Strong voicer: Deaf individuals vs. interpreter perspectives

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Abstract

When interpreter agencies or Deaf consumers request a 'strong voicer,' what is really being requested? An interpreter with a good English vocabulary base and high register discourse ability? Or an interpreter who will not interrupt the Deaf speaker to ask for clarification? This pilot project led by a Deaf-hearing team investigates this fundamental and well-used term by interviewing Deaf individuals and interpreters. The pragmatic choices of the interpreter - in the usage of nonmanual markers while backchannelling, lexical choices in discourse regulators, and posing questions/clarifications all combine to create an 'accent' that impacts the total impression of a 'good' vs. 'poor' voicer regardless of actual voicing performance. "Fluency is not a cognitive operation in and of itself but, rather, a feeling of ease associated with a cognitive operation" (Oppenheimer, 2008, p. 237). Perception vs. performance is explored in this analysis of contrastive factors from Deaf people and signed language interpreters to produce a clearer connection between projected, perceived, and actual voicing abilities.

Keywords: Deaf-hearing interpreting, interpreting, accent, believability, trust, credible, relationship

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Introduction

The motivation for this study comes from a comparison of our experiences and perspectives. We are both consumers of interpreting services and certified interpreters. We have also worked together in a Deaf-interpreter relationship and we have both studied linguistics. Because of our backgrounds, experiences, and knowledge, any time that we work together leads to discussions on cultural and linguistic novelties.

Our first Deaf-interpreter interactions happened in graduate linguistics classes, where because of the topics covered, every interaction, expectation, and assumption became fertile ground for analysis. We played with linguistic theories, testing it against our knowledge of ASL, English, and our communities leading to in-depth discussions before class, during breaks and afterward.

One day, it was decided that for some classes, a team interpreter was needed. The question came up, whom to request? While we easily agreed on the skills and knowledge needed to handle the content and fast-paced discussions of the graduate classes, we found we could not agree on whom. In naming interpreters in our area that we felt would be a good fit, we found we had differing perspectives. It turned out that we had very dissimilar ideas when it came to identifying 'strong voice' interpreters.

After lengthy discussions and analysis of our judgment criteria, we realized that we were working from two different definitions of 'strong voicer.' We then wanted to know if this occurrence was just in our personal definitions or were they different when the Deaf or interpreting communities used this term. Through past experiences and anecdotal information from colleagues and community members, we came to believe the Deaf community operates on one definition of 'strong voicer' and the interpreting community another, very different definition. This project analyses the reasoning behind these judgments.

Perspectives on 'Strong Voicer'

Through questioning each other's perspectives, some things became apparent. Several of the interpreters identified by the Deaf individual as 'strong voicers,' in fact were not very skilled in producing good English interpretations; their vocabulary choices, register, pacing, and syntax were not at the level appropriate for graduate classrooms. And several of those interpreters that the Deaf individual felt looked less than confident while interpreting were some of

the strongest voicers around from the perspective of the interpreter. As our discussions continued, a second conclusion became apparent: the Deaf community appeared not aware that the ASL to English skills of some interpreters that many identified as 'strong voicers,' were less than optimal.

Within the Deaf community, the 'strong voicer' and 'good voicer' labels are familiarly used (anecdotally). A good number of the interpreters that the Deaf individual identified as 'strong voicers' were in fact competent and even talented in their voiced interpretations. So while her instincts were generally sound, what was it about those certain few interpreters that looked like good voicers, but were in fact not?

Turning to the Interpreting field, the terms are used commonly as well. Interpreter agencies regularly send out job requests specifying the need for 'strong voicers.' The following examples are real requests copied from emails and Facebook.

> THIS Thursday 6/28 1pm-? (guessing this won't run more than an hour or two) – 1 interpreter (a "strong voicer" has been requested)

> July 10, 2013 - Time: 10:15am, Situation: discuss overpayment ***strong voicer has been requested***

> July 25 – We have just gotten a request for strong voicer today; ASAP 5:00pm, tomorrow 8am-5pm and Friday 12pm-5pm. It would be for training over at ISD. Please let us know ASAP.

All but one request came from a Deaf person through an interpreting agency. While there are several requests used for this study, it did lead us to question if hearing people request strong voicers? If hearing people do not make this specific request, or not make this request as much as Deaf people, what does that mean? What does this say, and not say? Within the requests listed, we identified the following themes within the requests:

1) They are time sensitive
    - only for an hour
    - ASAP
    - THIS Thursday
2) The assignments seem to be viewed as high-risk assignments.
    - Overpayment
    - ISD (Indiana School for the Deaf)
    - Theatre
3) The term 'strong voicer' is in parenthesis or quotes.
    - By marking this term a special way gives it more attention.

When interpreters get requests such as the above, they decide to accept or decline the assignment based on a constellation of demands, one being their own perspective of their skills. We can get insights from a nationwide self-ranking survey of 664 interpreters conducted by Nicodemus in 2009, which shows most interpreters prefer to work from English to ASL, especially novice interpreters.

Interpreters stated, via the survey, that they rated their English to ASL skills at a three times greater proficiency level than their ASL to English skills. When comparing interpreting proficiencies in ASL and English their comprehension and production of English was much greater than ASL. Possible explanations for this are that interpreters work more often from English to ASL so feel out of their depth more often or that they may feel they are not able to effectively monitor their signing as they cannot see themselves sign. This survey does show that the more experienced interpreters are, they were more likely to express no preference between English to ASL or ASL to English interpreting (Nicodemus, 2009).

While a self-ranking on how interpreters view their skills can be helpful in different ways, it does not explain what actually happens, or how an interpreter really understands and knows her skill sets in both ASL and English. However, it does help us understand how interpreters rank their skills. Working together, the interpreting community becomes aware of each other's strengths and preferences. Interpreters who are good at and like voicing usually take the lead when the job calls for voicing. Those more comfortable voicing in specific settings or for specific Deaf individuals usually make their preferences known.

This sharing of interpreter's strengths and preferences does not extend to the Deaf community. Through community interactions, it is apparent that Deaf people are identifying who the strong voicers are based on factors other than the interpreter's skills in spoken English interpreting.

The paradox is apparent. Are the factors used by Deaf people to determine what qualifies an interpreter as a 'strong voicer' the same as those used by interpreters themselves? Does this perspective reflect their actual interpreting performance? The hearing non-signers at those events have their own judgments as well, likely based on if the interpretation seems 'off .' As cultural anthropologists, we are motivated to figure out the individual factors that form those judgments. Looking at linguistic scholarship and theories in other disciplines, we start to see the basis for these assumptions.

Literature Review

This pilot study investigates how both the Deaf community and interpreters come to their differing interpretations of 'strong voicer'. In investigating this, we interviewed interpreters and Deaf individuals on their perspective. In compiling data from the interviews, it became clear that the interpreters' idea of a 'strong voicer' centers on the

technical aspects of voicing while Deaf people emphasized the working relationship and level of trust between the Deaf person and the interpreter.

In examining theories on relationships and trust from different disciplines we begin to see justification for the different perspectives. This literature review touches on research from within the interpreting field as well as linguistics and psychology.

Accent in ASL

Compared to other languages of the world, ASL has been described as "not an easy language to master for the adult learner" (Quinto-Pozos, 2005, p. 160). Jacobs (1996) evaluated the difficulty of learning ASL by using the Foreign Service Institute and Defense Language Institute standards. Results show that ASL is a category 4 language, one of the more difficult languages to learn, comparative to learning Arabic, Chinese, or Japanese.

Because most ASL interpreters learn ASL as college students or adults, it is no surprise that L2 learners of ASL have an accent, sometimes described as a "hearing accent." Flege, Munro, and MacKay (1995) found that the speech of late second language learners (of spoken languages) inevitably is accented, even after being immersed in the L2 environment for many years. Even after many years of exposure to a second language, using the language on a daily basis, and interacting with native users, L2 individuals will continue to exhibit a strong foreign accent, have grammatical errors, and exhibit non-native intuitions about the interpretation of specific sentences (Towell, 1994).

For the purpose of this study, we have adopted the term of *accentedness* as referring to how strong an individual's "foreign accent is perceived to be" (Munro & Derwing, 1995, p. 289). While there may be some argument for the difference of "hearing accent" and "foreign accent", we are combing the two and are referring to L2 individuals as having an accent or foreign accent, i.e., not being a native signer of ASL.

"Non-native speech is harder to understand than native speech. (T)his processing difficulty causes non native speakers to sound less credible (to native audiences)…" because "the ease of processing…" affects the way the speaker is judged (Lev-Ari & Keysar, 2010, p. 1). Because most interpreters have an accent, they are potentially harder to understand and, according to Lev-Ari & Keysar's theory, may be measured as less credible than a native signer. The interpreter's accentedness directly correlates to not only how hard their deaf audience has to work to understand them but also how believable they find the message.

When interpreters deliver a message that is authored by another individual, even a very credible individual (i.e. doctor, lawyer, professor, etc.), the message (the interpretation) may be viewed as less truthful because of the accent of the interpreter. The credibility of the interpreter and the credibility of the message may be challenged because of the interpreter's accentedness. From the data we collected, it follows that Deaf individuals find the accent of the interpreter, their expression of prosodic cues and ability to backchannel, to directly correlate with the interpreter's ability. It also seems that Deaf individuals measure the credibility of the interpreter's voicing skills through the interpreter's comfort level in interacting with ASL users and ASL fluency, not their spoken English abilities.

Levi-Ari and Keysar (2010) found that accent was negatively correlated with truth rating. In their study, statements spoken by non-native speakers were rated "as significantly less true when said with a heavy accent" (p. 1095). They also found through a particular exercise in their study, statements made by speakers with a mild accent were rated just as truthful as native speakers. It follows that if an ASL interpreter can minimize her accent, native signers might view her interpretations as being more credible. When the listeners struggle with the accent and have to work harder to understand the non-native speech of the L2 interpreter, this appears to trigger a natural resistance to the message being conveyed. The accented speech interferes with the *processing fluency*, and non-native speakers are seen as less believable. Even when listeners were forewarned about the accent and credibility of non-native speakers, they continued to discredit those speakers with a heavy accent (Lev-Ari & Keysar, 2010). Consequently, even when Deaf individuals know that an interpreter has an accent and are overtly aware of the accent, it still may interfere with their perception of the credibility of the message.

Native speakers have been seen to quickly catch on that a non-native speaker is an outsider and this in turn conjures stereotypes (Dixon, Mahoney, & Cocks, 2002). Displaying a prejudice towards non-native speakers is not a

novice theory. In fact, a number of researchers have found "irritation, a downgrading of attitudes towards speakers, or outright discrimination because of a non-native accent or non-standard dialect" (Munro & Derwing, 1995, p. 290). While there may be a host of stereotypes that are associated with being an L2 user of ASL, it is plausible to assume that these stereotypes could impact the credibility of the interpreter.

Believability of the message

For non-native speakers of spoken languages, accented speech can drastically interfere with the overall believability of the message (Lev-Ari & Keysar, 2010). Even when conveying a message from one native speaker to another, when it was the non-native speakers who were communicating the message, listeners found the message less credible. Not only do listeners discredit the information from non-native speakers when they are speaking on their own behalf, but also when speakers are delivering the message from others. "In general, then, even when speakers just deliver information from others, people perceive this information as less truthful when the speaker has an accent" (Lev-Ari & Keysar, 2010, p. 1094).

Considering that interpreters are working as "messengers" of another individual's message, this non-native effect no doubt applies. While the process of interpreting is cognitively much different than directly relaying another individual's message, the Deaf audience of the interpreter will be dealing with their natural inclination to discount non-native speech as being untruthful. This would definitely interfere with their overall processing and understanding of the message.

Lev-Ari and Keysar (2010) found that two main reasons why non-native speakers are viewed as less credible when compared to native speakers: (1) the accent is viewed as a signal and (2) the accent impacts the speech making it harder to process. Native ASL users quickly pick up on the non-native cues of L2 signers. When we look at this effect in an ASL interpreted situation, we can gauge the actual performance of the perceived 'strong voicer' by surveying Deaf consumers on their impressions of the interpreter's performance based on the native-like prosodic features used and hearing participants on their perception of the actual voiced situation. The pragmatic choices of the interpreter - in the usage of nonmanual markers while backchannelling, lexical choices in discourse regulators, and posing questions/clarifications - all combine to create an 'accent' that impacts the total impression of a 'good' vs. 'poor' voicer, regardless of actual voicing performance. "Fluency is not a cognitive operation in and of itself but, rather, a feeling of ease associated with a cognitive operation" (Oppenheimer, 2008, p. 237).

Prosodic cues

L2 interpreters try to balance their proper use of the language with the demands of the interpreting job. Often this causes their interpretation to go against the usual pragmatics of communication exchanges, whether spoken or signed. In endeavouring to get as much of the message as possible before conveying it in spoken English, the L2 interpreter will often allow an:

> …artificially long time-lag before interpreting an utterance. The deaf interlocutor starts to sign but nothing happens; the interpreter is simply watching and the hearing interlocutor is left, uncomfortably, 'out of the loop'. When the interpreter does eventually start, the overlong time-lag will mean that he or she must continue speaking long after the Deaf person has stopped signing. Now the Deaf interlocutor is out of the loop, wondering what is being said by the interpreter and whether it matches what was originally signed. (Llewellyn-Jones & Lee, 2009, p. 2)

Not only do long time lags go against the usual communication dynamics in signed (and spoken) conversations, constant backchanneling is an essential component of any signed interaction. Backchanneling communicates a wealth of information to the speaker, communicating that the audience is following along, agrees/disagrees with what is being said, has a question, is interested in further information, or needs clarification. This ability is intuitive to native

speakers and improper backchanneling or a lack thereof immediately signals to the native speaker that the interpreter is a non-native user. (Llewellyn-Jones & Lee, 2009, p. 3).

Llewellyn-Jones and Lee (2009) found that with student L2 interpreters, the student interpreters were trained that they should not react to what is being said or signed, which conflicts with the pragmatics of backchanneling. The student's lack of backchanneling would instead block the Deaf person from knowing if the interpreter was following along on with his signed messages. Communication then breaks down and the interpreter ends up asking the Deaf person to repeat the message, causing the Deaf person to become increasingly frustrated. This backchanneling is so crucial that one of their subjects, a Deaf professional, would lose confidence in the interpreter if three or more breakdowns occur.

"There are different cultural expectations regarding what linguistic devices to use in the mitigation of speech acts…," Hoza discusses, in his comparison of ASL politeness norms with those of other language communities. In examining discourse patterns of different language communities, scholars have found that different cultures mark the level of importance of things based on where they are expressed in a discourse. The example given in this book states that in America, if you say something first, it is marked as important; while in China, if one states something last, it receives the mark of importance (Hoza, 2007, p. 25-27). So people from different language communities can come away from a shared conversation with totally different perspectives on what is being said simply because of the placement of that information in the discourse. This kind of difference can show up between Deaf people and L2 interpreters, both in conversations and during interpreted interactions.

Hoza (2007) emphasizes that politeness strategies are learned as part of one's acquisition of a language, and discourse flows naturally when people know how to interpret levels of meaning and discern social messages occurring during communication. Our ways of speaking identify us as outsiders or insiders with the identifying judgments made quickly, often without conscious thought.

> When interlocutors' politeness strategies differ, there may be one of three results. First, the addressee may misinterpret the speaker by interpreting the speaker's meaning (social or otherwise) based on the addressee's way of speaking. Second, the addressee may judge the speaker harshly and may reject the speaker as being either too forward or too evasive. Third, the addressee may recognize the speaker as an outsider who has a different way of speaking, and either attempt to understand communicative differences or discount the speaker as a deviant who does not know how to interact well with others. (Hoza 2007, p. 203)

One cultural linguistic expectation held by the Deaf community regarding 'straight talk' is discussed in-depth by Mindess (2006, p. 83-88). She finds that Deaf people, as compared to hearing Americans, are significantly more direct in expressing the situation at hand. So from this information, we may conjure that during interactions, if a L2 hearing interpreter misses a portion of a signed conversation and tries to use American spoken English methods to get the missed information, the Deaf person may get frustrated with indirect questioning and dismiss the L2 interpreter as not understanding entirely.

Mindess brings up another point about the value of information in the Deaf community. Members of the Deaf community feel obligated to share information, from updates on medical conditions to warnings about danger or recommendations on where to get good service or good deals. Withholding information is taboo, even when the information is about a specific person, whereas this sharing of news is considered in direct conflict with the American spoken English community bias against "talking about someone behind their back" (2006, p. 83,89-93).

When the topic comes up, Deaf people will share their experiences with other Deaf individuals, recommending or warning against using certain interpreters. It is understandable that interpreters, with their knowledge of Deaf community group communication norms albeit "not-quite-insider but not-outsider" status in the Deaf community, are not consistent with sharing similar information about other interpreters' skills with Deaf individuals (Mindess, 2006, p. 81). The interpreters are still hearing Americans and are compelled to follow those communication norms; plus, they may often work with the interpreters, so the respect for colleagues and desire to maintain a good working

relationship is an important value. Yet if interpreters know Deaf people are working with an interpreter and counting on that interpreter's skill in voicing, it is a conflict of Deaf community group norms to withhold that information.

Considering all these views on Deaf community expectations and one's accent being directly tied to their appearance of truthfulness and its possible impact on the Deaf-interpreter working relationship, we now take a direct look at this phenomenon through interviewing Deaf individuals and interpreters.

Methodology

With IRB approval, we sent out recruitment emails to Deaf individuals and hearing interpreters for volunteer participation in the study; the individuals we recruited were people we know. With our participants' signed consent, we each individually video-recorded ten interviews: five Deaf individuals and five hearing interpreters. The Deaf investigator interviewed the Deaf individuals; the hearing investigator interviewed the interpreters.

We ignored sociolinguistic variables such as ethnicity, age, educational background, and age of language acquisition. We did ask the participants about their first language. Two of the Deaf participants had Deaf parents and used ASL from birth, three had parents who could hear who used spoken English from birth (in the home). The background on the interpreters is similar in that two came from Deaf families, using ASL from birth, and three from hearing families. We were interested in their credentials and working knowledge the participants had in regards to interpreting. All of the interpreters hold a national certification from the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID). Two of the Deaf individuals are RID certified, two work as Deaf interpreters, three work as ASL instructors, and three work in jobs supporting video relay service interpreters. The interpreters have worked as community interpreters in a wide-range of venues including post-secondary, theatre, mental health, medical, and video relay services.

There were no other individuals present during the interviews. The questions from the interviews were the same for both groups. Follow up questions and discussion prompted by one or more of the questions was permitted. The questions were as follows:

1. What does 'strong voicer' mean to you?
2. When you think of an interpreter that is a strong voicer, what specific qualities does she have?
3. When you think of an interpreter that is not a strong voicer, what specific qualities does she have?
4. When teaming (or working with a team), what qualities make the team a strong voicing team?
5. What qualities from a team make you nervous or uncertain about the work?

All 10 of the interviews were conducted in ASL. The pertinent information from the interviews was then transcribed into ASL gloss with a written English translation. The investigators tracked similarly expressed concepts in order to analyse patterns through the descriptions and language. Patterns quickly showed common themes for each group of interviewees.

Findings

After viewing and transcribing the interviews, themes began to emerge. Results from the interviews revealed a very different understanding of "strong voicer" from Deaf individuals and interpreters. The hearing interpreters emphasized the mechanics of voicing while the Deaf individuals emphasized the need for a connection; if they feel there is a good connection between themselves and the interpreter, they have more confidence in the interpreter's voicing abilities. We further analysed the interview data to look for crucial elements of that critical 'connection.'

Following these themes with analysis, our findings correlate with the literature review in that having a native or near-native accent is critical when considering the notion of a strong voicer. Native or near native accent lends itself to ease in processing the message which in turn leads to credibility and believability.

The following emergent themes were discovered with both groups: (1) the interpreter's skill presentation – both voicing and signing, (2) the voicing process, (3) language (ASL and English) abilities, and (4) relationship between the Deaf individual and interpreter. We will discuss each group individually and then reveal any overlap of ideas followed by suggestions for future research and discussion. The following table shows the emergent themes from interpreters.

Emergent themes from interpreters

Participant	**How interpreters sound while voicing**	**English language abilities**	**ASL language abilities**	**Relationship with Deaf**
#1	Strong, clear voice	**Vocabulary**	You **cannot** miss a concept	Express with confidence; if you sound unsure, people will think it's the Deaf person who is unsure;
#2	**Flow**; timing	**Vocabulary**	Must have good receptive skills; You **cannot miss a concept;** you must understand concepts; must catch **fingerspelling**	The Deaf person needs to have a presence at the table; full access
#3	**Flow**	**Vocabulary**	You **cannot miss information**; must catch **fingerspelling**	
#4	Smooth		**Cannot miss info**; you must catch everything	You **must** match the Deaf person; you **must** match the Culture/setting/register/person
#5	Smooth, **flow**, not choppy; not a gloss	**Vocabulary**; strong first language; native user of English	Receptive skills are important	Feedback from the Deaf consumer during and after the assignment

English Prosody

All five of the interpreters made comments about some prosodic features of English. Four out of five of the interpreters commented specifically on the *smoothness* or *flow* of the message. To be a strong voicer, they claim that the English should flow, not be choppy, sound smooth and not be a glossed representation of what was signed. It seems that the prosodic comments are about sounding like a native speaker. The importance of sociolinguistic competence is emphasized in Gonzalez et al (1991) quoted in Patrie (2005, p. 21), and is described as the ability to "appropriately use register, or levels of formality or informality, and appropriate speech style for a given setting, such as court or an informal meeting. This competency assumes a deep understanding of both cultures and bilingual competence".

In addition to the prosodic comments, four of the interpreters made specific comments about vocabulary. They stated that the right vocabulary for the assignment is important and that you need to have a "strong first language; a native user of English."

ASL receptive skills

Not only do the interpreters comment about English skills, they also describe how important an interpreter's ASL receptive skills need to be. All five interpreters make some reference to being able to understand the Deaf individual's message. Four out of the five interpreters state that one cannot miss any of the signed information. It appears that the interpreters feel that if a signed concept is misunderstood or "not caught," the interpreter is not a strong voicer. In reference to not missing any of the signed information, two of the interpreters added that an interpreter must catch everything conceptually. In addition to not missing anything, literally – not missing anything signed, the strong voicer will also be able to grasp everything conceptually. Two of the five interpreters specifically make reference to not missing fingerspelled words. They both state that it is imperative that an interpreter "catches everything, even all of the fingerspelling".

Concern about Deaf presence in the interpreted encounter

All but one of the interpreters makes comments about how the Deaf individual appears to others at the interpreted event. The comments were about concern for the Deaf person's accessibility, "presence at the table", and representing appropriate culture and linguistic information. One interpreter makes a comment that if the interpreter sounds unsure, then the Deaf person will sound unsure. In other words, she was concerned that the Deaf person be represented accurately through her interpretation; if her voicing projects confidence, the Deaf person will be viewed as a strong and confident participant. This shows concern for the Deaf person and his/her relationship with the other participants at the assignment and how others perceive the Deaf person.

Another interpreter comments that it is important that the interpreter and Deaf person prepare for and debrief about the assignment. The focus of the interpreter's comments about this preparation seem to center around others' perception of their voicing skills. The concern does not seem to include the Deaf individual, but others who are listening to the interpretation. They want to make sure that the Deaf person is represented (the "interpretation sounds right") to the other hearing people present.

Emergent themes from Deaf individuals

Participant	ASL Prosody	Language abilities	Relationship, Interaction, and Communication
#1	Non manual cues on face If no expression, no connection	Equally match my level, my register, my vocabulary choice	Work together as team, partnership Good vibes If no expression, no connection Signal each other that we understand each other
#2		All elements combine, make good voicer Word choice	Relationship, know, trust, know their mind process, personal philosophies Can't be just anyone, will struggle, break-down Integrated & working with me Energy matches mine
#3	Nodding, eye contact, specific questions so I can clarify		Show interest and care about presenter, develop relationship Work together, feel connected, make both of us look great!
#4	Confidence, no hesitation Expression – can see confidence in her fluency	Clear, "high level" English Know language, fluent	If interrupt, ask a lot, means they're weak, FINISH
#5	Catch nuances of ASL	English vocab Strong ASL = strong voicer in English,	Collaborate and be an ally, acculturated When teaming, should be two way partnership, not one dominant interpreter Understand in head, understand in heart, understand in gut (instinct)

ASL prosody of interpreters

Three of the Deaf individuals make reference to an interpreter's proficiency in ASL prosody. They specified appropriate head nodding, manual cues, eye contact, and fluency. These are integral features of ASL prosody and grammar. One Deaf individual states that eye contact is important so that if there are questions she and the interpreter will have accessible communication. This seems to support the idea of having a connection with the interpreter and

not necessarily about the prosodic features of the eyes. It seems that there is an expectation for the interpreter who is voicing to have these skills in ASL and be able to appropriately use these skills with the Deaf individual. If the interpreter cannot negotiate these features, she might be identified as a weak voicer. In addition to these nonmanual cues, one Deaf individual mentions that she wants to see confidence and no hesitation.

It seems that a 'strong voicer' has certain visual characteristics that a Deaf individual will use to measure an interpreter's voicing skills. If the interpreter does not look confident and hesitates, she might be viewed as a weak voicer. The last Deaf individual on the table makes another comment about relationship. She mentions that she wants to see cooperation and support among the team of interpreters. She does not want to see one of the interpreters dominating the other interpreter. Camaraderie and teamwork among the interpreters seems to support the notion of 'strong voicer' among some Deaf individuals.

Language abilities

Four of the Deaf individuals make comments about the interpreters' ASL or English language abilities. Three of the four make a specific reference to English vocabulary. It seems that using the right vocabulary and 'matching' the Deaf individual will identify an interpreter as a strong voicer. In addition to having specific English language abilities, a strong voicer also needs to have strong ASL abilities. While the Deaf individuals give a fairly vague description of ASL skills, one possible interpretation of this is that good skills are assumed; it is essential for the interpreter to be fluent in ASL.

One could argue that all of the interpreters working in an ASL to English assignment are bilingual; however, upon further investigation of this notion, we believe that the Deaf individuals are referring to native-like fluency with minimal to no accent. With the comments made about language abilities and prosodic features of ASL, it seems that Deaf individuals are referring to a level of fluency that is near native. One Deaf person stated that she wants to see the interpreter's confidence in her own ASL fluency. Further interpretation of these comments could mean that the interpreter needs to have a strong command of both languages.

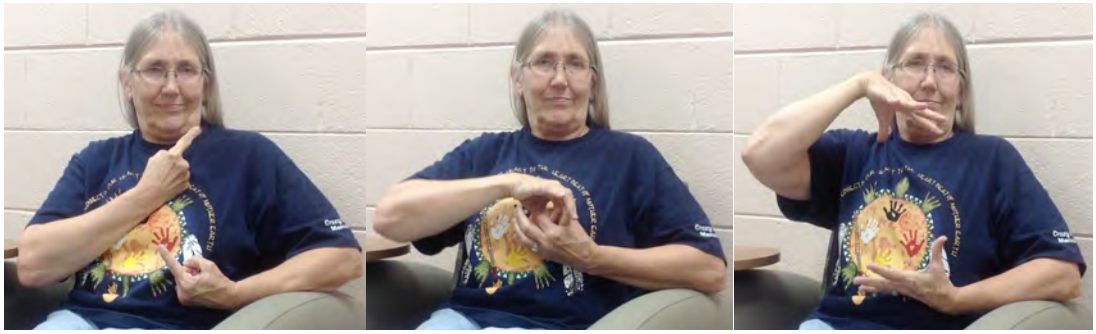
Relationship, interaction and communication

Our most significant finding is that all of the Deaf individuals make several comments about their direct relationship with the interpreter. It seems that this is the dominating characteristic that identifies a strong voicer to a Deaf individual; it is about the connection and relationship, rather than about the interpreting process or skills. The comments about relationship are different than the interpreters' comments about relationship. While the interpreters are concerned about the Deaf individual's relationship with others, the Deaf individuals are concerned about their relationship with the interpreter.

None of the Deaf individuals make a comment about the relationship with others in the room where the interpreting is taking place. It seems that their focus is on the relationship between the Deaf person and the interpreter. Two of the Deaf individuals make a comment about knowing the interpreter and her personal philosophies, and that the interpreter "can't just be anyone." The Deaf individuals want a partnership, they want to feel connected, and want the interpreter working directly with them. Through the partnership, the Deaf individuals want and seem to need to see native-like backchanneling and interaction for them to have confidence in the interpreter's voicing abilities. Two different Deaf individuals make reference to the interpreter having "good vibes" and "energy that matches mine." Again, this is about the relationship with the interpreter and no one else.

The following pictures are from one Deaf individual explaining her understanding of a strong voicer.

Example from Deaf individual



ASL gloss:

UNDERSTAND (at heart and gut) CONNECT COMPLETE

Conclusion

From the 10 interviews with the five Deaf individuals and five interpreters for this study, it is evident that these individuals are operating under different definitions of 'strong voicer.' After evaluating the interviews, there was some overlap in themes, or an overlap in some features within each group's definition. For example, both groups commented that having good English vocabulary and matching register were important.

Both groups also commented on language abilities, both in ASL and English. It seems that a particular level of fluency is needed in both languages to be considered a strong voicer. Several of the interpreters comment on not missing anything signed by the Deaf individual. This assumes that the interpreter must have excellent receptive skills. These interpreters add that not missing anything fingerspelled is also very important for a strong voicer. This might infer a particular level of ASL fluency. The Deaf individuals comment on ASL fluency by directly mentioning fluency while emphasizing use of several ASL prosodic and grammatical features.

While this study has focused mostly on the impediment of having an accent, this by no means implies that L2 ASL interpreters are doomed. With knowledge and understanding of how one's accent can interfere with the message, specifically relating to an assignment that is mostly working from ASL to English, interpreters can implement strategies that will foster credibility, trust, and believeability with the Deaf audience member(s). Munro and Derwing (1995) state that having an accent does not necessarily mean it will be an obstruction to communication.

If an interpreter's goal is to have better communicative competence, attention can be given to the specific aspects that are associated with accent. A foreign accent is not necessarily an obstruction to communication if the interpreter is aware of this effect and works to mitigate it through working toward a good partnership with the Deaf individual and a concentrated effort to use native-like conversational cues.

In addition to appreciating how accent is understood by native speakers/signers, we also found that the definition of strong voicer used by Deaf individuals and interpreters is drastically different. By understanding this difference, we can improve the outcome of an interpreted assignment. If Deaf people understand what this term means within the interpreting community and interpreters understand what Deaf people mean by this term.

One interpretation of this could be that the Deaf individual is signing for and to the interpreter rather than the hearing audience members. Just as most hearing interpreters dread interpreting when they know there are no Deaf individuals in the audience, Deaf individuals dread having an interpreter who is not visually present, not connecting and shows no interest of having a Deaf-hearing relationship (while the interpretation is happening).

As the literature and our interviews show, an interpreter's accent is a strong component for how Deaf individuals identify them as a strong voicer. Having an overt 'hearing' accent interferes with the believeability of the interpreter,

whether or not the interpreter can be trusted, and how Deaf individuals measure an interpreter's voicing skills. Our evidence supports the conclusion that the interpreter's accent in ASL and her lack of acknowledging and understanding of native prosodic cues from Deaf individuals interferes with how Deaf individuals measure that interpreter's English voicing skills. Only if interpreters are fluent with the subtle and nuanced backchanneling and prosodic cues from their Deaf audiences will they be identified by Deaf people as strong voicer.

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