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Intellectual Output 3: Course material in module Language and intercultural communication

Article 1

Language challenges in career guidance and counselling conversations with clients with migrant background

This article is part of the CMinaR project, an Erasmus+ project which aims to develop career guidance and counselling for refugees, in order to facilitate integration into the labor market. The article is a revised and adapted version of an article originally published by the Swedish National Agency for Education (Sundelin, 2017a).

Introduction

Both the report from intellectual output (IO) 1 and 2 in the CMinaR-project emphasized language and intercultural communication as important questions to address in career guidance and counselling (CGC) with migrant clients/refugees. The IO 1 report[1] focused on two central aspects of the theme Language and intercultural communication. One aspect concerned refugees' learning of the language in the host country. It was emphasized that knowledge of the language of the host country is an essential part of integration in society. The other aspect concerned language and intercultural challenges in counselling settings. The Swedish report, for example, points out that counsellors perceive their counselling skills as insufficient due to language differences and the intercultural meeting, among other factors. The report from the UK refers to Bimrose, J., & McNair, S., (2011), which highlights and explores the challenges

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[1] Hertzberg (2017)

faced when offering guidance to different types of migrants, especially as it is insufficient to transplant current models which may be irrelevant or inefficient for a migrant's particular needs. The question about managing language and intercultural communication is an urgent matter in career guidance and counselling with refugees. The career counsellors in the IO 2 report[2] also points out language and intercultural communication as major challenges in CGC conversations with migrant clients/refugees.

The aim with the article is to provide a background and starting point for the module Language and intercultural communication in IO 3. The article is also intended to support the implementation of the module. The intention is to provide an overall picture, based on current research and theory, of questions on language asymmetries in CGC conversations between newly-arrived clients and counsellors. It begins with an introduction of some of the challenges with regard to language and understanding in guidance counselling with migrants; these concern the challenges for both clients and counsellors to understand each other. Then strategies and methods are introduced that studies show that counsellors use to support newly-arrived clients' possibilities to take part in guidance counselling despite language challenges.

In order to bridge language differences in conversations, it is of course in many cases helpful to use an interpreter. The use of interpreters in counselling is examined in article 3, IO 3, within the CMinaR project. This text mainly deals with counselling that takes place without an interpreter.

Language asymmetries in institutional talk

CGC conversations can be designated as institutional talk. Institutional talk takes place in various fields with the aim of dealing with individuals questions in relation to societal institutions.[3] These conversations are characterised by being framed and limited by specific norms, rules and regulations; they often have specific purposes and aims which are to be met in the conversation. What also characterises institutional talk is the built-in asymmetry between the participants, which in turn comes from the institutional context.[4] The professional participant often possesses knowledge or information that the other participant is in need of and wants to get hold of. Mostly the professional also has greater experience of the conversation

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[2] Kohn (2017)

[3] Linell (2011)

[4] Ibid

genre and has developed strategies for managing the conversation.[5] According to their roles and positions the two participants have different possibilities to influence the conversation. Thus, the fact that a professional participant dominates a conversation seems as a natural consequence of the differences in knowledge and experience between participants in an institutional setting.[6]

Interaction in CGC conversations in general departs from asymmetries in knowledge between the participants: the counsellor has knowledge about career issues that the counselee often needs. In addition to the fact that the knowledge asymmetries often are large in conversations with migrants, there is often language asymmetries as well, which affects the conversations. Newly-arrived immigrants/refugees are often beginners in the receiving country's language and face many challenges in CGC.

Studies of second-language learning show that the ability to link words to their meaning is a special process that develops gradually, and that it takes time for new words to be integrated in a vocabulary.[7] We often recognise words before we have understood their meaning, which means that, in many cases we have an incomplete picture of a word's meaning to begin with. Research on multilingualism shows that it takes about one to two years to develop a conversational language, and between six and eight years to master a subject language.[8]

In the following quotation, the Swedish-Albanian teacher and poet Entela Tabaku Sörman looks back on her life in Sweden and her experiences of living with and communicating on a new language:

> Summer vacation job as a teacher of Swedish as a second language. This is the last week of teaching. Among the adult students is my 27-year-old self. I find it difficult to be rid of her, to let her go. I know what her life is going to be like. In a few years' time she will lose her feeling for her mother tongue, stop thinking, dreaming, writing poetry, stop talking her mother tongue with her children. She will become part of the new language, love it, gobble up everything written in Swedish, want to relax in it as if she was born in it. But that's just a fancy. The feeling of a mother tongue will never be there. Doubt will always remain. Is that right? Did I write, did I say right? Check again! Is the language as good as the thought? Can I see the light? Is there light? She will never again know whether what she says is what she means, properly. But she will also get a completely new understanding of language and people. She will step into a 3D dimension where life is so much more than just flat and black and white. I feel like going up to her and saying: "My dear, don't give up, don't go under, you are not your language mistakes!" But she has gone. Twenty years have passed.[9]

[5] Ibid

[6] Ohlsson (2012, p 150)

[7] Viberg (2016)

[8] Axelsson (2015)

[9] Tabaku Sörman (2017)

Tabaku Sörman describes a linguistic insecurity that won't let go of her despite her many years in Sweden. The quote illustrates not only the linguistic but emotional challenges that go with communicating in a new language.

CGC conversations deals with questions concerning a society's way of organising education and work, which may be seen as a subject language containing words and concepts with complex meanings. Many lack both the language for and the experience of career questions in the new country and have to learn about societal conditions that may in many respects be different. Their experience of how working life is organised and of systems for changing careers might differ from the new country's conditions: for example, pay structure, mobility in the labour market, job application processes and selection to education and jobs. CGC conversations put great demands on the client's language skills, and the conversations may create a communication obstacle for migrant clients.[10]

The language asymmetry hence also puts great demands on the counsellor's ability to cope with this, for example to describe and explain words and concepts within the field.[11] Counsellors experience this as a great challenge. One of them puts it like this:

> Usually there is an awful lot of information, again and again. You get quite confused about what you're saying in the lessons, it's like being on and off. They can come down three hours later and ask about what I just - yet we're very open for questions and they can interrupt and you explain again – or it's because they want to make sure they have understood. It's difficult to say. Yeah, there's an awful lot of information. [12]

In the Swedish IO 2 report in this project one counsellor says that both parties find it difficult to make themselves understood. "There can be two frustrated people who meet."[13] He also says that, above all, it can be difficult to know what clients have understood from a conversation.

Interplay that support understanding
However, Swedish studies[4] of CGC conversations with migrants give the impression that there is sufficient language understanding between the participants for the most part, and that it is of no great significance when the clients are beginners in Swedish. For example, in Sundelin's

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[10] Sheikhi (2013, p 231)
[11] Sundelin (2017b)
[12] Sundelin (2015, p 206)
[13] Sundelin (2017b)

(2015) study of career conversations with newly arrived clients on upper secondary level there are not many obvious misunderstandings. It seems as if the participants succeed very well in managing the language and knowledge asymmetries. Students and counsellors interplay so that they mainly reach mutual understanding in the conversations. Several examples of this are provided in Sundelin's study. Here is an excerpt from one conversation when the student and the counsellor are exploring different education opportunities:

C   Care is also good. Tell me more about what makes Care good.
E   Having contact with people, like helping them. You don't do difficult things, you don't need muscles or be like the people who do construction work and so on. They have to be strong, you know. But here you have to be sort of … nice.
C   What jobs can you think of in Care then?
S   Nurse.
C   What do you think about that?
S   How do you mean?
C   Does it seem to be a good job – or what do you do?
S   It's a good job but the pay is bad. You don't get much money but otherwise it's OK.

The participants cooperate to create understanding. The counsellor switches between reformulating, asking and clarifying the questions. The student switches between answering the counsellor's questions and asking questions when he does not understand. This is a pattern of interplay which recurs in the study, creating understanding as the conversation proceeds. One way of understanding this, as Hydén claims, is that the basis for interaction is that people collaborate in order to reach mutual understanding: "On the basis of our assumptions about each other and about the common situation, we try to organise our interplay so that our actions are mutually comprehensible and can be understood".[14]

Uncertain understanding
As in all communication between people, there may, however, be uncertainty about to what extent understanding has been reached. Goffman's concept and perspective on social interaction is one way of understanding uncertainty in conversations.[15] In interaction, people try all the time to present themselves as having a positive value for others by doing so-called face work. Goffman argues that those taking part in a conversation attempt in their behaviour to preserve respect both for themselves and for the others: "[Nearly every] act is taken to carry implications regarding the character of the actor and his evaluation of his listeners, as well as

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[14] Hydén (2001, p 21)
[15] Goffman (1981)

reflecting on the relationship between him and them". [16] In order to maintain our respect with others, we therefore avoid to reveal what we perceive as personal shortcomings or weaknesses. A smile, for example, can mask feelings of uncertainty in a situation.

Research shows that newly-arrived immigrants/refugees notice their inferior language situation in counselling and do their best to maintain their self-respect despite their shortcomings. It is stressful both to communicate in a foreign language and to admit one's shortcomings. One way to cope with the situation is to not reveal lack of understanding. In Sundelin's study, one counsellor says to a student that he can probably "put ants in their pants". The student laughs in agreement and it is easy to draw the conclusion that he has understood what the counsellor meant. In the subsequent interview, however, it becomes apparent that he did not understand and the student says: "I can pretend to listen and smile and understand but in my body, in my brain, I'm thinking of something else." [17]. It seems like the student has developed a kind of expertise in hiding his language shortcomings.

A further example on the uncertain understanding in interaction is when, in the same conversation as above, it appears that the student hasn't realised that the counsellor has made an application for him on the computer during the conversation. This does not come out until later when the student asks if they can apply to the upper secondary school:

S   When can we make an application to the upper secondary school?
C   We've already done that.
S   Oh, have you done it?
C   Yes, so now let's look at that IB program.

The student's lack of understanding becomes visible first when he asks about the application. When the participants metacommunicate[18] about the conversation, the misunderstanding is dissolved.

There are also aspects of uncertainty about understanding that have to do with our difficulty to estimate other people's reactions and feelings in intercultural meetings. When we communicate with people who are very different from us, and who also have limited access to the language,

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[16] Goffman (1981, p 21)
[17] Sundelin (2015, p 232)
[18] Sundelin (2015, p 71)

we can run into difficulties concerning our conclusions about what other people mean and feel.[19] Sundelin's study[20] shows, for example, that counsellors sometimes did not understand when their students made their migrant background relevant to their future planning. This is illustrated in the following excerpt where one student discusses the opportunity to practice as one important factor when choosing future education:

S   It's good for me to do practice work, I feel better.

C   So the practice work is a bit like what you feel and you get a job that feels good.

S   Then I'm into society, with the people.

C   If you do another year of Language Introduction, do you think you would feel safer about doing the Social program? In that case would you be better, and not feel it was so difficult to take the Social program?

The student seems to be talking about the importance of belonging in Swedish society, whereas the counsellor seems to understand it as a question about getting a job and managing an education. The counsellor use reformulation, which is a method for supporting both the counsellor's and the client's understanding, but she does not seem to really catch the questions and feelings that the student raises. Sundelin draws the conclusion that the counsellor's lack of personal experience of migration seems to affect the ability to understand when clients make the migrant position important in thoughts about the future.

This section has thrown light on some of the challenges concerning language and understanding when counselling newly-arrived immigrants: the clients' and the counsellors' possibilities to understand each other. In order to deal with the language asymmetries, the counsellor develops strategies for supporting newly-arrived clients' possibilities to take part in counselling despite language barriers. The next section presents some of these strategies on the basis of studies of counselling conversations and interviews with counsellors.

Managing language asymmetries in counselling

Supporting client's participation

In order to deal with the communicative barrier that counselling may mean for newly-arrived immigrants, Sheikhi states that counsellors need to take responsibility for communication by

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[19] Scollon & Scollon (2001), Tannen (1984)

[20] Sundelin (2015)

supporting them language-wise.i[21] She proposes that counsellors can do so by "sensitively reformulating" what their clients say in the conversations. Sheikhi identified a number of supportive speech talks from the counsellor, namely those who supported the ability of the second language speakers to take part and understand the content in the conversation: reformulation, limiting questions, introduction and conclusion of utterances (introduction or conclusion of the utterances of the second language speaker), repetition and meta comments.Using *reformulation* was also shown in Sundelin's study to be a favourable strategy for supporting students' understanding. The Swedish IO 2 report[22] within this project also emphasises the value of reformulation as a way of dealing with language asymmetries. One central function when counselling newly-arrived immigrants is to try to capture what they have understood of the conversation, but at least as important is to capture what they have not understood. Reformulating the clients' understanding may be a tool by which the counsellor can create clarity in what has been understood in the conversation.

Reformulation as a favourable strategy also seems to be two-sided. One counsellor states that counsellors are trained to express understanding for their clients, but that in meetings with newly-arrived immigrants it seems to be even more important to find out what the clients have understood of the content.[23] In other words, it seems to be important to let the clients show their understanding by reformulating and summarising what has been said along the conversation.

Another strategy described in both Sheikhi's and Sundelin's studies was that counsellors suggested words and formulations when their clients seemed to have difficulty in expressing themselves. The short excerpt[24] below gives an example:

C (notes) Why are you interested in that? [S: What?]

S I like working with people.

C Working with people, yes. (notes) What else is interesting? I'm thinking of the job situation, if it's easy or difficult to get a job. What do you think?

S Maybe it's easy.

To give *suggestions* for answers to questions seems to go against the basic assumptions in counselling methodology, which usually prescribes that the counsellor should await the client's words. These interventions, however, seem to have a supporting function for newly-arrived

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[21] Sheikhi (2013, s. 231)
[22] Sundelin (2017b)
[23] Ibid
[24] Sundelin (2017b, s 126)

immigrants. The counsellor's suggestion clarifies the questions and offers the student possible ways to express herself. Intervening in this way seems to help the client out of a language difficulty; it may be seen as a repair strategy when there is a breakdown in the conversation.[25] However, it requires the counsellor's sensitivity to what the client's hesitation is due to. This hesitation need not be caused by a lack of language ability but can just as well be, for example, a sensitive subject or that the client simply feels that the question is irrelevant.[26]

The above-mentioned strategy may also be seen as giving the client a *break* in the hard work that counselling conversations can be for newly-arrived immigrants. Bearing in mind the stress that a beginner in a new language experiences when talking about career issues, breaks may be a positive strategy. Sheikhi's study also gives examples of what can be seen as breaks being used as a strategy. The counsellor in this study switches consciously between everyday and more institutional language and talks about career questions in relation to everyday questions; that is, he tries to combine subject language with everyday language to support the client's understanding.

The importance of *metacommunication* in the counselling process is highlighted in various conversation methods and seems to play an important role in dealing with language asymmetries in counselling. Here, metacommunication means talking explicitly about the counselling process and interaction rather than the content; that is, to talk about the process of the counselling, what questions the counselling is and has been about, the aims and direction of the conversation. It appears to be valuable to metacommunicate on repeated occasions in order to support a client's understanding of what is going on in the conversation. As shown in a previous example, metacommunication helps to sort out misunderstandings. Metacommunication also helps to make the students more active in the conversation, thereby improving their possibility to influence it. To metacommunicate as a counsellor in a conversation is one way of taking that communicative responsibility that Sheikhi suggests.

Experiments have shown that new words are better integrated after a good night's sleep or when new words are repeatedly introduced during one day.[27] Individual's development of language and concepts is supported when they are given opportunities to work with words and concepts

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[25] Using interpreters would of course be a better alternative to avoid the risk of affecting the client's response.
[26] Sheikhi (2013)
[27] Viberg (2016)

repeatedly over time. On courses organised for the the Swedish National Agency for Education, counsellors have described their cooperation with teachers in Swedish as a Second Language as being in line with this. Before meeting the counsellor, the students are prepared by the teachers presenting central words and concepts in the field of career in their classes. This provides the students with a more developed representation of the language of career and can have more influence in the counselling situation. Furthermore, instead of the counselling sessions being devoted to teaching words and concepts, it can focus on the students' personal questions concerning their future and career.

Counsellors' formulation strategies

So far, this article has highlighted counsellors' strategies for supporting clients' opportunity to take part in counselling despite language barriers. The following section presents counsellors' own formulation strategies; in other words, how counsellors work to make themselves understood. Unless otherwise stated, the examples will mostly be taken from this project's interview study[28] of counsellors with great experience of counselling newly-arrived migrants.

A basic starting point which counsellors in the study emphasise is that they have to reckon that most of their clients with migrant background do not have any experience of career guidance and counselling in their home country. Many come from countries where education and vocational choices function differently from in Europe and where CGC does not exist, in particular in the form of conversations that aim to let the clients make their own choices. Counsellors state that they have to be able to describe and explain the function, form and aim of counselling in a clear way. They also emphasise the importance of the counsellor explaining what formal power and rights a counsellor has, so that the client will have realistic expectations both of the counselling conversation and of the counsellor's role. To be able to do this, the informants state, counsellors must develop their own clear frame of reference regarding the function of counselling, their professional role and the conversation form.

In accordance with what has already been presented in this article, the study point out that it is a challenge to give information to people who are beginners in a language. In addition, information in the career field is difficult to interpret. Its complexity puts great demands on the counsellor's ability to balance and manage the information. The counsellor has to be clear and have ability to restrict the choices and make them understandable. In the opinion of the

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[28] Sundelin (2017b)

informants, the counsellor has to be able to communicate clearly and directly and simplify complex phenomena without reducing the content too much. They also emphasise how important it is to speak clearly and sometimes slowly as well to adapt the tempo to suit the clients' language status.

The interviewed counsellors stress the importance of using visual tools to support their conversations with newly-arrived immigrants. The tools that are particularly mentioned are drawing, making notes during the conversations and to use visual material like Google pictures, photos and other pictures. Both to get quick help with translations from the client's language into Swedish and to find pictures that that can help to understand, for example, a client's previous work experience. One counsellor says that he tries to visualise what is discussed during the conversations by drawing mind maps; he claims that "the understanding is on the paper". Drawing mind maps is perceived as very useful to facilitate the client's understanding of the contents of the conversations. Counsellors seems to use visual tools both to support a kind of translation of the information content and to make the clients involved in the discussion.

One counsellor means that she gets good help from her own language curiosity when meeting newly-arrived immigrants. She speaks several languages herself and tries to learn words and concepts that come up in the languages she meets regularly, so as to be able to use them in her counselling. This also creates a good contact with the clients, she says. The counsellor in Sheikhi's study sometimes switches between Swedish and English to help understanding. Research shows that the language and knowledge development of second-language speakers benefits from using their mother tongue parallel with the new language. [29] Letting students switch between saying words and concepts in the new language and their mother tongue (or English) may also be a useful strategy for supporting their understanding.

Concluding remarks

As we have seen, counselling newly-arrived immigrants places great demands on the counsellor's ability to deal with language asymmetries. As Kohn puts it, the question about language in CGC:

> opens up a wide range of challenges. It is not only about assessing client´s skill of the receiving country´s language and coping with a setting of counselling where both partners speak different

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[29] Skolverket (2016).

mother tongues. It´s also about taking into account what being a beginning speaker of the receiving country´s language means to the self-esteem of people, to the probability and effects of misunderstandings in every sphere of life (occupational and private), to ensuring the functionality of communication it counselling itself, in communication with network partners, in supporting measures, especially in training courses for clients, in the educational system and in the vocational system clients want to be integrated in.[30]

The heavy demands on second-language speakers' language skills in counselling can create a communication barrier for both the counsellor and the client. This communication barrier is not merely a matter of language effort but also has existential dimensions that are unspoken, often invisible yet still present in the conversations. When newly arrived refugees communicate with counsellors, they are very often in a linguistically inferior position; they have to battle not just with the language but also with their identity. It is not only mentally but also emotionally stressful to talk about questions concerning the future in a new language. It seems to be vital that the counsellor observes not only the language aspects of understanding but also that second-language speakers face the difficulty of making themselves understood with their own wishes, dreams and feelings about the future. Here, it is important for counsellors to notice when students make their migration experiences relevant for their future. To do so, it is important that counsellors acquire knowledge of migration and migration processes.

The following points for managing language asymmetries have been highlighted in the text:

Communicative support

- Conversation methods such as reformulation and summarisation
- Language breaks
- Metacommunication about the conversation process.

Clarity

- Clear language and a suitable tempo
- Clarify and simplify choices
- A clear frame of reference for the counselling function, the professional role and the the counselling conversation
- Checking the student's understanding

Creativity

- Explain and describe complex systems
- Visual tools
- Language openness, e.g. switching between languages

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[30] Kohn (2017)

Time

- Opportunities to repeatedly return to counsellor with career-related questions.
- Language education with focus on words and concepts in the field of career.

Sheikhi[31] concluded that the counsellors and the counselees managed to achieve sufficient reciprocal understanding, despite the linguistic asymmetries and that the CGC conversations initiated learning processes. Knowledge asymmetries in relation to educational matters and the labor market constituted a bigger obstacle for communication than a lack of linguistic understanding. Nevertheless, the conclusion can be drawn that, to increase counsellors' ability to manage both the language and the knowledge asymmetries in CGC conversations with refugees, the above stated points are important to address and depart from in training for counsellors meeting refugees.

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[31] Sheikhi (2013)

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