



# The Many Sides of "It Looks Good"

When a medical interpreter asks you for clarification, it is usually important.

by Andy Beggs, CMI

No novice interpreter makes the mistake more than once. She arrives at the Emergency Department, and the provider asks the patient, "What brings you to the hospital?" If the answer comes back, "The ambulance," then the interpreter has uttered a word-for-word translation of the question, and gotten the answer she deserves! In fact, in one now infamous case, the question "Are you sexually active?" elicited the response "No, I just kind of lie there!" These are problems that a professional medical interpreter soon learns to work around. The point is that a word-for-word translation is not what is required in most circumstances, and that the

medical interpreter takes great pains to get across the intended meaning, not a transliteration of the words issued from the mouth of the provider.

But things are not always that simple. I was recently doing an interpretation by video. The patient had been sent by her primary care physician, who had felt what might have been a mass in the patient's breast, and ordered a mammogram, an ultrasound, and an exam by a breast specialist. I was called to interpret for the ultrasound portion. From my vantage point behind the curtain and via video, I heard the doctor say the reassuring words, "I am looking at

the area where your doctor felt something. I want you to know that on both the mammogram and the ultrasound, it looks good." I proceeded with a completely acceptable interpretation in Spanish, which was, "Estoy viendo el area en la cual su doctora sintió algo. Quiero que usted sepa que tanto en la mamografía como en el ultrasonido, se ve bien." The problem was that this was a one in a million case in which "se ve bien" could be interpreted as "it looks good", or alternatively as "it can be seen very well" (i.e., the mass can be seen very clearly!)

Immediately sensing the patient's consternation, I informed the doctor

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March 2014 was a record breaking month at MGH MIS. Never before had we recorded 5,662 staff interpretations in one month; nor 12,327 phone calls that were handled in our call center. This averaged a whopping 625 calls per day.

There were also 777 video calls and 2,018 phone interpretations. Congratulations!

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## Cultural Corner:

*"Could we get a Brazilian interpreter please?"* By Flavia Smith

Though on the surface this sounds like an odd request, in some ways, it is not so far-fetched.

Portuguese is the official language of Portugal, Brazil, Azores, Cape Verde, Madeira, Mozambique, Angola, Guinea-Bissau, São Tomé and Príncipe, and is also spoken in parts of Asia (Goa, Daman, Diu, Macau, East Timor, Sri Lanka,

Malacca).

The Iberian peninsula (modern day Spain and Portugal) has a long history of encounters among cultural and linguistic groups including Celts, Germans, Phoenicians, Greeks, Romans, and Arabs.

The Portuguese language is structurally based on the Latin spoken by Roman soldiers. This colloquial Latin evolved

into several Romance languages, one being Galician-Portuguese. In 1325, these languages split, and Portugal was no longer under Galician (Spain) or Moorish/Muslim rule.

Between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Portuguese language spread to the four corners of the world with maritime explorations and colonies in Africa, Asia, and South America.

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## MIS represented in Culturally Competent Care Event

On Monday, April 6th the Norman Knight Nursing Center for Clinical & Professional Development in collaboration and partnership with the Collaborative Governance Diversity Committee offered an educational event, ***Providing Culturally Competent Care to a Diverse Patient Population***. Our colleague, Marina Michurina, CMI, was part of a large panel of employees, representing different role groups and cultures who discussed their specific cultural values as it relates to

healthcare. Each panel member talked about topics such as how pain is expressed, or not, in their culture; who makes medical decisions in the family; what spiritual rituals are important related to death and dying. This event offered a rich discussion of cultural beliefs to help clinicians begin the discussion with patients and families around issues that may impact their care.



Our colleague, Marina Michurina, CMI, Russian medical interpreter discusses the nuances of the Russian culture

### *Cont from Page 1; Brazilian Interpreter Please?*

In 1500, the Portuguese discovered Brazil, and over time, with the contact of the languages of the Indigenous Indians and the Africans brought from Africa, the spoken language changed here. Later, in the late 19th century, European and Asian immigrants arrived in Brazil, and new changes in the Brazilian way of speaking were introduced.

There seems to be a greater variety in the accent or pronunciation of Portuguese speakers relative to Spanish speakers. Similarly to British and American English (and Scottish and Australian), there are differences between European or Continental and Brazilian Portuguese. They speak the same basic language, most grammar rules are the same, as is the vast majority of vocabulary.

The differences between Portuguese dialects are mostly in phonology, in use of cer-

tain grammatical forms, some vocabulary, especially in expressions, and in formal and informal ways of speaking. All Portuguese dialects are mutually intelligible, although some of the phonological changes may create difficulties in rapid speech. Portuguese people understand Brazilian Portuguese because Brazilian Portuguese vowels are pronounced and not reduced, and there has been a higher exposure to Brazilian Portuguese through Brazilian TV soap operas and Brazilian music. African and Indigenous influences have influenced Brazilian Portuguese, resulting in a softer pronunciation.

When Brazilians normally don't understand Continental Portuguese it could be because of differences in phonetics, the speed of speech, they don't pronounce all the vowels, and also, comparatively, there has been a certain lack of exposure to the Continental

Portuguese and its culture.

European Portuguese tends to have words more closely related to other Romance languages, particularly Spanish, whereas Brazilian Portuguese has incorporated more words from Africa, Indigenous languages, North America, and the languages of the European and Asian immigrants.

Nowadays, most interpreters have been exposed to several varieties of dialects, as have their clients. Additionally, both parties have been exposed to a third culture, the local culture, in our case, of New England. In a medical setting, the patient, and the interpreter can judge what ingredients will make up the ideal recipe. The patient or interpreter who cannot understand the other to the point that it is affecting comprehension, requests to get another interpreter. The majority of patients and interpreters can communicate. But it can, and does

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### *Cont from Page 1; "It looks good"*

that a linguistic subtlety had caused a bit of confusion, and asked "Do you mean that you do not see anything, Doctor?"

"I don't understand your question, sir," said the doctor. But then she rephrased her statement, "I don't see anything

concerning on either the mammogram or the ultrasound."

"Thank you, doctor," I immediately replied, and got right to the point both linguistically and in a way that calmed the patient's fears.

Medical Interpreters, by virtue of working daily in two, three, or sometimes

more languages, and by hearing the patient's reactions first hand, know when a fix is necessary. Take the time to work through these moments with the interpreter.

Medical Interpretation is more complex than it looks.



Since our last issue of *The Interpreter* there have been a number of celebrations. Here are a few photos from some of them.

Holiday Celebration 2014



Erika's Farewell Potluck Vegan Lunch!



Sayoko's 80th Birthday Party

*Cont from Page 2; Brazilian Interpreter Please?*

happen, that an Azorian patient will request an interpreter from Portugal, or that a Brazilian patient will request an interpreter from Brasil. (For more viewing on this topic: <http://www3.tvcultura.com.br/laeca/>)

#### CAPE VERDEAN CREOLE (PORTUGUESE CREOLE) AND PORTUGUESE

All Cape Verdeans speak Cape Verdean Creole, and many speak Portuguese. The official language of Cape Verde is Portuguese, however, communication between inhabitants of the 9 islands is in Cape Verdean Creole, the result of a mixing of Portuguese with the languages of the coast of Guiné. Creole is used in daily life, while Portuguese is used in official situations, such as in educational settings and in the social media. As happens in most creoles, the lexicon of these languages can be traced to the parent languages, usually with a predominance of Portu-

guese; while the grammar is mostly original and unique to each Creole with little resemblance to the syntax of Portuguese or of other parent languages.

#### ARE SPANISH AND PORTUGUESE INTERCHANGEABLE?

Spanish and Portuguese both belong to the same linguistic family and Spain and Portugal are neighbors. Both are Romantic languages that originated from Latin after fragmenting into their own separate languages. Although Portuguese and Spanish are closely related, to the point of having considerable degrees of mutual intelligibility, there are differences which can pose challenges for people acquainted with one and trying to learn the other. Even among Portuguese speakers originating from different countries difficulties may arise. As an analogy, in English, we have only to listen to people speaking in South Carolina, Tennessee, New York City, and Billerica, Massachusetts. The Interpreter's Department once received a

request from a nurse in desperate need of a New Zealand interpreter!

Many Portuguese and Spanish words are similar, for example, dor /dolor, leite/leche. But many words are false cognates. In the medical context, if a Spanish speaker says he is "flaco" that means he is skinny. If a Portuguese speaker says he is "fraco" that means he is weak. If a Spanish speaker says she is "embarazada" that means she is pregnant. If a Portuguese speaker says she is "embaraçada" that means she is embarrassed, ashamed. If a Spanish speaker says the cut was very "largo" that means it is very long. If a Portuguese speaker says the cut was very "largo" that means it is very wide.

So, while Brazilian is not a language in itself, it is easy to see why someone would request a "Brazilian" interpreter!

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*The MIS Newsletter was created in response to the need for a new and improved mode of inter-departmental communication. The information shared in this publication is intended for the use of MGH MIS staff and freelance interpreters.*

*We are always looking for information and ideas for articles that would interest our readers. Please submit any contributions that you might have to Chris Kirwan at the email address given to the left.*

*Whether you have an important event that impacts our profession, an article that might be of interest, or general information that the department might find useful, please help to make this instrument an effective method of communication.*

*Thank you!*

## Interpreter Profile: Wayne Chen, CHI (Certified Healthcare Interpreter)

*By Andy Beggs, CMI*

**Country: China**

**Languages: Mandarin and Cantonese**

Though he has been with us at MGH for almost a year, Wayne Chen has been a Medical Interpreter since 2001. He actually began interpreting in a very personal way, interpreting for his father who was sick at Beth Israel Hospital. During this experience he learned from the interpreters at that hospital that interpreting was an actual profession. Wayne had come to this country in 1991, and first worked not as an interpreter but as a waiter in a restaurant. During this time, Wayne did make one important trip back to China to marry his college classmate and sweetheart, but he returned soon to the USA to work so that he could bring her here. She was able to come two years later, and the couple now has a daughter in high school.



Helping people is the most important thing about interpreting for Wayne. "Chinese people are humble," he says, "and are always so thankful for help." He also stresses the importance of cooperation between co-workers. This means working the other Chinese interpreter in the office, who is a

"tremendously nice person" and has helped coach him on the new systems at the MGH. Teamwork also means letting the Coordinators know what you are doing right away after an interpretation, thus making the Coordinators' job easier. "It is not just you, it is a larger group," says Wayne.

Wayne loves to take pictures, and photography has been his hobby since he was little. As a part time photographer, he has his own photo sharing website at [www.flickr.com/xiaomawen](http://www.flickr.com/xiaomawen). He encourages his fellow interpreters to take a look!

Sadly Wayne's father passed away while at the Beth Israel, where Wayne first began interpreting. But the experience of helping his father led to a whole new career, one that has changed his life. "Helping people is my passion," says Wayne. What better way to do it than through interpreting?