

SUPREME COURT OF MINNESOTA

State v. Lopez-Ramos

929 N.W.2d 414 (Minn. 2019) · Decided June 12, 2019

SUMMARY

The Minnesota Supreme Court held that admitting a criminal defendant's statements translated by a foreign-language interpreter did not violate the Sixth Amendment's Confrontation Clause. The court treated the defendant as the declarant and the interpreter as a language conduit, so the statements were also admissible as admissions by a party-opponent under Minnesota Rule of Evidence 801(d)(2)(A). The court affirmed the court of appeals.

CASE DETAILS

COURT	Supreme Court of Minnesota
WRITING FOR THE COURT	Gildea, Chief Justice; Hudson, Justice; Lillehaug, Justice; Thissen, Justice
JURISDICTION	Minnesota
DECIDED	June 12, 2019
DISPOSITION	affirmed
PROCEDURAL POSTURE	Lopez-Ramos appealed his conviction for first-degree criminal sexual conduct, challenging the admission of statements he made in Spanish and that an interpreter translated into English. The Minnesota Supreme Court granted review after the court of appeals affirmed the district court's evidentiary ruling.
STANDARD OF REVIEW	The Confrontation Clause issue was reviewed as a constitutional question; the hearsay ruling was reviewed for abuse of discretion.
PRECEDENTIAL VALUE	Published precedential opinion of the Supreme Court of Minnesota
PARTIES	Cesar Rosario Lopez-Ramos v. State

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QUESTIONS PRESENTED

1. Whether admitting a criminal defendant's statements made through a foreign-language interpreter, without calling the interpreter to testify, violates the Sixth Amendment Confrontation Clause.
2. Whether the defendant's translated statements are inadmissible hearsay when offered by the State in the defendant's criminal prosecution.

HOLDINGS

1. Use of a foreign-language interpreter to translate a defendant's statement from one language to another does not implicate the Confrontation Clause because the interpreter is not a witness who bears testimony against the defendant; the defendant remains the declarant of the translated statement.
2. The translated statements were not hearsay because Lopez-Ramos was their declarant and they were offered against him as statements of a party-opponent under Minn. R. Evid. 801(d)(2)(A).

KEY QUOTATIONS

“Ultimately, we conclude that Lopez-Ramos is the declarant of the statements in this case. Use of a foreign language interpreter to convert the statements by Lopez-Ramos from Spanish to English does not implicate the Confrontation Clause because the interpreter is not a witness who bears testimony against Lopez-Ramos.”
(at 422-23)

“If Lopez-Ramos was the declarant of the statements, and the State offered the statements against him, the statements are not hearsay under Minn. R. Evid. 801(d)(2)(A), and are therefore admissible.” (at 423)

FACTUAL BACKGROUND

Police interviewed Lopez-Ramos, whose ability to speak and understand English was limited, using an independent Spanish-language interpreter connected through AT&T LanguageLine. During the recorded interview, Lopez-Ramos admitted having sexual intercourse with the 12-year-old victim, although he later testified that he was intoxicated and did not understand some questions. The officer testified that Lopez-Ramos participated without requesting clarification, and the recording showed no apparent confusion. The district court admitted the statements, and the jury convicted Lopez-Ramos of first-degree criminal sexual conduct.

PROCEDURAL HISTORY

The district court admitted the translated interview statements, ruling that the interpreter was a language conduit and that the statements were attributable to Lopez-Ramos rather than the interpreter. A jury convicted Lopez-Ramos, the district court entered judgment and sentenced him to 144 months in prison, and the court of appeals affirmed. The Minnesota Supreme Court affirmed the court of appeals.

DISPOSITION

affirmed

CASES CITED

- Crawford v. Washington, 541 U.S. 36 (2004)
- Ohio v. Roberts, 448 U.S. 56 (1980)
- United States v. Solorio, 669 F.3d 943 (9th Cir. 2012)
- Nazemian v. United States, 948 F.2d 522 (9th Cir. 1991)
- United States v. Charles, 722 F.3d 1319 (11th Cir. 2013)
- Taylor v. State, 226 Md. App. 317, 130 A.3d 509 (Md. Ct. Spec. App. 2016)
- Bullcoming v. New Mexico, 564 U.S. 647 (2011)
- Melendez-Diaz v. Massachusetts, 557 U.S. 305 (2009)
- State v. Caulfield, 722 N.W.2d 304 (Minn. 2006)
- State v. Mitjans, 408 N.W.2d 824 (Minn. 1987)
- State v. Daniels, 361 N.W.2d 819 (Minn. 1985)
- State v. Sanchez-Diaz, 683 N.W.2d 824 (Minn. 2004)
- State v. Lee, 494 N.W.2d 475 (Minn. 1992)
- Miller v. Lathrop, 50 Minn. 91, 52 N.W. 274 (1892)
- United States v. Hieng, 679 F.3d 1131 (9th Cir. 2012)
- United States v. Anguloa, 598 F.2d 1182 (9th Cir. 1979)
- People v. Mejia-Mendoza, 965 P.2d 777 (Colo. 1998)