

The Deaf Professional and the Interpreter: A Dynamic Duo

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Abstract

Teamwork, negotiation, trust and empowerment are all by-products of the unique relationship developed between the deaf or hard of hearing professional and the interpreter. The postsecondary setting requires the deaf professional's involvement in numerous roles and functions – the interpreter must be adaptable to these changing personas and agendas. A “staff interpreter” may have additional duties, complicating his position by being exposed to the staff innerworkings. Many questions arise. Does the interpreter serve as the professional's “ears” even after the assignment? To what degree are interpreters considered “staff” when also needed for communication facilitation? Each situation calls for certain protocol that may be negotiated and refined over time. Often deaf people and interpreters are unsure of how to establish these basic and essential ground rules to make the interaction successful. Discussion of videotaped examples of interpreting at staff meetings, making phone calls, giving presentations and conducting other university/college business were discussed.



Introduction

The fruits of this reality-based workshop would not be available if not for the cooperation of the deaf professionals who were willing to “expose” themselves and their business dealings, and contribute to the growth of the interpreting field. Gratitude is also expressed to the interpreters who were willing to be videotaped, have their work analyzed and discussed while baring their professional souls. Three years of working together in a variety of situations (e.g., President's Disability Advisory Board, Student Affairs meetings, ground breaking ceremonies, retreats, guest lectures, telephone conferences, meetings with parents, students, the press, foreign visitors, conventions, receptions, and confidential meetings) allow for such self-reflection and the dynamic relationship that has generated a wealth of experiences to share. Hopefully, through the candid discussion of these practices and experiences, we can learn from each others' mistakes, successes and realizations.

Interpreters are trained using a theoretical base to introduce mock situations, or artificial settings. These typically use single-speaker events, rarely exposing the new interpreter to the complexities of turntaking, hierarchies, role tasks and live human interaction.

It is rare to have training materials of this nature made available and for deaf people and interpreters to honestly and openly discuss the techniques they employ to make communication happen. Interpreters are not taught these “tricks of the trade,” and some of them may not be considered RID-sanctioned. Even the deaf people present may not be aware that cultural/linguistic adjustments are being made. But as the video demonstrates, these techniques work – communication happens effectively. The role and function of the interpreter needs to be a malleable one that is constantly negotiated between the deaf professional, the interpreter, and those with whom they interact.

What a Successful Team Requires

Trust. It is said that trust is given to someone automatically, and will slowly erode if not maintained. For many reasons the opposite is true with respect to deaf people and interpreters. Many deaf people recount stories of feeling “violated” by someone claiming to be a “professional interpreter” (linguistically/culturally competent, flexible, ethical, non-judgmental, and unobtrusive). The form in which trust is “earned” varies, but an interpreter must earn a deaf person’s trust.

Anna Witter-Merithew, in her 1996 teleclass “The Socio-Political Context of Interpreting,” discusses approaching work in a “principled way.” She refers to a quote by Samuel Johnson: “There can be no lasting relationship without confidence and no confidence without integrity.”

This concept is reinforced by the deaf community when they state that the nebulous concept of “attitude” is equitable with honesty. The deaf presenters in Merithew’s teleclass stress the importance of interpreters being honest with their level of understanding. “Be brave & interrupt,” one speaker states. He explains that fumbling or the interpreter’s reaction to missed information is eventually detected through observation or other party’s responses. Approaching interpreting work in this principled way leads to enhanced credibility, builds trust and, most importantly, minimizes oppression.

Herb recounted a story that demonstrated “trust” is multi-layered. He indicted that trust is achieved when the interpreter exhibits repeated good judgment in all areas or has a good “track record” in areas such as skill, flexibility, manners and appearance. A good interpreter knows his/her role well. He or she knows when to stay in the background or be in the foreground. Other important areas that interpreters are judged upon are their ability to accept constructive criticism, their sense of humor, their ability to be tolerant, and their understanding of diversity. Interpreters are expected to leave their religious beliefs out of the assignment. He believes what the deaf consumer wishes for is someone who is willing to share.

Confidentiality. Confidentiality is key to maintaining the code of ethics and privacy within the deaf community, but an office culture is its own social microcosm which leads to unique practices. The interpreter who works with the same deaf and hearing staff everyday becomes privy to all sorts of information. Interpreters are subject to enormous amounts of private information that, if disclosed, could adversely affect numerous people. Discussions of staff members’ salaries, raises, promotions, demotions, reprimands, performance evaluations, and decisions that impact the staff or students take place. It is often difficult to remember where a piece of information was heard, therefore an interpreter must constantly assess whether it was overheard in the lunch room, at the front desk, or in a meeting (Which one? Was the interpreter acting as staff or was he/she the working interpreter?)

Usually in the postsecondary setting, staff interpreters work alone. If a team is assigned, the person who is the “regular interpreter” will lead. When interpreting for an emotionally charged situation or particularly “meaty” meeting (relative to information or challenging translation), interpreters lack someone with whom to decompress. The lead interpreter may worry about the team’s ability to do better than “good work” for the professional, based on a lack of schema or potential confidentiality slips. Where does the interpreter “vent?” Where can the interpreter share what worked and what didn’t without violating the code of ethics?

We propose that there be an equivalent of a Morbidity & Mortality Conference (M & M conference) where the medical field meets to discuss inaccuracies in diagnosis, performance or interesting facts about their work, but for interpreters instead of doctors!

“Super” interpreting skills. When gathering feedback on presentation content, we circulated a copy of the outline to deaf and hearing staff in our office. The concept of “super” interpreting skills was introduced by a 16-year deaf veteran of staff interpreters at NCOD. He felt his job as a deaf meeting participant was made easier or more difficult based on the interpreter’s level of comfort in the given situation. He wasn’t referring to skill level only, but to the interpreter’s ability to make communication happen without too much focus being drawn to themselves or the deaf consumer. Based on the

feedback we received, this could mean an interpreter who cues the deaf person into the emotional climate of the meeting, makes cultural and linguistic adjustments, indicates the tone of the speaker, and other factors that shape the communication event. This veteran professional feels more comfortable with “those kind” of interpreters, making the definition of a good interpreter even more subjective and difficult to teach!

Representation of the deaf professional and flexibility. Interpreters are often perceived as a “duo” with the deaf professional, or joined at the hip. Herb and Allisun have been asked questions such as: “Do you live together?” “Is she your daughter?” “What do you do when she’s not around?” To the unsuspecting hearing person, seeing the interpreter out of their normal context can be confusing. In order to further the discussion of how lines can be easily blurred, Allisun recounted an episode where on a Saturday she ran into a campus department chair at a local mall. They exchanged small talk and said, as she was leaving, “See you Monday,” knowing that Herb’s monthly college meeting would be held on Monday. This story evoked interesting reactions from the audience. Some were steadfast that Allisun’s comment violated the code of ethics and was privileged information. As always, hindsight is 20/20 and if she could replay the incident, she’d be more careful. But again, the question is what are the limitations of the role? At these monthly meetings and other situations the interpreter is easily recognized and may become part of the conversations (or often the topic of them). Allisun is sometimes the voice for some sexist jokes and even golf stories. These numerous personas require great flexibility, thick skin, a great deal of common sense, and professionalism. The point is not to determine whether her actions were right or wrong, but to really take a look at the humanness of the interpreter and how it is easy for us to become too comfortable in the dynamic role, sometimes inadvertently making inappropriate decisions because of the many hats we wear.

Factors Affecting the Process and Product

Agendas. Everyone comes to a meeting with a different game plan, whether it be to report, make a motion, become informed, make a mandatory appearance, or to run the meeting. If the interpreter is aware of the participants’ roles, plans and “agendas,” the product and process will usually be smoother. Isham (1985) names context as “the pair of glasses one needs to wear to see any part of a message... it is the tool (interpreters) use to fill in the gaps” (p. 111).

Deaf participant’s agenda. Communication, status, and information flow inequities are only part of a deaf person’s concerns when attending a campus function. Deaf professionals also have their stakeholders to lobby for. The interpreter needs to be sure to match affect, and not to allow their own personal feelings on the issue or how the professional is being treated interfere with their work.

There is an example in the videotaped vignettes of Herb in a meeting with a male interpreter and several hearing campus officials. The meeting is being co-chaired by a man and a woman who work for different campus units. Both players are powerful and are needed to get approval on this project. The female chair asks the group about the existence of other programs within the CSU (California State University) system. The male co-chair is quick to answer and asks Herb to respond after him. He proceeds to state that there are no other campuses with the same capacity as CSUN for this type of program, and then defers to Herb as director of NCOD. Herb, who admittedly wasn’t paying attention, answers the question regarding the CSU system with: “Well, Gallaudet...” mid-sentence the interpreter coughs/clears his throat (perhaps due to discomfort with the inappropriate answer). Herb completes his irrelevant thought while interrupted by the male co-chair with the comment: “Gallaudet isn’t in the CSU or even in the region, so...” From this point in the meeting any time Herb makes a side comment (not necessarily to be voiced), back-channel (“Yes, I agree. Oh, I see.”), the interpreter takes the floor by using a louder than regular voice and by talking over others.

After analysis of the tape, discussion with Herb and the male interpreter, several things were determined: Herb admitted that sometimes deaf professionals’ minds do wander (rarely) and he would have preferred if the interpreter subtly

helped get him “on track.” It was suggested that when the interpreter saw Herb responding with “Gallaudet...” that the interpreter could quickly sign to him “CSU.”

Six out of seven of our deaf staff members agreed with this approach. Several hearing audience members reacted by stating, “Deaf people have just as much of a right to look stupid as hearing people – he wasn’t paying attention, too bad!” But we must ask ourselves is the playing field even to start with? Inherent in an interpreted event, the deaf professional is at a disadvantage having to rely on another person to gain access. The interpreter after watching himself realized that he may have been more vocally aggressive as a result of Herb’s meeting faux pas.

Where does the interpreter’s job begin and end? Another deaf professional we spoke with alerted us to the fact that in his office, the interpreters he works with have been asked to keep their ears and eyes open all the time on campus, and to apprise him of what they hear. There is not one correct answer to what the interpreter’s role should be. The role is defined by the deaf professional, the goals or agenda for the situation, needs of the participants and of course, the interpreter and the decisions they make.

Translation. The task of interpreting from one language to another is quite complex and often underestimated by those who are used to “good interpreting.” Split-second decisions are made while scouring the different mental file drawers searching for “equivalents in two languages” (Seleskovitch, 1978, p. 84). The viewer or consumer often doesn’t realize the amazing complexity of having to negotiate two different lexicons as well as communication systems that use different conventions for openings, humor, pausing, jokes, backchanneling, competing input, indicating non-understanding, interruptions, turntaking, and closings. Not only are we translating language, but culture and its behaviors. At a Student Affairs meeting, Herb wanted to make a comment to a participant, and chose to address him by his last name (for a lack of remembering his first) which happened to be Bubb. Herb used ‘deaf attention-getting conventions’ which Allisun vocalized, “Excuse me...” while she saw the word B-U-B-B fingerspelled. At this point Allisun decided to use Mr. Bubb’s first name, which she knew, and spelled it simultaneously so Herb would see the addition. Fortunately, this quick decision worked out best for all those involved.

After analyzing hours of tapes, turntaking is also something that we feel interpreters don't have a handle on. Often we use ASL turntaking behaviors to relinquish the floor from the hearing participant, when in actuality, they are still talking. We falsely alert the deaf person it is their turn by raising our eyebrows, putting our hands into a rest position, sustaining eye contact, and tilting our head or body forward (for more on turntaking features of ASL, see Baker, 1977). This causes communication disasters, (exacerbated ten-fold on the telephone) that cause frustration for the deaf person who keeps trying to get the floor. Interpreters need to study and analyze both systems in order to interpret effectively between them.

Register. Register, otherwise known as “linguistic style levels” (Joos, 1968), is crucial to interactions for the deaf professional. If, in her expressive work, the interpreter is unable to match the elevated register, vocabular, or descriptive language used in a meeting because of limited sign language skills, then the professional does not have full access to the flavor of the meeting. Conversely, if in her receptive skills, the interpreter is unable to produce English utterances that are complete, cohesive, using the jargon for the setting (background knowledge is key), and at an appropriate register or style level, a power imbalance occurs. The interpreter is oppressing the deaf professional because of her lack of skill. It also may reinforce the erroneous stereotypes hearing professionals may have about people who are deaf.

The interpreter must also be competent in ways of speaking (Roy, 1992). There is a difference between a professional who is speaking vs. speaking professionally. We saw several examples representing extreme ends of the speaking continuum (formal vs. informal). In one of the videotaped examples, Herb is presenting at a national convention and is referring to an overhead which contain verbiage from Section 504. Herb signs “... LAW STATES...” and the points to several lines, tracing them with his finger. The male interpreter says, “The law states (pause) *yadda yadda yadda.*” Whereas several minutes later, Herb is explaining several sections of the ADA and points again to the overhead to a phrase that says

“must be effective” and signs “THAT.” This time, the interpreter chooses to formalize his statement and produces a complete sentence referring back to the “language of the law states that all accommodations MUST be effective.” Interpreters make decisions sometimes that make a deaf person’s output seem too informal or may conversely, formalize an utterance for the deaf person. The latter example can be considered a linguistic or cultural expansion.

The interpreter’s gender may have an impact on speaking effectiveness. When analyzing the videotapes, we noticed some distinct gender differences in communication styles, word choice, and phrasing. The notion that men report and women seek rapport when communicating was evident in some of the videotaped interpretations. Herb would sign “INTERESTING” and Allisun voiced, “And isn’t *that* interesting.” Allisun has caught herself using words such as “fabulous” as well as using very descriptive words for colors when Herb has said “light blue.” We are not saying there is a cure for being a female interpreter working with a male professional (or vice versa), just be conscious of your speaking patterns and try to assess what words the consumer would use and how they would phrase their answer. Use your vocal chords, not your personality.

Interpreter “baggage.” Interpreters may arrive at assignments carrying the world on their shoulders or a least a very large chip based on the events preceding their arrival. Events at the location of the interpreting assignment often effect their behavior as well. The interpreter may be uncomfortable with the fact there will be a lot of voicing, or finding out about a surprise guest speaker who is deaf. Interpreters can easily feel frustrated because they aren’t apprised of the schedule changes. When we removed ourselves from the role of interpreter and consumer, we were better able to analyze the many oppressive behaviors that interpreters engage in.

Herb and Allisun have seen interpreters “nest;” when they come to an assignment, they set up shop as if they were moving in. The bag, water, pillow, lotion, clothing, wrist guards, time keeping device for their team, and so forth. Also the complexity of the human brain often gets in the way of good interpreting work. West and McLaughlin discuss obstacles to listening: “the brain that contains more than 13 billion cells, can think upward of 60,000 words per minute and is listening to someone else speak at about 123 words per minute” (1978, p. 76). There is a huge gap between what we are capable of thinking and what we are hearing so often the brain sets out on its own tangents while maintaining partial attention.

Not only can our own drifting thoughts can be an impediment to the interpreting process, so can obtrusive behaviors. We viewed hours of interpreted events and discovered many distracting habits: pulling on clothing, adjusting hair, laughing before the joke is interpreted, sharing the physical floor with the deaf presenter as if equals on the stage, blocking hearing audience sight lines, rolling of the eyes, making meta-comments (comments not directly about the content or work), and responding to an event as if the interpreter was a participant.

Interpreters when working in teams sometimes make verbal comments that are easily overheard by others. “When is this going to be over?” “Oh, I don’t want to voice for him. You do it, and good luck!” These are by-products of an ego run-amuck, excessive comfort, laziness, or a lack of boundary recognition. These slips are easily performed, often unintentionally, and are a form of oppression – not to mention the undermining effect it has on the authority of the deaf professional. To maintain a dynamic relationship, the interpreter should strive to exemplify the role of a “professional,” one who may have opinions, feelings and beliefs, but who abstains from impacting the communication event with their own sentiments.

Another oppressive behavior interpreters engage in is being possessive of the deaf consumers or of the actual assignment. Allisun can recall times when, as an interpreter, she has felt slighted, neglected, or unneeded, and heard other interpreters refer to the assignment as “my meeting” or the deaf people as “my clients.” She has been requested to interpret a meeting, only to find the participants prefer to communicate directly with each other. Another example of this is at the conclusion of a meeting or event where Allisun worked hard and felt proud of her work, yet received no comments, kudos or thanks. This is not the deaf person’s job to provide interpreter affirmation. We must always keep at the forefront of our minds, that the communication event is not about us; it doesn’t even directly involve us.

Specialized vocabulary. The postsecondary setting is replete with specialized vocabulary that interpreters need to familiarize themselves with, as well as how deaf professionals sign those concepts or terms. Name signs and spellings of stakeholders names and positions, campus officials, and government representatives should be learned quickly.

The term “impaction” was being used on an interpreted phone call by a campus administrator when discussing special programs on campus with a counselor who is deaf. Although the term was not unfamiliar to the deaf professional on the phone, Allisun, as the interpreter, wasn’t sure of the exact meaning. After fingerspelling the word three times, she inferred a definition and created a compound sign: FULL + CLOSED. The phone call was successful; however, after more analysis, we realized that the deaf professional was a bit confused as to what it would mean for the program if it were to be “impacted.” Perhaps some of that confusion stemmed from the sign creation and the other signs she has seen used for this concept. Another interpreter used the sign ACCEPT (admission) + DIFFERENT. The discussion of how to sign impaction led us on a search for its true definition: supplementary admission requirements or criteria. When in doubt, and whenever possible, ask the deaf consumers their preferred sign(s).

Conclusion

Being an interpreter requires continuous learning, inquiry, self-analysis and a commitment to becoming a true partner in the “duo” on a daily basis. The interpreting profession is relatively new, operating under a conglomeration of “models” or functional definitions for interpreters to adhere to. Hartmut Teuber, a deaf professional, RSC and RID Region 1 representative, states in a letter to the RID Views that a new model of interpreting is developing – that of the “ally” or, as Teuber calls it, the “equalizer.” He says when a level of trust, negotiation and professionalism is achieved between the deaf professional and the interpreter it results in empowerment that contributes “ to the social emancipation of deaf people... an attempt to remove inequalities from the interpreting situation, where they exist, and to promote social and political changes in favor of the deaf community.”

This may require a frequent dialog between the deaf professional and the interpreter Herb and Allisun call them “exit interviews.” After an assignment, if appropriate and wanted, a discussion about the interpretation may be healthy and productive for both parties. We strongly feel working as a team for three years was an immensely rewarding personal as well as professional experience. The journey required mutual respect, dedication, an open heart and mind and, most of all a commitment to working together as a team.

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