

Who Comes First

The Deaf Presenter or the Interpreter?

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During the 2007 RID National Conference in San Francisco, CA, the Hatrak Sisters Enterprises (Hatrak Sisters) presented a workshop titled, “Eek! I’m Voicing for a Deaf Presenter!” The Hatrak Sisters include three deaf leaders who are frequent presenters and a hearing sister who is both the only hearing child of deaf adults (OHCODA) and a working sign language interpreter. Through the years at family gatherings, the discussion has always turned to the topic of “interpreters and the working deaf professional” along with other interpreting/Deaf issues. This workshop was developed as a result of those discussions.

For the workshop, the Hatrak Sisters conducted a brief survey of two groups: interpreters and deaf professionals who make presentations. As much as the Hatrak Sisters thought they knew “the results,” the comments were somewhat startling. The survey results, which follow, are the focus of this article:

DEAF PRESENTERS

We asked the following three questions of 94 deaf presenters who responded to our survey via e-mail.

1. Do you give a prepared text to the assigned interpreters?

Yes – 68%

No – 32%

Although 68 percent of respondents will give prepared texts, there are caveats. They find it awkward to follow the text and conclude that outlines provide greater flexibility. They have had some experiences where they provide actual texts and instruct interpreters to follow the given texts. Interpreters usually begin following the text and then ignore it and try to follow the deaf presenter by voicing it. “Disaster would then strike,” one of the deaf presenters said. “Most interpreters

are not proficient in sign to text, thus making me look like a kindergartener. How did I know? Well, I got the printout from the CART.” Most of the respondents admitted that they would likely share an outline or PowerPoint presentation, rather than full text of the presentation. They felt that they have more flexibility to present through the use of notes that way.

2. Do you meet with interpreters for preparation and feedback?

Before the presentation – 38%

Both before and after the presentation – 59%

Not at all – 3%

“The opportunity to discuss before the presentation does not present itself very often,” one of the respondents commented. “Even if there is an opportunity to prepare with the interpreter before the presentation, I don’t think it is helpful. The interpreter doesn’t have time to read the whole text. Sometimes, the interpreter needs to prepare with more than one presenter. There isn’t enough time for them to ‘crash read’ and come up with questions of substance.”

In discussing whether deaf presenters make time after their presentations to debrief with the interpreters, one of them responded, “I should, but it seems too difficult since I wouldn’t have the voice interpretation to review.” Most of the time, the deaf presenters receive feedback


from people who attend the presentation; those who are fluent signers. Another comment was, “I rarely meet with the interpreters after the presentation because they leave immediately right after the presentations.” One of them felt that the initiative should come from the interpreter to meet with the deaf presenter afterward.

3. How do you feel about interpreters asking for clarification during your presentation?

I rather they stop me and verify – 82%

I rather they do not stop me at all – 18%

This question prompted additional comments. How often can the interpreter interrupt that is acceptable to deaf presenters, and in what manner? It would be “unacceptable” to deaf presenters to have interpreters interrupt them “every five minutes.” The deaf presenters suggested that the interpreters can request, “again...” as a way for the deaf presenter to fingerspell something again or repeat the previous comment. They emphasize,



Survey Results from a Presentation
Conducted at the 2007 RID
National Conference

"It's not like a halt but that they keep voicing and communicate with the deaf presenter to either 'fingerspell' or 'what you said a-while-ago (ASL structure)?" They admit it is a special technique "of interrupting without really halting everything and apologizing..."



In spite of their preference not to be interrupted, most respondents agreed that it's important that interpreters stop and interpret the right information. They appreciate the interpreters maintaining a reasonable level of diligence and sincere effort to make the material represented in spoken English that is properly equivalent to signed ASL. Some comments are as follows: "I have mixed feelings about being interrupted in my presentation. No, I don't want to be interrupted lest I lose my momentum." One of them believes that "if the presenter and interpreters 'do their homework' and prepare each other properly, the team will be more effective." Some others are clear on different behaviors for different audiences. They suggest that if it is a hearing audience, stop

and verify. If audience is deaf, do not stop the deaf presenter at all. The general consensus is that if the interpreters need clarification on fingerspelling, it is acceptable; even deaf audience members have difficulty reading fingerspelling.

INTERPRETERS

1. Do you ask for prepared text when interpreting for a deaf presenter?

Yes – 89%

No – 11%

The general sentiment among interpreters is that even if they ask, they don't always receive it. "Not usually," an interpreter commented, "because typically there isn't one. If it is more formal, there may be a PowerPoint presentation that they will share with me." Most of them would try to have one-on-one discussions with the deaf presenters to get an idea about what they will be presenting. Other possible sources for preparation are related to Web sites or handouts. "...definitely want to meet with them beforehand, but I don't expect them to have it all written out." An interpreter wrote that a "rehearsal" with the presenter would make a great preparation.

2. Do you ask to meet with presenter before/after the presentation?

Before the presentation – 69%

Both before and after the presentation – 31%

An interpreter commented, "Often deaf presenters assume that if an interpreter is certified, they don't need preparation or closure. This needs to change. Certified is a minimum standard and not the best of the best in our field." Meeting after the presentation is usually when "something comes up to make it necessary." Some interpreters agree that the opportunity to debrief with a teamer and a presenter, if need be, during a break, before they get started again, is incredibly helpful to make sure the interpretation is as accurate as possible.

3. Which are you likely to do when you need assistance with voice interpreting?

Ask the presenter to pause and repeat – 6%

Rely on the teamer – 94%

Keep going - 0 %

One of the respondents added a fourth possible answer, "Ask for clarification by non-manuals without stopping the presenter with a small gesture or sign." However, it can be distracting to both the audience and, in particular, the deaf presenter.

Interpreters generally employ all strategies. "That depends entirely on the situation, but all three strategies are helpful. If I have no team, obviously, I would need to stop the presenter. If I have a teamer, especially one whose skills I admire, I tend to rely on their input first. But, I remain prepared to ask the presenter to repeat if that is necessary. As for 'keep going,' I would wait and continue to strategize, such as getting a bit more of the presentation. Then, I would try to synthesis to make a more complete and more accurate interpretation."

"If the deaf presenter is on stage, I rely first on my team. Depending on how critical the information, I may dump it and keep going or may interrupt the speaker."

As for relying on the teamer, one has to have confidence in his/her skills.

"Unfortunately, I have been forced to keep going and then try to 'fix' things on the fly when getting back on track."

4. How do you perceive feedback from your team during your own voice interpretation?

Beneficial – 83%

Distracting – 17%

Most interpreters emphasized that "it is of the utmost importance to meet with your team and ask essential questions such as how one likes to receive feedback, turn-taking, cues for switching and interpreting for whom, if there are more than two presenters." Another wrote, "I clearly tell the person what and how to provide information before we start working together and what to watch out for in my work. It's important to know and trust the team." The majority of the respondents agree that it is always helpful to agree what strategies to use before the start of the assignment.

An interpreter cautioned, "I may or may not always incor-

porate their input, but I appreciate more, rather than less.”
 “Because each interpreter’s lag time and style of structuring, their interpretation is sometimes different than my own. I can find it distracting if I am given a feed that I don’t need or is given because my teamer’s lag time is shorter than mine and s/he is panicking to get out the information in a style that is more comfortable for them.”

An interpreter volunteered, “I wish I had more team training because whenever someone feeds me information, it is distracting. They just spit out words, which is not really helping if I don’t know what the subject or point of the sentence is.”

5. Do you take over voicing when your team is having some difficulty?

Yes – 91%

No – 9%

One of the interpreters was emphatic in his/her responsibility, “Heck, yes! We’re a team. If one is faltering, it’s the responsibility of a team to step in and give the other interpreter time to catch up, get a better handle of the subject matter or whatever else they may need.”

The interpreters answered an additional but unasked question, “When do you take over voicing for your team?” Their answers abound:

- only if team completely missed the concept
- only if asked or nudged
- if there is 30 seconds of silence
- only if I am given the ok by my teamer
- if feeding is not working, then I take over the voice interpretation.
- when the deaf presenter requests it
- when the message has been compromised to the point that I need to “take over”

Comments from the interpreter respondents confirm that they “will feed first rather than take over an interpretation. If they were stuck or interpreting incorrectly, I would hope that they would pass things over to me. I would not take the microphone away from a teamer and take over without the teamer initiating the take-over.” Although interpreters have had to take over, some of them commented, “I would ask if they want me

to do this for them so that the team feels more supported, like it was their decision.”

They have their cues as to when they could inform their teamer that they need to take over. “If the team doesn’t realize they are having a difficult time, I would provide a feed and then signal my turn if it wasn’t working.” Other suggestions are tap on the leg, wave low and slowly in their sight line and wait for a natural pause in the message to take over.

Finally, one of the interpreters said, “If I am struggling, I expect that they will provide assistance and vice versa, without judgment. We all have good days and days in which we struggle. This is most successfully done when feeling comfortable with the team and after developing a level of trust.”

DEAF PRESENTERS & INTERPRETERS

In conclusion, a few recommendations presented themselves after reviewing the survey results.

Foremost would be the recommendation that deaf presenters become more aware of the process of interpretation and what happens when they do not work more closely with the interpreters. Likewise, interpreters need to be more aware of how

every one of their decisions effect how deaf presenters are portrayed as “professional and knowledgeable of their subject matter.”

Perhaps the interpreters need to be more willing to stop deaf presenters for significant clarifications, and maybe deaf presenters have to accept this as an inevitable practice when presenting before English-speaking audiences.

Deaf presenters and voice interpreters need to work more closely if they want more accurate ASL-to-English interpretation. Undoubtedly, the survey comments show that this is the ultimate goal of both the deaf presenter and the voice interpreter, with an ever-present thought that the deaf presenters and their messages should come first. ■

The four authors are the Hatrak Sisters. Hatrak Sisters Enterprises (HSE) sponsors summer camp programs for deaf children and retreats for interpreters. Check out www.hatraksisters.com for more information.



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