

Fiñđing ã cõmmõn lãnđüãgé

Russian by birth, but resident in the UK for over 10 years, **Anna Storey** reflects on the challenges of working as a therapist in her second language

I asked my client, 'What is *Peter Pan* about?' As she was telling me the story, it became apparent how much she associated herself with Wendy and how the story was really a story of my client's life. But my question was not a carefully planned intervention. I really did not know what *Peter Pan* was about. In the country I grew up in it was not on children's reading lists. I am a UK qualified counsellor, but the language I work in is not my mother tongue.

Hargarden and Sills say, 'It is not possible to be empathically attuned to someone if they are outside of your ken, for it is not possible to be powerful for someone whose mores and internal world we cannot understand, or do not have a lexicon for understanding.'¹ Due to my extensive training, I am aware of issues of difference, cultural diversity, class etc. I learned to pay particular attention to the process of enquiry. I avoid false interpretations. I am always very careful to find out what my client 'really means' in each particular case. But still...

Sometimes I have questioned whether I have chosen the right profession. What if, having grown up in a different culture, I can't fully understand what my client says? What if I miss part of his or her story? What if my last client stopped coming because he felt misunderstood? On these occasions it has been helpful for me to look back to my work experience in Russia and

Kazakhstan. My clients there spoke the same language as me, yet, as in my current work, it took me hours of enquiry to discover the real meaning of their words. The words were the same, but the meaning could be very different. For instance, in Russia, men marry only one wife. But in Kazakhstan, they can easily have several, so the whole meaning of a family and family life is different there.

Working with Russian clients now, after fully qualifying in the UK and having lived in the country for over 10 years, has brought about a new set of challenges. One of my clients was interested in learning more about the modality that I work in, relational transactional analysis, and I found it difficult to translate therapy concepts into Russian. But it was not just about terminology – my whole identity as a therapist was formed in English, so when I had to work in Russian I had to ‘reinvent’ myself as a therapist, with a different style and way of talking.

Linguistic identity

I spoke to Maria Shukurova, a researcher in bilingualism at the University of Iceland. She told me: ‘Linguistic identity is a challenging factor facing every professional working with multilingual individuals. Multilinguals would often more willingly talk about childhood memories in their mother tongue, but could easily switch to another language describing their everyday lives or referring to their present country of residence. This change of linguistic identity is explained by cultural, social and psychological settings and plays a crucial role in multilingual self-identification. In this light, the ability of a psychotherapist to understand and switch between languages during a therapeutic session can only benefit a multilingual client.’

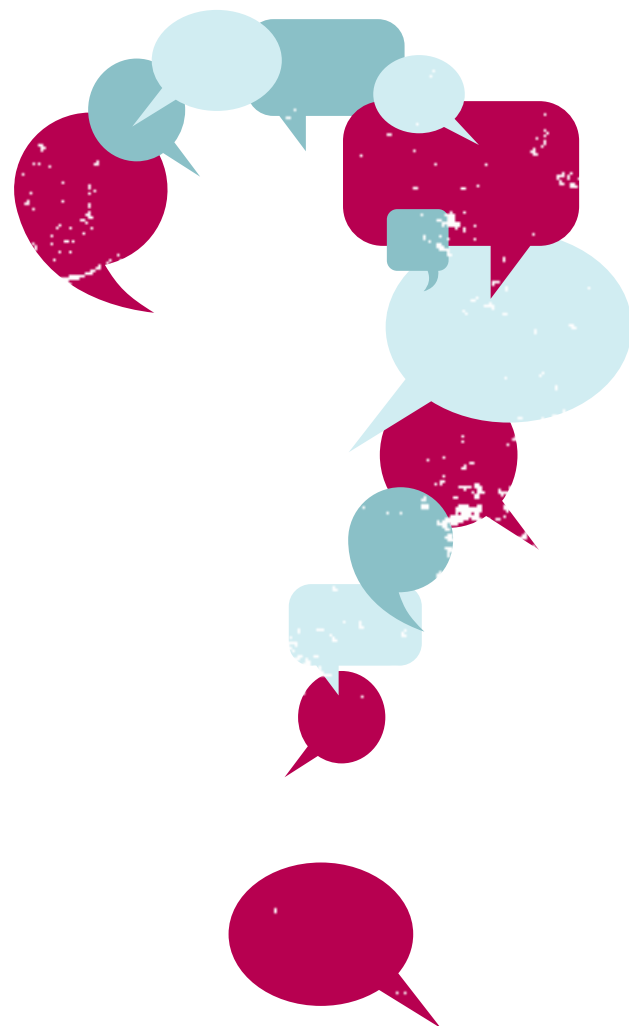
What I noticed in the process of therapy with Russian clients, is that they would often use English words or expressions to describe their day-to-day experiences, but speak Russian when talking about childhood memories. At times, I found myself stuck in the transference without realising it. It was easier for me to spot incongruities in a client’s story if they were speaking English. In Russian, it was much finer work, especially if the client was about my age and grew up in a similar setting. I accepted some situations as the ‘norm’, rather than assessing them critically, and had to be careful to look out for possible collusions. Does sharing the same language, therefore, make therapeutic work easier? I am still looking for answers.

My personal therapy is an interesting example of how emotions and language are closely connected. I find it much easier to talk about my childhood experiences in English, rather than Russian – talking in my second language lifts taboos and I can find words for hard-to-describe and even preverbal experiences. It has never come naturally to me to talk about my emotions in Russian; I usually intellectualise instead. But speaking English creates a certain level of safety for me to explore this unfamiliar territory.

Amati Mehler et al write, ‘When looking at the senses of self present in the bilingual speakers... each language provided an opportunity for the speaker to manifest and experience different aspects of self.’² In that sense, my personal therapy was enhanced by the fact that it wasn’t conducted in my birth language. In therapy I was discovering parts of my self that I did not know existed and the process was made easier by the availability of new words to describe them. Speaking another

language allowed for interesting metaphors and made the process of therapy richer. For instance, during a visualisation, I once described myself as a shell. In Russian the word shell means only a marine shell, as found on the beach. Different meanings for the word in English, of which I knew, brought about a startling insight.

So what does this mean for my everyday practice as a counsellor? What I have discovered is that exploring each other’s cultural space, when both therapist and client are being open and honest about it, may facilitate the establishment of a good therapeutic relationship. With a Polish client we discovered that quite a few words have a similar meaning in Russian and Polish. These words, which we started using in our sessions, became little links between our two worlds. Not just between a Russian and a Pole, but between two adults with their own life stories. Another Eastern European client gave me a postcard for my graduation. It was written in Russian. My client studied Russian at school, had completely forgotten it, and now took the trouble to write a card with the help of a dictionary. For me, it was a sign of her acceptance of me as a therapist and an individual, and of a developing therapeutic alliance.



The limits of language

At times, exploring the significance of having a foreign therapist brings about useful insights. One client held a perception of Russia as a ‘scary country’. Talking about it brought up the meaning of fear in his life, which he was reluctant to talk about earlier. Another client thought all Russian people were ‘friendly and warm’. Exploring what friendships and warmth meant for her allowed us to contact the lack of warmth and friendships in her family of origin.

I have noticed that not being able to use the wealth of a language to the full makes me work a lot with visual images. With several of my clients we have created ‘symbolic images’, which reflect certain aspects of their lives, and which we can subsequently talk about, transforming them or adding new details. For one client such an image was a greenhouse – a clumsy, useless structure, which she had to assemble and re-assemble as her family moved from one house to another. The more my client talked about it, the more the greenhouse



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reminded me of my client’s relationship, which she had to work hard on, but which had lost its meaning long ago. I shared my thoughts with her and since then ‘greenhouse’ became a word for my client’s relationship in our shared language.

Another client decided to write down a dream she had, so we could talk about it during our next session. She thought it was ‘complete nonsense’. When we turned the piece of paper over, we saw my client’s shopping list, which was extremely detailed, precise and to the point. My client laughed. ‘Just like you?’ – I cautiously suggested. She willingly agreed and our subsequent sessions became an exploration of the ‘complete nonsense’ that lay behind a composed and well-controlled front.

I certainly don’t have all the answers. I read with interest about other therapists working in different languages or with a translator. I compare their experiences with my own and look forward to working with more clients from different countries. The one thing, however, that I am certain about is that the process of therapy, amongst other things, is a development of a common language between two very different individuals. This process has to happen for therapy to be successful, regardless of the languages the two people are speaking. ■

Details have been changed to protect identities.

Anna Storey is in private practice in Oxfordshire and London. Prior to training as a counsellor, she studied art history and worked in advertising.

References

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