Mother and other tongues

Ali Zarbafi discusses the importance of the second language as a bridge to greater self-awareness and release in the therapeutic space

I recently hosted a workshop at the BACP Universities & Colleges annual conference in which the participants were asked to discuss their experience of other and mother tongues. We started with other tongues, where the group was asked to write down their experience of not being able to speak their mother tongue (eg as tourists or other experiences).

There were many memories and associations around loss, panic, confusion and a feeling of foolishness, childishness, invisibility, defensiveness, raising one's voice and feeling exposed and powerless. This was especially the case if they found themselves in a vulnerable situation where feelings of dependency were very marked. There were also feelings of gratitude and idealisation when people from the country they were in showed understanding and concern.

One striking point was the heightened use of other senses to compensate for the lack of language. So people would look more closely at facial expressions, eyes and gestures for signs of care or indifference. If they felt understood or helped it was generally not through language but through another medium – empathy, sympathy or just plain friendliness.

People also started noticing themselves physically. This was primarily linked to gender, being a man or woman, with women particularly aware of their gender in a foreign land. Another issue was heightened awareness of shaken self-esteem, self-perception and how you manage this when your own familiar language and culture are unavailable.

The positive side of this experience for some was a sense of liberation, of the possibility of creating a fresh identity, taking a holiday from yourself, starting again, and a sense of discovery.

When talking about their mother tongue, a phrase that stood out to describe feeling culturally and linguistically 'at home' was, 'I feel they get me'. There was discussion around feeling safe, relaxed, at ease and having a platform from which to express your vulnerabilities. You do not have to account for yourself. The darker side was that it could also expose a false sense of

security and there were wry comments about 'accents' and how, despite speaking the same language, you still felt somehow 'different' or 'outside' if you were not in your region or class, even though this could be rather illusory. This highlighted the importance and discomfort of being and feeling different.

Language and meaning

The issue many counsellors encounter when faced with an international student in a counselling situation is, first, that the student is attempting to communicate and 'translate' themselves and their difficulties into English for their (the counsellor's) benefit. The counsellor may be aware that the student is attempting to express something for the first time in a second language. A Cantonese patient told me that it was impossible to speak about anything emotional in Cantonese as it is not an interpersonal language. English was the only language where she could find words for feelings. The international student too, in translating their self, may become aware of feelings of vulnerability, identity, pride and difference, and so become more conscious of themselves as individuals.

Language tends to be spoken automatically: the way people speak relates to how they live, with numerous assumptions about what we mean, what the 'real world' is and how we understand each other as a group. Generally no two languages are sufficiently similar to represent the same social reality. A second language therefore immediately creates a consciousness of difference. Culture and language are so intimately connected that our way of life is all but inextricable from our way of speaking.

'Language is not merely the external covering of a thought; it is also its internal framework. Language does not confine itself to just expressing a thought but it also aids in making the thought.'[1]

Thus language is both a 'covering' and a container of possibilities of expression. A good example is the colour spectrum, which is divided into three primary colours but could easily be 3,000 or, in some languages/cultures, just two – yet the same colours are being seen. In short, categories are created because they suit the nature of our 'lived' culture, which is different from other lived cultures.

Metaphor means 'to carry over'; it is the figurative realm of language. It gives what we say greater clarity, depth, nuance and complexity but, paradoxically, exists within a lexicon of meanings that are culturally shared. Metaphors generally use 'images' to amplify meaning, to deepen a mystery or to express the inexplicable.[2] Edward Said[3] demonstrates how culture-bound Western assumptions about what was 'natural' were used to define the 'exotic': for example, the East was seen as different, primitive or undeveloped and was then called 'the Orient'. Racism is based on the same premise, where shades of skin colour are seen as being more or less familiar, more or less foreign.

Every culture ranks what is regarded as 'natural' through analogy, sanctifying a particular set of myths or way of life onto which language overlays metaphors and symbols.[4] In food there is a primitive distinction between the edible and inedible that is about a relationship between what a culture accepts and does not, and thus a way in which foreignness is defined. The idea of edible-inedible gets linked to native-foreign in which what is 'natural' is given a value through culture.

Language in counselling

Central to our work as therapists is the person sitting in the room with us – their presence. As therapy is a place of speech rather than 'writing', we are in the presence of a performance by both therapist and client where something very complicated is communicated. In this performance a great deal of the communication is non-verbal and the unique quality of the encounter is lost once the session is over.

In addition to language, all our other senses are present in the background in the therapeutic encounter. There is sight: what we see in gestures, movement, gait, colour etc. There is what we hear: not just the words but the audible presence of the other, including sighs, tone and quality in the voice, accent. There is smell: a powerful internal guide to the physical nature of the person and at the same time an unconscious communication. Despite the importance of language, the non-verbal senses form the basis of our deeper and unspoken understanding of the other and create a subtle two-way bridge – this is what makes the encounter human.

Often, as supervisors and therapists, we are trying to understand what the client's 'performance' means – what shape it has sensually and verbally. We do this by using ourselves, our theories and our own sense of culture but we also do it from a distance, afterwards. Tesone,[5] an Italian analyst, compares the use and learning of a second language as a sort of detour and distance from the mother tongue that is full of intense emotions and associations.

When a bi- or multi-lingual individual chooses to go into therapy in a second language, s/he is deliberately making the circuit longer. S/he is putting him/herself at a greater distance from the emotion-laden mother's voice, in order to gain perspective. Mother is also a metaphor for culture and father. This distance is therefore very useful. Clare[6] argues that Samuel Beckett needed to leave Ireland and his mother tongue to gain a much-needed distance. He went to Paris after a short analysis with Bion in London. From this distance Beckett was able to write in French and then re-translate himself back into English. French was a kind of life raft where he could explore his unconscious before he could express himself more freely and clearly in his mother tongue.

This idea of distancing is not just linguistic, however. Some clients 'shape' their internal struggles through stories, fairy tales, films and even music, which serves to distance them from what they are describing. This accords with Jung's[7] notion that the psyche speaks first in images, before language.

When language and culture differ, the main issues become much clearer; it is possible to describe feelings in the second language that cannot be tolerated or heard in the original – see, for example, Ferenczi's[8] point about the difficulty of swearing in one's own language. A Russian patient told me in our first session in pigeon English that she needed to see a head doctor and, after some internal pondering, I referred her to a psychiatrist and she was diagnosed with schizophrenia. I later wondered if maybe it was only in English that she could ask or even know she needed help. Perhaps in the second language the emotional power is less and the therapist feels less culturally familiar and so the client feels they can take a risk and ask for more?

Although language and culture emphasise our emotional selves in particular ways, as therapists we can, through our intuitive reactions and senses (counter-transference), grasp the emotional language that may not need words but can be shared psychically. In our own minds we can translate the feelings in the room and make some sense of them, often without

having to literally share this with the client. It is 'obvious', subtle and mutual; a form of containment the client may not have experienced before. After all, as therapists our daily language is to do with making the emotional more acceptable and speak-able. This is our professional language.

The third language

The third language is one in which therapist and client slowly learn each other's languages, helped by the non-verbal senses: a sort of psychic patois that emerges like a transitional space in which it is possible to find/know things together. Therapist and client start to understand each other's metaphors or ways of seeing the world and how these may actually be different ways of describing a similar emotional landscape.

The client wants to be understood and have a sense that the therapist is interested in knowing him or her. This is a metaphor for the relationship between inside and outside elaborated by Winnicott[9] in his notion of playing and transitional space between client and therapist. If the client feels like an outsider, the need to be known is even greater. Both are working hard and language is not necessarily the main source of communication.

Most analysts distinguish between words and things. Words are attempts to describe feelings that give rise to consciousness and perspective.[10-12] These are important and complex issues to do with levels, timing and depth of therapeutic work. Many languages have different ways of describing intimacy and the therapist needs to be aware that, for many non-European cultures, the description of intimacy is always obtuse, more understood and understated than spoken. So it becomes a case of what 'can' be spoken, both culturally and emotionally.

An example of the third language is some work I did with a Sudanese man who spoke Sudanese Arabic. We were accompanied by an interpreter who was Iraqi and spoke Iraqi Arabic – a slightly different dialect of Arabic. I worked with this man and the interpreter for about a year.

It was a curious experience. After about three months of weekly meetings, I began to understand what the Sudanese client was saying before the interpreter spoke and he began to understand what I was saying. His English may have improved slightly in this time – it was non-existent at the beginning – but my Arabic was certainly non-existent. I did not understand his words literally but I somehow tuned into something more feelings-based in the way he was responding. There was a shared cultural backdrop (we were all from the Middle East) but what was going on was a more unconscious, silent relating.

Subjectivity and home

Working in a multi-lingual or bi-lingual space immediately confronts the psychotherapist and client with their own subjectivity and identity. Self and other are evoked. It is inescapable because language is linked to both our early identity formation and to our notion of cultural identity and what we unconsciously assume to be normal or true in our cultural landscape, our internal and external home.

Papadopolous[13] says that our idea of home is linked to a collective and individual story about who we are, where we came from and *where we are going*. When there is a longing for home, it may be important to think about it in this symbolic and dynamic way rather than as a place of origin. Our notion of home, which is what we take for granted, is how we unconsciously *read life* and fulfil our desires.

For many refugees or migrants, as well as international students, it is only when you leave home that you start to feel the ache of all the things you took for granted and face the individuality of your own internal life and longings more clearly.

Conclusion

I have briefly tried to highlight the relationship between the mother tongue and other languages for both client and therapist and how this becomes present in the room, whence a third language/sense emerges and the client can use the therapist to find meaning. Language, though central, is not the most important aspect of the work; rather, it is the containing function (the capacity to tolerate difficult feelings) of the therapist that is the key to the client's sense of being held, translated and known. The client is also attempting, through a second language, to understand themselves more clearly than they are able to in their mother tongue. There is a profound comfort for the client when faced with a therapist who is culturally a stranger, as both need to find each other, enter a reverie and tolerate not knowing. It is a creative work in progress that allows client and therapist to meet in a unique and life-changing way.

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