

# Managing interpreting for domestic violence cases

*Terena Bell*

Let's face it: in-country review isn't typically done for interpreting. To be honest, the turn-around time alone makes it impossible. I mean, what are you going to do? Record a simultaneous interpreter at work, e-mail the mp3 to Spain, then have the attendees wait while someone reviews it? Not only is that a logistics nightmare, it's also ludicrous. In the language services world, if translation is polished, with its myriad of project management protocols, then time alone dictates that interpreting is the quintessential quick and dirty.

The trick is, though, that while interpreting has to be quick, it doesn't have to be dirty. Qualified, skilled interpreters are consistently looking for ways to clean up their work. In the United States, medical interpreting certification is a new example of this. Healthcare interpreters who previously led a splintered existence in the fringes, picking up training where they could find it and fighting to differentiate themselves from ad hocs, can now get nationally-recognized certification from the Certification Commission for Healthcare Interpreters (CCHI). US legal interpreting has all but moved beyond the state-level, with federal court certification in place and the Consortium for Language Access in the Courts – formerly the Consortium for State Court Interpreter Certification – now at 40 member states. And other interpreting specializations are starting to crop up and define themselves as well. California now has a trade association specifically for workers' compensation interpreters, and in Kentucky, domestic violence interpreters are also finding their voice.

Through the Immigrant and Refugee Women Project, three partners (In Every Language, the Kentucky Domestic Violence Association and the Kentucky Association of Sexual Assault Programs) are currently in the process of cleaning up domestic violence interpreting, developing the nation's first certification for domestic violence interpreters. Out of the many steps taken in this process, the one that surprised me most was in-country review.

Which country, you ask? The United States. In Kentucky, where we've started the project, limited-English proficient



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(LEP) victims tend to speak Spanish, Russian, Swahili, French and Arabic; of these, Spanish is most requested, with victims primarily coming from Mexico and Cuba. There are 15 domestic violence shelters statewide, the bulk of which also assist rape and sexual assault victims. In addition to both individual and group counseling sessions, interpreting must be performed for rape kit administration, new client intake and processing, and residential meetings. Domestic violence is the leading cause of homelessness among American women and children, so domestic violence interpreters also work at economic success meetings and interpret for various community programs – such as insurance providers and public transit – that serve the impoverished. In addition to this, there's all the legal work that needs to be done as court-appointed interpreters may not always be available: emergency protective order (EPO) and/or domestic violence order filings and hearings, divorce filings, custody hearings,



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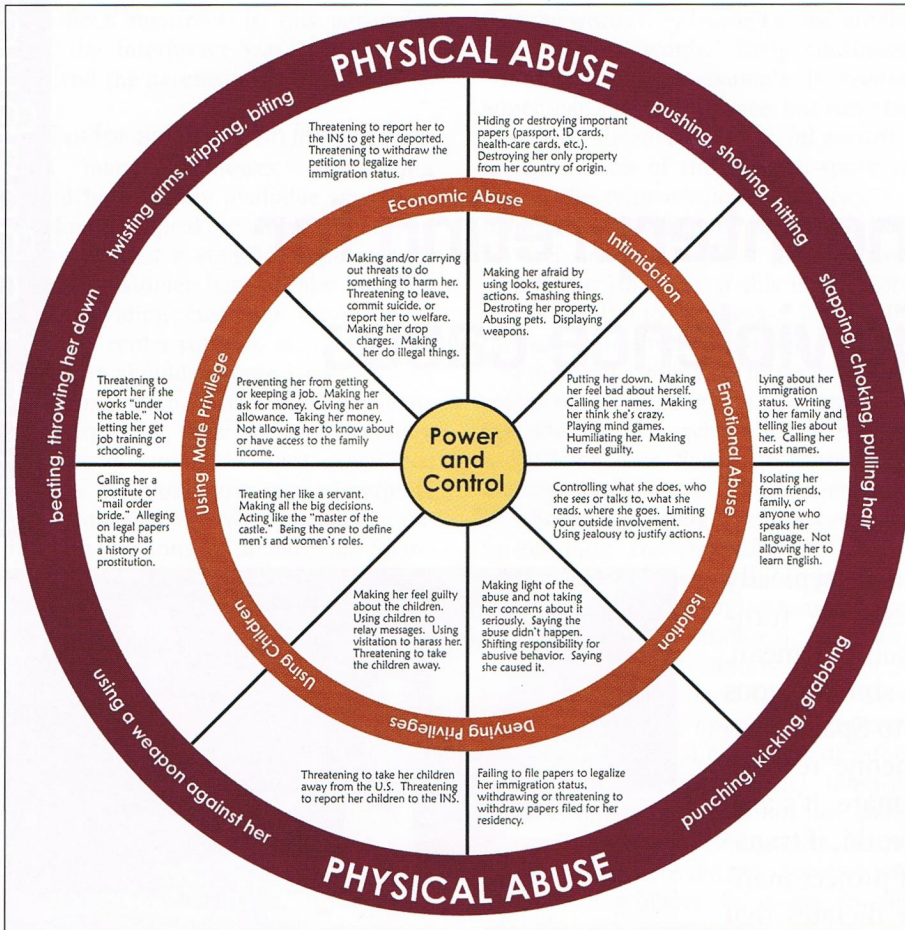


Figure 1: Immigrant power and control wheel. Produced and distributed by National Center on Domestic and Sexual Violence. [www.theduluthmodel.org/wheelgallery.php](http://www.theduluthmodel.org/wheelgallery.php).

criminal proceedings and arbitration meetings. Needless to say, that's a large vocabulary range for any interpreter.

There's a lot of high-stress vocabulary and the way interpreters use these vocabulary words can truly change people's lives. Latina women are less likely to seek help for dealing with domestic violence than any other US group, and many immigrants, regardless of ethnicity, are hesitant to report domestic violence because often their abusers threaten them with deportation, hide their visas and so on. In fact, the issues immigrant victims face are so unique that the Domestic Abuse Intervention Project has developed a separate power and control wheel just for them (Figure 1). The power and control wheel is used to help victims pinpoint instances when they have been abused. With issues this unique, the lexicon that interpreters use must be unique as well.

When In Every Language first started interpreting at The Center for Women and Families, Kentucky's largest domes-

tic violence and rape crisis shelter, The Center met language needs through both bilingual advocates and ad hoc interpreters from a local, refugee-resettlement agency. A few handouts had already been translated, some by the advocates, some by the K DOMESTIC VIOLENCEA or similar groups. Because of the myriad of subjects interpreted and the vulnerable nature of the LEPs we would work with, consistency was key.

In building this consistency, we approached interpreting for The Center as though it were a translation project. Since certification for domestic violence interpreting is still in development, we had a lot of freedom in how to determine the best quality control steps for our client. If The Center had been a translation client, our first step would have been to have created a translation memory (TM) out of their existing translations. So that's what we did. We created a TM for interpreters.

Words like *love* and *power*, although they seem simple at first, take on entirely

different constructs in domestic violence situations. Depending on the second language, there may even be more than one word. Love can come in many forms, and so can abusers. Human relationships are complex and abuse often comes from a partner or a family member, so the word an interpreter uses may change depending on a lot of different factors. Even the word *abuse* itself becomes problematic, as in American English we assume that damage is physical or sexual when we hear the word "abuse" by itself. But abuse can also be emotional or verbal. So when interpreting into English, sometimes an adjective has to be added. Sometimes clarification with the victim must be sought.

So, after running The Center's existing corpora through TM software, we checked it in-house. The employee who worked on the project was a state-court-qualified, practicing domestic violence interpreter who speaks both English and Spanish natively. She pulled out any terms that had been mistranslated in the provided materials, but didn't look for replacements at this point. After an initial read-through with the client, we decided the TM was good to get interpreters up and running, but that for long-term use, some tweaking should be done. The state certification project would also need a glossary that was a lot more extensive. We needed to add in additional terms that didn't appear in the translated literature, like police report and courtroom, and come to an agreement on translations for the terms that had been deleted in round one. The Commonwealth of Kentucky courts have a legal glossary available for interpreters, but a victim's education level and country of origin often change the translations used in a domestic violence construct. Just as with any other client, in constructing The Center's TM, we couldn't fully rely on TMs created for others. So round one left us with 82 terms – some polished, some not – and many more to add.

As with any good translation project, developing a TM for interpreting requires client collaboration. We assembled a team that took in our interpreting quality control staff, The Center's bilingual advocates and management, and a state-court-certified freelance interpreter who interprets in domestic violence settings almost daily. Whereas our initial TM reviewer had spoken Spanish from Spain, this new group also spoke Spanish from

Colombia, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Costa Rica and Spanish-speaking areas of the United States, such as Miami. One of the advocates involved was also a former domestic violence interpreter officially qualified by the Kentucky Cabinet for Health and Family Services.

For round two, the first thing we did was get interpreter feedback on the TM. They were using it in the field, so they knew best what worked and what didn't. In this way, they were their own in-country reviewers. They hadn't developed the TM, so they were third-party and they were working with the actual victims, so they knew any dialectical or on-site changes that would need to be made. Interpreter criticism came in two forms: some terms were missing, which we knew, and some terms needed to be changed. Instead of simply making these changes, though, we had our interpreters make notes as to why the changes were needed and then reviewed those notes in-house. Anything that looked purely subjective was passed over, so as not to burden our client, and all the others were passed on.

Center management and advocates then studied the implications of the words. Remember, *love* is not always love. Some words, like *gun*, had to change because of how they're specifically used in domestic violence interpreting. For example, *arma* was the original word in the TM. The interpreter wanted to change it to *pistola* (pistol) or *revólver* (revolver) in order to be more precise. The Center, though, wanted to leave it as *arma* because when the word *gun* is used, advocates are generally referring to firearms. In fact, a section of Kentucky's EPO prohibits respondents from purchasing or attempting to purchase a firearm, using that word specifically. This includes all kinds of weapons – rifles, shotguns, crossbows – but not necessarily handguns. *Pistola* and *revólver* only describe handguns. Like with the word *abuse*, we have a schema as to what the word *gun* entails. Abuse in American English is physical; a gun is a handgun. But in the world of domestic violence, these words take on different meanings.

Another example is *docket*. This was a term our interpreter had added, not changed. For *docket*, the Kentucky courts prefer legal interpreters use *lista de comparecientes*. When we sent the TM over to The Center, though, advocates preferred *orden del día* (agenda), a much simpler

alternative. In fact, when it comes to legal terminology overall, Center advocates prefer to de-legalise as much as they can. Reporting domestic violence and seeking help can be overwhelming even if you speak English. Add a language barrier between you and the services meant to help you, and the legal processes involved grow even more difficult. As Center advocate Robin Valenzuela puts it, "Legal jargon can be overwhelming and intimidating for our clients – especially if their education level is lower. I also accompany those terms with a lot of explanation as to what they mean. Remember, our purpose is different than that of a strictly legal interpreter. We want the client to understand more than we care about implementing legal jargon."

These examples speak as to the differences between domestic violence interpreting and interpreting in other settings. One example, though, really speaks to the heart of what domestic violence is and to the power of the words we used: to be forced. To be, in Spanish, can be one of two words – *ser* or *estar* – depending on the context. In high school Spanish, my teacher made it quick and dirty for us students by saying that *ser* is permanent, whereas *estar* is temporary. She also said *estar* describes you, whereas *ser* is something that you are. *Ser* is also used in passive

voice constructions, whereas *estar* is more active. So is it *ser forzada* or *estar forzada*? How deep does the violence go? Does having been abused describe you or does it define you? Did things just happen or is there somewhere the responsibility lies?

Our words have meaning and we must be careful with them. In the end, the back and forth stopped and our team came to an agreement on which ones to use. Our "in-country review" almost complete, a 131-term TM was distributed at a K DOMESTIC VIOLENCE training for domestic violence interpreters working state-wide. Interpreters from all sections of the state workshoped the glossary to make sure we hadn't overlooked any terms or translations that might not be essential in Louisville but that were essential in other parts of Kentucky. In the end, no changes were made, but the TM was transformed into a training piece intended to help domestic violence interpreters consider the larger picture wrapped around small words. The TM may be completed and circulated, but we are still learning. Interpreting, as I mentioned before, is the quintessential quick. Words come in one part of you and out another and it takes training to make memory. There is no time to check against your resources; the TM must be part of you. *Ser*. **M**

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