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Edited by Carmen Valero-Garcés and Anne Martin

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Definitions and dilemmas

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CHAPTER 11

Sign Language interpreters and role conflict in the workplace

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The issue of role conflict and role confusion is one of the primary difficulties facing sign language interpreters (SLIs) working in employment settings. The source of this conflict is complex, multi-layered and has its origins deeply rooted in traditional models of interpreting. SLIs are struggling with their roles and responsibilities in relation to their client groups, with all the implications of power and oppression that are grounded in the history of relations between Deaf and hearing communities (Ladd 2003; Cokely 2005). They are also faced with a daily battle, conducted both internally and externally, with the ways in which their role is perceived. The more recent concept of the interpreter as an active, highly visible third participant in interpreted interaction (Wadensjö 1998; Roy 2000) is continually coming up against the unexamined, unreconstructed models which tend to be assumed by default.

With SLIs frequently expected to switch between confidant, co worker, interpreter, assistant and advocate within a single interpreted interaction, it is no wonder that this unpredictability results in confusion and inconsistency, with SLIs reporting feelings of guilt, anxiety and frustration.

Drawing upon ongoing research into the role of SLIs in the workplace setting, including highly revealing practitioner journals, this chapter will examine the difficulties and challenges that SLIs face in the very specific public service sector of workplace interpreting, and will address practical and theoretical implications for the field.

Introduction

Sign language (SL) interpreting of some description has doubtless existed wherever communication has been mediated between signing and non-signing people. The task began to receive formal recognition in the 1960s, with the formation in 1964 of the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf in the USA (Frishberg 1990). The need to spell out a distinct role for interpreters reflected anxiety about the conflation of interpreting with separable professions whose members had often undertaken to mediate Deaf-hearing communication—e.g. welfare officers, teachers, priests. SL interpreting has subsequently developed as an independent, regulated profession in many countries, with increasingly structured education leading to professional

status, and practitioner associations providing representation and strategic development (Stewart, Schien and Cartwright 1998). It should be acknowledged that SL interpreting now occurs across a wide range of social circumstances, from community and public service settings to conference, theatre and media work.

As SL interpreting emerged, the models inherited from the wider field established a role for the interpreter as a conduit through which messages could be transferred: interpreters were understood to have no influence on conversational meanings. In the late 1980s, however, an alternative perspective rose to prominence, inspired in particular by recognition that the 'conduit' model described a passive role for SL interpreters, which was simply unrealistic. It began to be recognised that practitioners could not be as passive as this model suggested, and that in fact they actively reach independent decisions about how most appropriately to convey meanings (Roy 2000).

This paradigm shift also drew upon the steady growth in awareness of Community Interpreting (CI) in general: as in the wider field (see Berk-Seligson 1990, Wadensjö 1998), accounts have been presented which explore the *co-participant* status of the interpreter (Metzger 1999, Harrington and Turner 2001). Recognition of the relevance of SL interpreting to the wider field dates back at least to the 1970s (see Brislin 1976, for instance), and as this thinking has impacted upon the professional organisation of SL interpreting services it has become realistic to see SLIs as, in some respects, among the significant leaders in the CI field.

A key element in the development of understandings of the role of the SL interpreter (SLI) has been the attention paid to matters of power in discourse, including tensions over control of the interpreter's operational performance. Deaf people have often been seen as intellectually incapable (see Lane 1992 for discussion) which has led to a paternalistic approach towards them. Since the profession began to grow independently, SLIs have sought to underline their impartiality. Nevertheless, the idea (e.g. Baker-Shenk 1991) has arisen that the interpreter also has an opportunity to act as an 'ally', engaging in the social re-positioning of Deaf people. Whilst such ideas do circulate, and a number of recent explorations have re-considered relationships between interpreters and other communication stakeholders (Pollitt 1997, Turner and Pollitt 2002, Cokely 2005, Turner 2005), the strong normative expectation of interpreter neutrality remains largely in place out in the field.

Deaf people in the workplace

> Although Deaf people may be recruited to work alongside hearing people, they often do not share the same levels of training and qualification as a result of poor educational experiences earlier in life and are therefore not able to participate at an equal level to hearing colleagues. Lichtig *et al.* (2004: 286)

Deaf people have become more visible in the workplace since the industrialisation of employment. No longer supported within an agricultural society, Deaf people moved into manufacturing trades, as this was seen as an area where their disability did not affect their ability to be a productive workforce member. Indeed, in the nineteenth century Deaf employees were often seen as 'good dedicated workers—'undistracted by sound" (Kyle and Pullen 1988: 51), who comment that the stereotypical view of deafness was established at this point.

As well as being recognised and valued for their skills in relation to the education of Deaf children and services specifically designed for Deaf consumers (Young *et al.* 2000), Deaf people are increasingly being employed in more mainstream employment domains. Yet Deaf people still face many barriers when it comes to employment. As Lichtig *et al.* state (2004), their educational attainments mean that they are immediately starting from a lower position than their hearing colleagues. Even in situations such as those described by Lichtig *et al.* (2004), where the involvement of Deaf people has been specifically sought in recognition of the skills and knowledge that they could bring to the setting, communication difficulties and culture clashes arise. In situations where there is little or no understanding of Deaf culture and no attempts to mediate or accommodate communication differences, the potential for conflict and misunderstanding is immense.

Deaf people's experiences in workplaces reveal gaps between inclusive ideals and lived realities. Harris and Bamford (2001) report lack of awareness and flexibility in employers regarding expectations for Deaf workers; employee reluctance to seek workplace support; inaccessible application procedures for requesting support; problems with knowledge about and the provision of work-related equipment; and an overall sense that provision remains service-led rather than needs-led. Deaf people thus find their work practices constrained by norms designed for or evolved in hearing workplaces. Kendall (1999) summarises the outcome as resulting in the following four types of disadvantage to Deaf workers.

Linguistic disadvantage is readily predictable: Deaf and hearing co-workers understand each other's communication poorly, especially when the Deaf worker signs, and—crucially—the 'problem' is located in the users of the minority language form (Montgomery and Laidlaw 1993; Isrealite *et al.* 2002). When Deaf people report communication breakdowns in the hearing world, they also express the frustration and anger that can be experienced (Young *et al.* 1998).

Identity disadvantage especially relates to the way in which the identity that individuals are able to construct and present in fundamentally monolingual contexts, is affected by the mixed nature of the Deaf-and-hearing workgroup, with the result that—again because of their minority status—Deaf people tend to background or otherwise submerge significant aspects of their self-identity (Corker 1994; Rose and Kiger 1995).

Educational and knowledge disadvantage relates to the fact that many hearing people are not aware that spoken/written languages are second languages to many Deaf people. Literacy for Deaf people also remains a barrier which the education system has not consistently addressed (Kyle *et al.* 1989; Powers *et al.* 1998). Historically, Deaf people have often not been afforded accessible educational opportunities.

Finally, *representational and perceptual* disadvantages can be cited: the climate may be changing, but there remains cultural 'baggage' within the wider society which patronises and sentimentalises Deaf people as 'afflicted' and 'underfunctioning' (Lane 1992).

The gulf in terms of understanding also applies to Deaf people's awareness of workplace culture and their hearing colleagues behavioural norms in that specific setting, this dual deficiency of perception referred to by Kyle (2001) as the lack of mutual knowledge about individual's needs and different life perspectives of each group. Informal 'system' knowledge within the workplace is hard for Deaf people to access (Trowler and Turner 2002). From the perspective of the hearing staff they are expected to make considerable adjustments to various aspects of their communicative behaviour, such as turn-taking, making eye contact with the Deaf person, speaking clearly and at an even pace as well as more practical considerations such as seating, lighting, ensuring interpreter availability etc (eg Lichtig *et al.* 2004). Given the stress, competing demands and workloads of many modern day organisations it is easy to see how the communication needs of Deaf employees can be seen as a low priority, if not ignored altogether.

Approaching the needs from the perspective of the Deaf employee, their lack of awareness of the wider issues embedded in workplace culture, practices and hierarchical structures might mean that they perceive their requirements as being deliberately dismissed or devalued. Deaf people are frequently seen as being more direct in their approaches to what can be deemed as 'sensitive' or face saving acts by hearing people. Hearing employees also are frequently unaware of or forget the extent to which Deaf people are excluded from casual workplace communication. Their inability to 'overhear' or pick up information through casual and informal conversations (Lichtig *et al.* 2004) results in an incomplete picture of all the nuances and subtleties that make up communication in the work environment.

Sign Language interpreters in the workplace

The difficulty in accounting for the numbers of SLIs employed in workplace settings is comparable to that of describing their provision in the U. K. As Brien *et al.* (2002) highlight, the available lists of BSL/ English interpreters and interpreting agencies do not provide a full picture as to the number of SLIs working in the U. K. Similarly, there are no statistics as to how many SLIs are employed in workplace settings, either as freelance interpreters or employed on a staff basis. However, the impact of the Disability Discrimination Act (Turner *et al.* 2002) and attitude change over the last decade means that the workplace has gradually become more accessible to disabled people (Goldstone 2002), with Deaf people being increasingly offered opportunities to work in more professional fields (Dickinson 2002). The majority of SLIs currently practising in the U.K are likely therefore, at some point in their professional life, to accept assignments that occur in a workplace setting.

As part of the project outlined in this paper, SLIs working in this domain were surveyed about their working practice, with over 91% of the respondents stating that they worked with the same Deaf client on a regular basis, in an office or Access to Work (ATW) type setting. Access to Work is a Government funded scheme, a system whereby Deaf and disabled people can apply for support in their workplace, in the form of personal assistants, sign language interpreters, technical support or the modification of materials. Most profoundly Deaf people are allocated a number of hours for interpreter support. SLIs therefore are generally employed to work with Deaf people who use British Sign Language as their first or preferred language, in what are mainly hearing dominated workplace environments. Employed on both a staff and freelance basis, SLIs can be contracted to support Deaf people in a wide variety of settings, ranging from offices, social services, and education to factory floors. They can interpret across a wide spectrum of interactions—team meetings, formal and informal discussions, training events, supervisions, conferences and every-day social workplace interaction. The research outlined in this paper has focused on SLIs who are mainly contracted to work in office settings as their employment tends to be more consistent, providing a clearer picture of the conflicts that can occur in this domain.

Studying Sign Language interpreting in workplace settings

The workplace is a complex and multilayered setting, and as a result interpreting between Deaf and hearing people can be an intricate task. SLIs are not only working between different languages but also have to negotiate a minefield of cultural differences, relating to Deaf and hearing culture, as well as disparate perceptions of workplace norms and practices. The challenge of the research reported here was therefore to devise a methodology that would identify as far as possible the behaviour of SLIs in workplace settings, creating a rich and detailed description of the

interpreted interaction in this particular domain. The study has directed its focus to an ethnographic perspective on interpreted interaction located within workplaces. In order to identify the issues that were pertinent to SLIs working in this field, data were collected through the use of questionnaires and journals. A total of 110 questionnaires were distributed, predominantly via sign language interpreter e-groups. Of these, 57 questionnaires were returned, with 24 SLIs volunteering to participate further in the project by keeping a reflective journal over a three-month period. The data from both the questionnaires and journals were then thematically analyzed to provide an outline of key issues from a practitioner point of view. This paper draws on evidence from the questionnaires and journals, to highlight the conflicts that SLIs experience in the workplace domain.

Differences in the perception of the SLI's role

> This feeling of discomfort and internal conflict is more likely to occur in ATW jobs because the regular nature of the job gives the interpreter more insight into the perspectives of both participants. (J36.1)[1]

The data from the questionnaires and journals provided by SLIs have revealed a wide range of issues that present challenges in this setting, ranging from workplace environment and culture (including office politics, small talk and jargon) and conflicts over role and boundaries, to culture and identity negotiation. Many of the issues that have been raised can be said to stem from one common source—the lack of understanding of the SLI's role by all participants in this setting and the conflicts that are subsequently generated from this confusion.

What's in a name? Interpreter, Personal Assistant or Helper

The terminology used to describe the role of the SLI in the workplace is indicative of the complexity of that role and the differing perceptions held by both Deaf and hearing people.

> Deaf person often jokingly introduces me as their "interpreter-stroke-PA (personal assistant)". (J16.3)

> Hearing colleagues assume more of a "support" role is happening, just by virtue of the interpreter's regular presence'. (Q17d: qr18)

> Seen more as a support worker—asked to do 'non-interpreting' tasks, typing letters, making tea for rest of staff...! (Q17d: qr16)

1. 'Q' denotes questionnaire data. Q17d: qr52 signifies Question 17d: questionnaire respondent number 52; 'J' denotes journal data. J14.4 signifies Journal 14: entry 4.

> A blurring of roles can occur in the ATW setting—the frequent and regular contact, along with time between actual interpreting of meetings/ conversations, leads to chat about personal stuff, so the interpreter may be seen as more of a colleague... (J36.3)

SLIs employed in the workplace domain are in an unusual situation in that they are regularly present in the same workplace but (unless they are directly contracted as a staff interpreter) they are not an 'employee' of that workplace. This results in a very ambiguous and ill-defined role for the SLI—if they work for the same clients in the same company on a regular basis, they will see those same people every day, and will be party to the conversations and discussions, both formal and informal, that constitute the discourse within that particular environment, effectively becoming a quasi-employee. The data collected so far in the research indicate that SLIs are struggling with the problems and feelings arising from this tenuous positioning within the workplace.

> my presence often makes hearing staff feel uncomfortable if I behave strictly as an interpreter, because it is not what people are used to in that environment and sometimes they feel compelled to try and befriend the interpreter. (Q17d: qr52)

> makes it difficult to remain impartial and often staff interpreters are asked to "take their hat off" for a minute and provide some information that they know we know. (J21)

The struggle to establish their role in the workplace environment adds an additional pressure to the tasks that SLIs have to undertake; they frequently shift roles, repositioning themselves to suit differing interactions, perceptions and demands. Being seen as employees or as part of the workforce is not necessarily a negative aspect for SLIs. Developing social relationships with both Deaf and hearing employees can enable them to blend in to the environment and potentially become a more flexible and integral part of the communication process. However, SLIs have yet to develop subtle, role-integrated ways of 'doing social interaction' without feeling that they are becoming too overt, too visible and overstepping what they consider to be their professional boundaries.

Visibility versus invisibility

> One interpreter/stranger/new face etc already draws enough attention to the fact that somebody in the office is Deaf. After all, hearing people don't have those sorts of things to deal with (J31.2)

SLIs are finding it difficult to balance the degree to which they make themselves visible within the office setting. On the one hand they are wrestling with the unavoidable truth that their very presence draws attention to the Deaf client's exist-

ence in the workplace. Paradoxically, on occasions the presence of the SLI can emphasise the Deaf client's *absence*. One SLI, describing a situation where the Deaf client did not appear for work, stated that the presence of the interpreter had inadvertently:

> highlighted a "disappearance" from work [...] before long the whole office was questioning where the Deaf client was. I felt awful as it became obvious that they must be skiving, however, thanks to me, not discreetly anymore. (J6.3)

As the SLI in the above example comments, it is quite likely that a hearing colleague unofficially escaping work would have gone unnoticed but, by having an SLI assigned through ATW, Deaf people become highly visible within the office. SLIs are clearly aware of their degree of visibility in this setting and attempts to minimise their presence are coming up against long-held models of interpreter invisibility and the more recent trend towards a visible active interpreter (Angelelli 2001).

SLIs are not only struggling with the issue of just how visible or invisible they should make themselves but also the degree to which the interpreting process should be brought into the interaction. If we take a view of the purpose of the provision of SLIs through Access to Work as being to make Deaf people's experience of work 'normal' and on an equal basis with their hearing peers, then it would seem that SLIs are striving to produce this unrealistic picture by making themselves and the interpreting process as invisible as possible:

> because of that "normalising" it is not always helpful for interpreters to disappear off on breaks or to make a fuss when the work is too heavy for one interpreter to deal with, it doesn't make the Deaf person or the interpreter look very professional. (J31.2)

> I try to keep my interruptions to a minimum because this client is very embarrassed by the attention that is drawn to her by being a Deaf person. (J31.3)

> I do not want my needs to reflect badly on the client who has to work in that environment everyday, whereas I come and go. (J31.3)

> By the time you have asked people to repeat things a number of times (due to poor acoustics) the feeling of colleagues getting to know each other is no longer there. It brings the interpreter to the forefront of the conversation. (J2.1)

SLI's are also conscious that they can draw attention to themselves by their inactivity when everyone else around them is engaged in work-related tasks. This is the cause of a considerable amount of anxiety for SLIs, who are already aware that they do not fit into the office environment and that by 'doing nothing' they further highlight their difference:

> I also never know what to do with myself when the deaf person says that they don't need me for half an hour. Is it okay to take out a book? Do I simply sit and stare into space, do I look busy? Can I use my phone? (Q16: qr8)

The evidence to date therefore suggests that SLIs are coming up against a variety of interpreting models—interpreter as conduit, robot or invisible participant—and that they are finding it difficult to reconcile these models with the reality of their role and actions within the workplace setting.

Tracing the source of the conflict: Positionality and positioning

> Interpreters have always occupied a unique social and cultural position relative to the communities within which they work. It is they who are positioned "between worlds" and who make possible communication with outsiders. (Cokely 2005: 3)

SLIs are continually experiencing discord in their positioning within the workplace, as the overriding norms that inform their practice, those of the interpreter as conduit and as an invisible, uninvolved participant unconsciously clash with their more recent acquisition of the concept of the interpreter as an active, highly visible third participant in interpreted interaction (Wadensjö 1998; Roy 2000). Inghilleri (2004) states that she does not presume that translators and interpreters are passive in their acceptance of the established and dominant norms of their profession, and evidence from this study suggests that although these norms are deeply ingrained and pervasive, SLIs are aware of their presence and are reflecting on their impact on interpreting activity. It is this struggle that is bringing to the surface the feelings of discomfort, anxiety and conflict that they experience.

In order to examine the source of these conflicts it is necessary to expand from the micro-dimension to the macro, in line with Inghilleri's (2004: 71) suggestion that '... the particular communicative competencies that interpreters bring to their work are influenced by both the micro and macro features of the interpreting activity'. In order to bring into play the macro-dimensional features we will examine the concept of the SLI's *positionality* (Cokely 2005) and then explore how this in turn affects their *positioning* (Mason 2005) within the micro-dimensions of the interpreted event.

Cokely's (2005) illuminating examination highlights the positionality of interpreters in relation to the Deaf Community. His description of the rapid shifts in the professional status of SLIs in the United States, and his observations as to the impact this has had on their relationship with the Deaf Community can be similarly applied to developments within the United Kingdom. SLIs in the U.K have also seen their position both with and within the Deaf community become highly complex. As hearing people, SLIs are part of a dominant and oppressive culture (see Ladd 2003 for an in-depth analysis) and yet have a strong alignment with the minority group in the interpreted interaction. It is this very particular 'caught-between' (or 'both/and') status that brings such pressures to bear upon the space

the SLI occupies. As Kyle and Pullen (1988: 57) comment, in order to acquire sign language successfully, there must also be contact with Deaf culture: '... there is a closeness required which needs at least a temporary shift of identity'.

We would suggest that the SLI in fact takes on board that required 'closeness' and integrates it, at least temporarily, into their identity as an interpreter. It is this closeness that aligns SLIs again and again with the Deaf client when they are interpreting in situations where there are clear power imbalances and evidence of oppression. This cultural pull of allegiance clearly also occurs in spoken language interpreting, particularly within community interpreting where the interpreter can often be from the same minority group as their client. Angelelli (2002: 9) identifies this as a source of tension in her study on Healthcare Interpreters—that interpreters find it difficult to '...remain neutral and be a member of the same small community'—but we would suggest that this is especially difficult for SLIs because of the history of oppression of Deaf people, the medical model that has been adopted in terms of their disability (Ladd 2003) and the SLIs uniquely semi-detached position within the community. This struggle or conflict that SLIs experience with their positionality in relation to the wider Deaf community feeds, both subliminally and at times overtly, into the positions that they adopt within interpreted interaction.

Mason (2005) moves away from the use of the word 'role' to encompass what people do within discourse, suggesting that this description is insufficient to illustrate the actions of participants, as it is too static. Mason instead talks about *positioning*, as reflecting the dynamic and changing ways that all participants are positioned within interaction and the ways in which these continually shifting and evolving positions effect their communication with each other. In referring to the way in which courtroom interpreters in the USA position themselves as a 'non-person', Mason highlights how this in turn forces the other participants to interact directly with each other, disregarding the presence of the interpreter. The term 'non-person', originating with Goffman (1990), signifies someone who is present during the interaction but does not play either the role of performer or of audience. Wadensjö (1998: 67) states that '... in many respects, the concept of non-person applies to the interpreter in face to face interaction' and the evidence from this study suggests that SLIs frequently position themselves as a non-person in the interpreted event, reinforcing their invisibility by their actions and fostering the impression that they are not really involved in the communicative process. However, the responses from the questionnaires and journals in this study suggest that SLIs are not adopting just one position within the interpreted interaction, but that they frequently switch and adapt their positions within the space of a single communicative event, maintaining a fluidity that allows them to meet the differing expectations of the primary participants.

Concluding thoughts

> I think the office interpreting scenario is a real can of worms because I think that if I behave like an interpreter should, sometimes I'm not being very helpful ... interpreters have 'fallen into' doing office support with no real guidance as to good practice. (Q22: qr52)

In order for SLIs to gain an understanding of their complex status in the workplace we must continue to build on recent work in interpreting studies and 'take the lid off' what is happening for SLIs in the workplace setting, examining the reality of their role and positioning. SLIs have to take on board the reality of their role and accept that it is impossible to be a neutral and uninvolved bystander, someone who merely passes information between other participants. It is only when SLIs begin to consider the depth and intricacy of their role in the workplace that they will start to think about how they are going to deal with the issues that arise during interpreted events. By developing supportive, non-prescriptive, underpinning frameworks we will enable SLIs to feel confident in their fluid and adaptable workplace positioning, providing them with a safety net that empowers them to operate in the most effective way for all participants and for themselves.

SLIs have to explore ways in which they can inform all those involved in the communicative event about the practicalities of their role, and work with all participants to ensure that they fully understand and appreciate the fluid position that the SLI has in the interaction. It is an essential part of the interpreter's professionalism to emphasise their visibility, so that all participants are aware of their presence and can make informed decisions about the way they react and interact, thus ensuring that they become a consciously active part of the interpreting process itself. To capture the point, Turner (2007) writes by analogy with the field of physics, of 'quantum interpreting'. Fundamental to quantum physics is the notion that the nature of phenomena only exists in the act of our knowing about them: he suggests that, ultimately, "effective interpreting is similarly embedded or instantiated within our collective awareness, our co-construction, of the task". Such interpreting, it is claimed, acknowledges the *interdependence* of process, perceiver and product: it is only with the active 'uptake' of the interpreter's output by the other participants that it is fully 'made real' as communication. Achieving effective interpreter-mediated communication is something no individual can do alone: the 'quantum' notion points at the part other participants must play in inhabiting and taking ownership of the words ascribed to them by the interpreter. This is something they cannot do by treating the interpreter as a non-participant or by underestimating the impact the interpreter's utterances have upon the course of every interactional exchange.

In this way, then, SLIs can move towards addressing the mismatch between consumer expectations and the actual reality of interpreted events (Mason 2000), making small but incremental steps in reducing the role conflicts that SLIs experience in the workplace domain. It is only by doing this that SLIs will achieve the type of interpreted interaction in all settings that they are currently describing all too infrequently in the workplace data discussed in this paper:

> I felt that everyone was not only aware of each others roles and aims but respected each other as professionals in their own fields. I wasn't viewed as an 'invisible person' that should be ignored but as someone who was part of the meeting and who allowed communication and information to be understood by all. I wish more of our work was like this! (J14.4)

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