



Distilled words and filtered conversations: Findings from comparing interpreted and first-language talk in focus groups with community interpreters

laura.tucker@york.ac.uk kate.gridley@york.ac.uk and Mohammed Rauf March 2025

For more
information on
the Good Life
with Dementia
research scan
the QR code:



FUNDED BY

NIHR | National Institute for
Health and Care Research

Example 1:

Unexpected answers may have linguistic explanations:

Some responses seemed unrelated to the question until the fuller translation revealed a missing shift in meaning:

How do services make sure they are culturally appropriate?

Researcher [speaking English]

She is asking the question that they are talking about running the group and whether we should include about our culture and religion within that group or not?

We are all human beings, whether it is a white person or me, we are all human beings and we all have our different habits. That doesn't mean that we've got to alter the course according to my religious needs, that's way out.

Interpreter [speaking Urdu] not in standard transcript

Participant [speaking English]

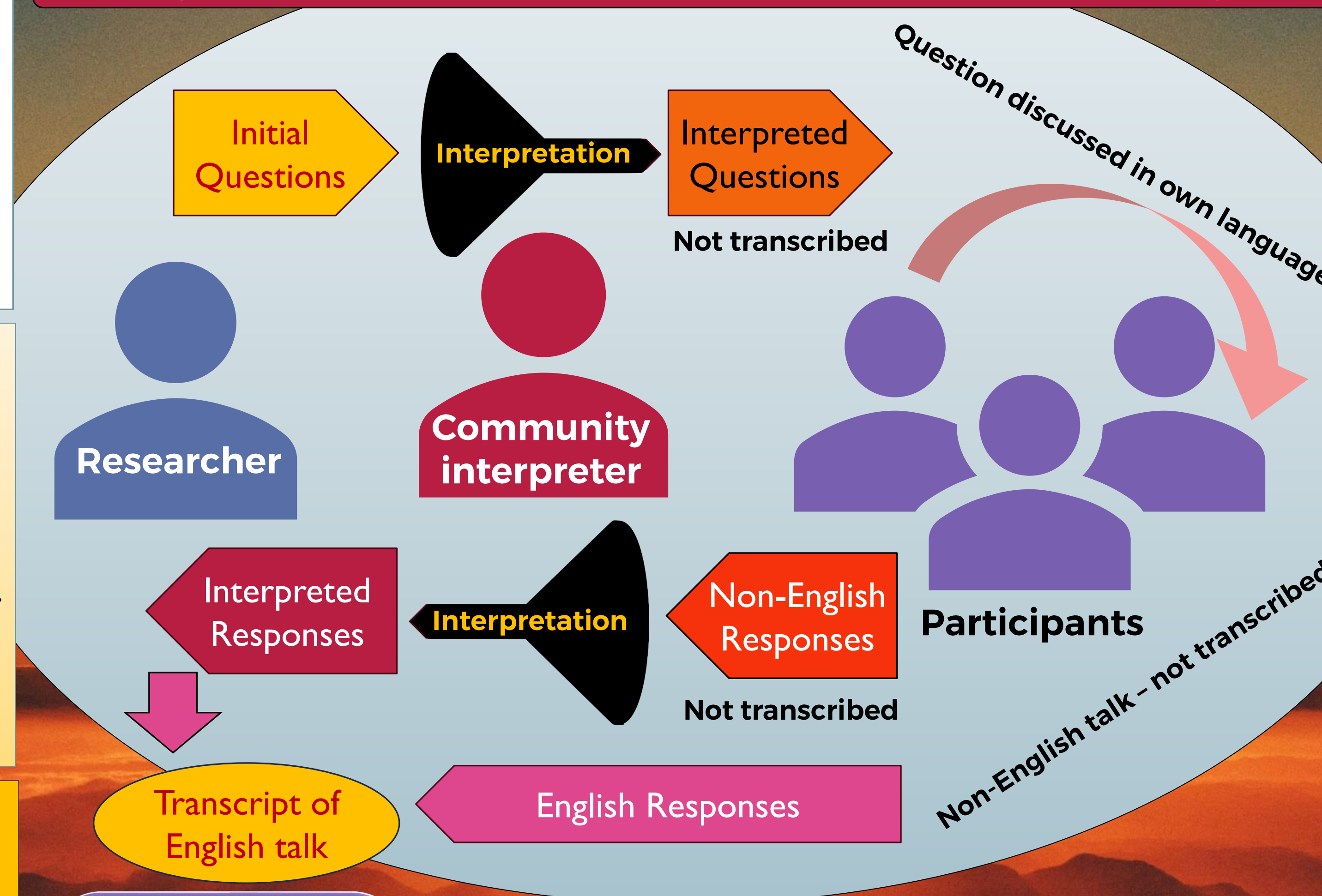
Above: The initial question was about cultural appropriateness, but the interpreted answer seemed defensive and was specifically was about religion – without the enhanced transcript we could not see why.

Below: The interpreter filtered the first part of the response, perhaps thinking it would not be socially acceptable, but filtering means research could miss important learning from people's nuanced views.

She's saying when the whole family lived together it was easier because they could do it as a team and you need a team.

Interpreter [speaking English]

Meaning & nuance can be lost at multiple points in an interpreted focus group:



Example 2:

Perceived social desirability may filter responses:

Participants may feel more comfortable sharing with community interpreters than professional interpreters (and so may be less likely to self-filter), but interpreters may filter their responses instead:

A man can take care of another man's personal care better, a woman can't, also in the house where everyone lives together, what happens is that they work as a team.

Participant [speaking Urdu]

Groups may be more comfortable with interpreters who are known to them and *that is ok – we just need to find ways to make this work...*

Background: Four community groups of South Asian people affected by dementia took part in four focus groups for the NIHR Three Schools Good Life study (see QR code). They chose to have community interpreters (members of their own groups) interpret between the English-speaking researcher and participants who spoke a range of languages (Urdu, Punjab and some English).

The problem: Standard transcripts only include the English talk (the questions asked in English and the answers given in English by participants and by interpreters, but not the non-English talk). Much was missed, so we decided to have the remaining (non-English) talk professionally translated and transcribed. An NIHR Three Schools impact award funded critical discourse analysis of these enhanced transcripts to identify methodological insights.

We learnt: Interpreted responses cannot always be taken at face value. Concepts go through multiple filters between initial presentation by the researcher, comprehension and presentation by the interpreter, processing and discussion by participants and a final interpreted response that is also often reduced to the essence of the idea. At each point meaning and nuance can be lost, and the process can also be influenced by power dynamics and social

Recommendations:

- 1. Preparation is key:** Complex concepts can be challenging to convey in-situ and the potential for misunderstanding is high. Build in time to prepare with interpreters in advance: check understanding, discuss how to clarify meaning and agree roles. **De-brief after.**
- 2. Work with small groups:** Large groups can be challenging for interpreters, especially where multiple speakers raise different points simultaneously. In small groups every voice can be heard.
- 3. Record and transcribe as much as possible:** Decisions are constantly being made in interpreted focus groups about what to convey and how. Recordings can help to capture the detail and nuance of participant accounts. Translation apps could supplement in-situ interpretation.