Deaf people and interpreting - the struggle in language

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Introduction

> The meanings carried by language are never fixed, always open to question, always contestable, always temporary, [and this] has major implications for our understanding of the person, her or his identity and the possibilities for personal and social change ... Language is a fundamentally social phenomenon; it is something that occurs between people. (Burr, 1995:39)

The current paper represents a development of an earlier one which I presented to the Issues in Interpreting 2 conference in 1995. That paper sought to achieve two main things. Firstly, I wanted to put forward a somewhat different argument for the sociolinguistic analysis of sign varieties which draw from both BSL and English, suggesting that existing analysis reflects particular trends in sociolinguistic thought which produce particular outcomes almost as a matter of course. Secondly, I aimed to re-emphasise the role of sign language interpreting *as a service* - as indeed it is within the terms of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 - which should therefore be led by and responsive to a range of user concerns and user preferences, rather than by the whims of elitist practitioners working within narrowly defined linguistic frameworks. Throughout this paper, I made it clear that I strongly supported campaigns for the full recognition of BSL as a minority language of Britain along with those which call for an end to deaf people's linguistic oppression, whatever language, form of language or dialect they use, because, at the end of the day inequality is institutionalised in society and we are all influenced by this in different ways.

In the current paper, I want to reiterate this support. However, the earlier paper was in many ways experimental, and now seems out-of-date. This paper develops the ideas further in the context of human rights and sociolinguistic theory, emphasising particularly that the suggestion that some language groups within the deaf population have more rights than others has rather more to do with elitism and power relations than with with the linguistic make-up of this population, the history of deaf education, and consequently, with access to information. It certainly works against principles of social justice and the political effectiveness of our campaigns (Corker 1997). As such, these issues are of relevance to the interpreting profession, particularly for relationships between users and providers, who controls the content of the interpreter training curriculum, who decides what the aims and objectives of training and service delivery should be, and who delivers it.

Historical perspectives

In sociolinguistics, the term *language planning* is used to describe the efforts of the state or to influence directly the various social and cultural factors which were held to influence language change. Language planning tends to be divided into two discrete streams, *status planning* and *corpus planning*. The first involves an understanding of how social factors relate to language in terms of status, while the second is associated with the linguistic features of a language, mainly in relation to some form of standardisation of one variety over another. Over the last forty years, language planning has become a very powerful subdiscipline of sociolinguistics but there has been limited analysis of it in relation to the languages used by deaf people, outside of traditional approaches. Language planning is not ideologically neutral, however, though many of those engaged in it claim that it is; what language planners seek to do will develop from how they perceive

language change and, ultimately, how they want the relationship between individuals and society to be. This is precisely why it is a very significant mechanism for social reproduction.

Language planning emerged alongside the theory of modernisation which became inextricably linked to the sociological perspective of *structural functionalism*, and an *essentialist* world view built on a whole series of dichotomies relating to the structure of society, culture and language. There is not sufficient space within this short article to explain fully the theory of structural functionalism. However, I do want to highlight a particular aspect of it which relates to social stratification and power. This is the belief that inequality is an inevitable outcome of the uneven distribution of ability in society. Having power is therefore justified on the basis that it is a benefit to society because it is linked to serving the needs of society, and this 'service' is seen as adequate compensation for 'the needy'. Within a structural functionalist framework, a critical sociology which addresses the political implications of power and inequality becomes irrelevant. Yet, paradoxically, it could be suggested that a critical approach is aimed at exposing oppressive power relations and so works against the dominant philosophy of language planning. As such, it has to be made irrelevant through its marginalisation. Essentialism - or the view that objects or people have some ultimate essence which transcends historical and cultural boundaries - is a powerful prop to this view of inequality because it dichotomises diversity by imposing rigid boundaries between 'powerful' and 'needy', 'normal' and 'deviant', 'pure' and 'impure', for example. Because the two elements of each dichotomy are perceived as entirely separate and described as such, it is only necessary to develop 'notions' of one or the other. However, since the structural functionalist view is that inequality is inevitable, and one side of the dichotomy is attributed greater value than the other in such a way that it becomes a 'norm', it is taken as a given and is not seen to require analysis. The other side is then always analysed in relative terms; that is, it is compared to the norm and inevitably found to be lacking. This might be described as attitudinal essentialism.

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Davis (1995:50) states that "normalcy became the norm" in nineteenth century Western culture underpinned by the essentialist beliefs of phonocentrism and ethnocentrism, for example, which dictated the supremacy of the spoken word and 'white' cultures. This had far reaching implications for language in general because "the cultural narrowness of a society in which spoken language is paramount expands to include all users of language, spoken or not" (Davis 1995:62). Phonocentrism also echoed the claim of Diderot (1877: vol xviii:232) that "a nation could not emerge from the state of barbarism until its language attained a certain level" (Williams 1992:23). And so there began a relentless pursuit of 'pure' language forms which could be designated as 'the best' languages for expressing thoughts and ideas and were reinforced as the language of reason and rationality - so-called 'standard forms'. Language planning was therefore directed at overcoming the 'hindrance of dialects' by stigmatising non-standard forms, which were then denigrated through the reification of the standard form - a process which remains deeply entrenched in the social and education systems of Western society.

This concept of language planning implies that linguistic and social oppression are specifically bound up with the prestige and status associated with language standardisation and reification - status is seen to derive from language itself, not from users of the language or language variety - and its discursive construction of majority-minority group relations. Moreover, one of the most important mechanisms for the process of oppression is what French philosopher Michel Foucault (1979) calls the exercise of *disciplinary power*, or the power of self-discipline often perpetuated through the manufacture of internalised oppression (Corker, 1997). This, too, is culturally reproduced through language standardisation - for example, the language

standards which define deafness as impairment and deviance, and deaf people as linguistically impoverished. It therefore becomes equivalent to cultural hegemony in that society sees it as 'the truth' and it continues "to be passed on as received wisdom within the (Deaf) community" (Turner 1994:18) through the use of disciplinary power. In many ways, then, disciplinary power is a more invasive means of social control than the *sovereign power* of eugenics, cochlear implants and genetic engineering, because it operates underground and renders our resistance 'voiceless'. We become politically ineffective.

Sociolinguistics and SSE

Foucault argued that one way in which power relationships could be dismantled was through the liberation of diversity and minority discourses. Most accounts of language in the Deaf community, whilst emphasising the symbolic importance of sign language prestige for Deaf identity and culture, do not describe the community as monolingual. But the way in which language diversity and differentiation are produced is not immune from the embedded inequalities of structural functionalism or essentialism; the community appears to be hierarchically organised. Kannapell (1993) cites Wolfram and Fasold's (1974) reference to 'deficit' and 'difference' models, which in relation to deaf people, are more usually described as the individual/medical model and the linguistic minority model. The individual model treats language differences in terms of a norm or standard and a deviation from the norm or standard, whereas the linguistic minority model "considers socially subordinate societies and language varieties as self-contained systems, inherently neither deficient nor superior" (Wolfram and Fasold 1974:14). However, a great deal seems to hinge on the definition of 'socially subordinate societies' and 'language varieties', because in claiming certain exclusive language and identity 'rights', some groups appear to become 'superior' in using what Brah (1992:144) describes as "the bonds of common cultural experience in order to mobilise their constituency":

> As a cultural description, Deaf captures the experience of an identifiable group, but when it is used to question, invalidate, or trivialise the authenticity of someone else's cultural experience it can itself be an oppressor's term. (Jordan, 1992:70)

In consequence, though there is considerable sociolinguistic evidence of diversity in terms of linguistic, social and cultural contact, both in terms of language groups and in terms of individuals, it is contextualised differently for different language groups and individuals. The clearest example of this is that signs used by Deaf people from black and ethnic minorities, Deaf gays and lesbians, and Deaf women are regarded as 'language varieties' and signs used in London, the North and Scotland as 'regional dialects', whereas mixed forms drawing on English and BSL, such as the different forms of SSE, are not seen as 'natural contact varieties', and are commonly labelled 'deviant'.

The distinction is perpetuated in sociolinguistic research that generally ascribes SSE two different interpretations which reflect individual and difference models in ways which are not always clear cut:

- For (hearing) educationalists, SSE represents an English-based signing system, it supports English or is a signing code for speech which makes up for the 'ungrammaticality' or 'deficiency' of the sign channel. BSL is itself assumed to be deficit;
- For some sign linguists, SSE represents a 'deviation' from the BSL standard which is a consequence of a preference for social identification with the hearing community.

These definitions tend to be reinforced by the use of selective research paradigms. For example, terminology is regularly used interchangeably in a way which does not distinguish SSE from Signed Exact English or Manually Coded English (MCE). This is a significant anomaly because many of the common objections to SSE coming from sign linguists and Deaf activists are clearly grounded in the definition of MCE - a system developed by hearing educators to respond to "the language problem" of limited BSL nativity in hearing families with deaf children (Ramsey 1989) which aims to match English grammatically with signs on a word-for-word basis. As such, MCE is about the linguistic status and prestige of *standard English*. But

significantly, there is no known community of MCE users any more than there is a community of cued speech users, and so the teaching and learning of MCE is controlled by hearing educators.

Maxwell et al. (1991) have argued that definitions which view SSE as 'deviant' stem directly from the 'deficit' model of research - which they call 'error analysis'. As an example, we might critically analyse Barbara Kannapell's sociolinguistic study of bilingualism in American deaf college students, which identified six 'types' on the basis of 'comfortable' language use, ease of understanding, and identity (1993:17-18). Throughout the study, English and ASL are assumed to be discrete and dominant; English is implicitly associated with hearing people as is ASL with Deaf people. She doesn't actually ask the students whether they are 'comfortable' using mixed forms or 'understand' them easily, because she changes the structure of her questions at this point to ask "How well do you know and use ... [mixed forms]?" (1993:178), which implicitly links mixed forms to issues of competence rather than preference. Though she is aware of definitions of bilingualism which refer to the use of two languages irrespective of the skill in those languages (Bratt-Paulston, 1977; Fitouri, 1983), she chooses to adopt Cummins' (1979) distinction between 'balanced bilinguals' who are skilled in both languages and 'semilinguals' who use both languages but with limited skill, "for the purpose of clarity" (1993:17), thus introducing a status element.

It later emerges, however, that the identified 'types' are not uniform, nor can there be clear boundaries between them, because when analysed in terms of self-reported 'communication skill', 78% of the students ranked themselves as skilled or very skilled in Pidgin Sign English (PSE, or what we know as SSE) in comparison to 68% who saw themselves as skilled or very skilled in ASL. In the light of this, it seems even more important to know whether these students are comfortable using PSE and understand it easily. Kannapell stresses that PSE and MCE (Manually Coded English, or, in Britain, Signed Exact English) are not languages, whereas ASL undoubtedly is (1993:12); but when she looks at the reasons for particular language preferences in these students, *her own choice* of language is interesting. Of the four illustrative examples she gives in her conclusion (1993:166) three are described as "*classifying themselves as* .... [being one of the six 'types']" and the fourth "*claimed that* PSE was his true sign language". The use of language has the effect of marginalising the claimant as an 'anomaly'.

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A postmodernist view of SSE

An essentialist world view, which divides human experience into the 'either-or' of Deaf or hearing and BSL or SSE is not, however, the only way of viewing experience. It is increasingly being seen as out-dated, because it does not reflect a postmodern perspective of the social world created by greater pluralism and individuation, in which language as constantly changing, time-related and context-bound. A postmodernist framework - which, I must emphasise is proposed here as an alternative to attitudinal essentialism, not *the* alternative - views different aspects of human experience as more fluid and mutually constitutive. Within such a framework, SSE might be described as an *interlanguage* (Selinker, 1992) which is not related to 'pure' BSL but arises from language targeting and achievement differences, arising from the influence and interaction of individual and group language competencies and skills and community and society language norms. Hence, Maxwell et al. (1991) point to the failure of error analysis to look at the *interaction* which occurs between vocal and visual channels in SSE use, and its emphasis on omissions of spoken or signed morphemes. They describe SSE as a form of *bimodal communication*, where both the sign channel and the speech channel must be in use for full expression and reception because they supplement each other to produce 'a language'. Sustained insider observation of informal social interaction also suggests that different forms of SSE are widely used in the Deaf community, *and that there is a community of SSE users who*

are attitudinally (though not necessarily culturally) Deaf.

SSE, which may be English-based or BSL-based, though commonly, it is a mixture of the two, is very much a 'language' of deaf people's collective experiences, particularly in relation to:

- education in mainstream schools, especially where the total communication approach is/was used;
- learning sign as a second language from an imperfect first language base;
- a conscious desire to improve on the deficiencies of lip-reading without losing the human contact aspect of communication;
- living/working in mainstream society as opposed to the Deaf sector.

As such, SSE might be described as a symbol of a culturally conditioned 'in-between' identity which is searching for a collective 'home', and which is therefore an example of *ethnolinguistic vitality*. To claim that SSE is deviant is therefore a sociolinguistic anathema. Perhaps more significantly, however, this claim hides behind the fallacy of the proposed dichotomy between status planning and corpus planning which becomes most evident when particular language groups attempt to increase the status of a minority language such as BSL. It could be suggested, drawing upon Giles et al. (1977), that the different routes to the emergence of an SSE community are linked in part to language status and as such involve the manner in which "history, prestige value and the degree of standardisation may be a source of pride or shame" (1977:312). This influences how the ethnolinguistic reference groups - English users and BSL users - are evaluated. Structural functionalist descriptions of linguistic diversity, as we have seen, avoid looking at the correlation between power and economic/linguistic wealth and status which demarcates the boundaries between the language community's in-group and its various out-groups.

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The Deaf in-group hold power by virtue of being a numerical minority of well-educated Deaf people who have had the *good fortune* to be exposed to all the conditions which are said to contribute to the formation of a strong Deaf cultural identity - a Deaf family, attendance at a Deaf school, and total immersion in BSL and Deaf culture. Ironically, it is also this group who have the greatest capacity to move into the domains of direct social reproduction in mainstream society from this strong, secure base. Moreover, because the relative value of one language over another in social advancement, or its *prestige*, will depend on such movement, there will be repercussions for its corpus, not because of any 'deficiency' in that language but because of its social reconstitution. So the Deaf in-group, like many minority language users before them, become a major source of the emergence of what might be called 'class varieties' of BSL, *which include forms of SSE*. The change in the BSL corpus derives directly from the change in status from moving language domains - status and corpus planning are not discrete in the way that many sociolinguists claim - and this is why we are now seeing a move towards BSL standardisation to remove the 'hindrance' of linguistic diversity in sign language.

The paradox created by this is that the community out-group consists not of those who, in Harlan Lane's view, have "made the wrong life choices" (1992:7), but of those who have not had the relevant exposure to optimum conditions and/or who are regarded as being of inferior status because of the change in the BSL corpus. 'Stigma' is also 'relational' in the relationship between Deaf and deaf people. This is because the domain extension of a minority language, when associated with the drive for language prestige, as is the case with BSL, does not necessarily mean that this prestige value is open to all users of BSL. While increased prestige seems to be an essential prerequisite of increasing the status of a minority language it can lead to factionalism within the minority language group. As Figure 1 shows, the struggle shifts from a struggle *over* language to a struggle *in* language, associated with language 'purity'. To a certain extent then,

the possibility for domain extension must reside in the power differentials of minority - majority group relations.

Many Deaf people and their allies nevertheless see SSE as a threat to the cultural symbolism and prestige of the BSL standard and to its unifying function. However, there are ways in which the Deaf community is exclusive and, as Deaf people know from history, a common response to social exclusion is to claim a new 'proud' identity. Moreover, Francis Elton (1997:4) stresses that "in comparison to hearing people, Deaf people know very, very little about linguistics" and that "if Deaf people do not catch up with linguistics knowledge, hearing people are likely to take over BSL", a view which is echoed by Charles Herd (1997) in relation to the standardisation of BSL. But again, we need to ask which particular 'linguistics knowledge' Elton is referring to, and where, specifically, are ideas about BSL standardisation coming from? It is certainly not from this strangely vague entity which we like to call 'hearing culture' because the vast majority of the population, both hearing and deaf, are not aware of the extent of diversity within sign language, or take it for granted in much the same way as spoken dialects are taken for granted. They see signing and think *deaf*, not BSL or SSE. Moreover, there is a further paradox embedded in standardisation in that the language that most of us are encouraged to learn in compulsory education is rarely equivalent to the language that most of us use as adults. Our 'social language' is highly personal and contextualised. Wakelin observed that Standard English is treated as "the sort of language used when communicating beyond the family, close friends and acquaintances, whereas dialect is nowadays often kept for intimate circles" (1972:5). Similarly, Deaf people often describe 'family signs' which are hidden from use outside of the family context, and particularly within educational contexts (Corker, 1996).

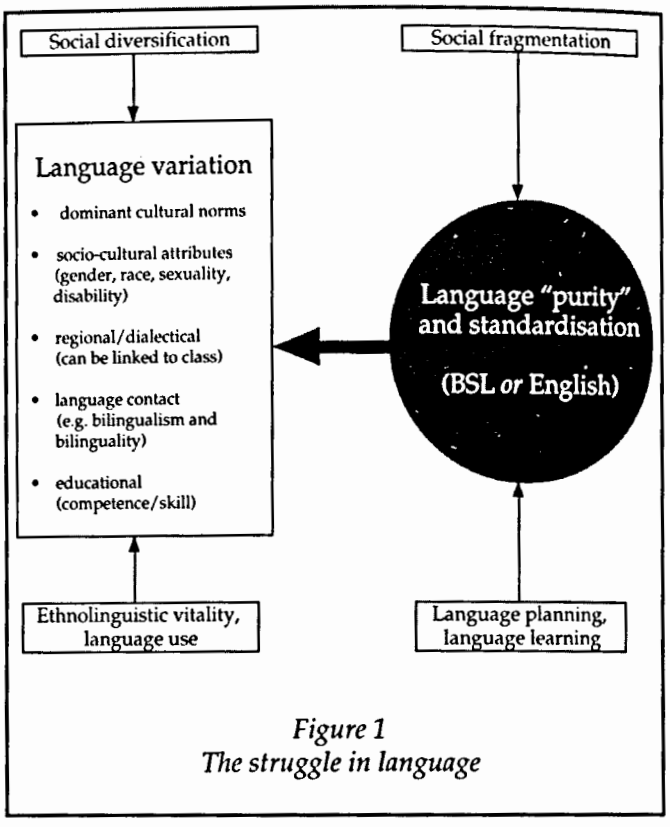

Figure 1
The struggle in language

In this situation, the focus on BSL standardisation, of which the elimination of SSE is a part, seems to represent a pulling of the ranks - a kind of regrouping which encourages preoccupation with 'the struggle in language'. This is why deaf people must heed Elton's and Herd's concerns, because however academically interesting an inward focus may be, it presents us with an enormous political problem, since any move away from the 'struggle over language' lets the dominant society off the hook and allows *that society's* standards to prevail. Deaf people are not unique amongst the deaf population in their experience of linguistic oppression, and anything which distracts us or marginalises us from the way in which oppression and inequality are institutionalised makes us less politically effective. As such it becomes a subtle exercise in social control - turn deaf people to an inward focus and we cease to be a problem, because we are too busy oppressing each other to see that this is part of the state's 'grand plan'. Those who are most damaged by this struggle are the 'weakest' amongst us, because language standardisation is ultimately aimed at dividing 'the competent' from 'the rest'.

Implications for the 'new breed' of interpreters

There are many aspects of this article which are of relevance to a number of different activities and profes-

sions - not the least of which is research. I am here, however, confined to commenting on its implications for interpreting. Critics of standardisation have long regarded the absolutism it involves as inappropriate to democratic processes, particularly those which involve local accountability. Concepts of human rights and their enshrinement in anti-discriminatory policy and practice are the cornerstones of democracy in Western society; it follows that language standardisation works against the 'right' of access to equal information in much the same way as language deprivation does. Where language planners insist that our language choices, as deaf people, lie between English and BSL, they are reinforcing inequality through the implicit suggestion that the Deaf elite and hearing people have more 'rights' to information and participation than anyone else. These same people muddy the waters further by claiming to support BSL-English bilingualism whilst arguing that contact forms such as SSE are deviant. Language conflict is a natural outcome of bilingualism, as a form of language contact, which is exactly why the discourse on structural functionalism views rationality as enshrined in language standards and bilingualism as incompatible (Williams, 1992:122). Moreover, bilingualism in sign language and spoken language is very different to bilingualism in two spoken languages because there are culturally embedded competence differentials produced largely by incompetent, non-native users within the main domains of social reproduction. A bilingual approach often hides a monolingual agenda, but as long as we ignore minority-majority power relations, we cannot pretend that this particular monolingual agenda is founded on BSL.

New discourses of disability access, which is now enshrined in law, and deaf empowerment, which has yet to be, have changed the social and linguistic makeup of the deaf population and, therefore, the political climate of interpreter training.

Interpreters, as most Deaf people know, hold considerable power in determining the outcome of minority-majority relations simply because they work at the interface of these relations. When sign language interpreting was originally conceived, it was part of the structural functionalist discourse of benevolence or support for the 'needy', and was not always altruistic in its intentions since it reinforced dependency of Deaf people on language mediation. There are many Deaf people who still view interpreting in this way which is why there is still a demand for communication support as opposed to language translation. New discourses of disability access, which is now enshrined in law, and deaf empowerment, which has yet to be, have changed the social and linguistic makeup of the Deaf population and, therefore, the political climate of interpreter training. Interpreting now operates from a professional base that is not compatible with the provision of communication support because it is built on a model of linguistic competence in BSL and English which does not match that of the vast majority of the adult Deaf population. In short, many interpreters are more knowledgeable about sign linguistics and more proficient in BSL than most Deaf people, particularly those who were casualties of oralism and learned BSL as a second language, and are certainly more sophisticated in their ability to manufacture discourses using the rules of the dominant culture. These are the very people who denigrate SSE, and often other sign language varieties and dialects, by emphasising how difficult it is (for them) to cope physically and intellectually with 'impure' language forms, and who play upon Deaf people's natural antipathy or prejudice towards English.

But, as Burr (1995:64) says, drawing on Foucault: "To define the world or a person in a way that allows you to do the things that you want is to exercise power". Next time we ask ourselves why we can't understand a particular interpreter in a particular context, perhaps we should be asking "Whose language are they using?" It remains my view that the survival of the interpreting profession will depend on how far it can adapt to the postmodernist agenda - how far a 'new breed' of interpreters can be identified and trained who embrace, as an important ingredient of professionalism, a commitment to the 'right' of optimum access to information in the language, language form or language variety *of the user or user group*. This will involve training which places equal emphasis on cross- and bi- or even multi-modal work in different contexts - some Deaf people will be functioning in multi-lingual situations and others will need particular specialist knowledge and skills

- and which develops an awareness of the different language bases that Deaf people come from and require access to. Training must therefore utilise the skills and knowledge of Deaf people who are 'native' to such situations, because those working within a framework of attitudinal essentialism will only perpetuate the view of multi-modal work as the poor relation of 'proper' language translation. Indeed, there is a very compelling case for multi-track training which makes the best possible use of available skills and resources without sacrificing the skills of those who fail on a particular route or depleting the availability of professional interpreters who are qualified to work in particular contexts e.g. BSL to English and vice versa. Such a scenario will only come from a recognition that, for the vast majority of Deaf people, whatever our social and cultural affiliations, language choices, and often identity choices, are not personal choices at all (Corker, 1996). They are culturally produced by the language planning strategies of a dominant culture intent on perpetuating inequality.

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