person involved?”	Tsk / Nsk	No

When Culture Collides with the Record

In the mind of the Israeli deponent or witness, each click is a perfect “no.” To the attorney, court reporter, and judge, however, the response is nonverbal and easily missed — or dismissed as non-responsive. One attorney, after the interpreter rendered “no” for the fourth consecutive time during rapid-fire questioning, turned and shouted at the interpreter: “NO VERBAL RESPONSE WAS GIVEN!!!” The pace left no room for the interpreter to pause and educate counsel that the tongue click is a culturally standard, unambiguous negative. The misunderstanding was entirely cultural, not linguistic.

Key Takeaway for Legal Professionals

If you represent, depose, or examine a native Hebrew speaker — or interact with Israelis in any formal setting — listen for the subtle tongue click. It is not a verbal tick. It is a clear “NO.” Once you recognize it, a simple clarifying question confirms the record: “I believe I heard a tongue click — did you mean ‘no’?” Identifying this cue prevents ambiguity, protects the integrity of the transcript, and demonstrates cultural competence.

An experienced interpreter does far more than render words. In courtroom, deposition, hearing, and meeting settings, a skilled Hebrew interpreter also serves as a cultural disambiguator — alerting counsel to subtle cues, preventing miscommunication, and helping every participant (client, attorney, judge, and court reporter) perform at their best.

Ready to eliminate cultural blind spots and communicate with precision?

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