Interpreting: The Culture of Artful Mediation

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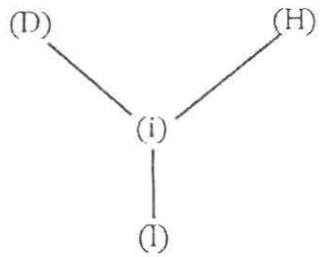
When asked, "What does an interpreter do?", most interpreters respond, "Interpreters facilitate communication." In the Introduction to her resource book *Sign Language Interpreting*, Sharon Neumann Solow writes, "The sign language interpreter acts as a communication link between people, serving only in that capacity. An analogy is in the use of the telephone — the telephone is a link between two people that does not exert a personal influence on either" (1981) Emphasis is on facilitating direct communication between the nearing and Deaf with minimal or no interference from the interpreter. Virtually Cry interpreter manual duplicates this view. Consequently, the standard model for interpreting (and the model behind the theme for this convention) shows Deaf culture (D) and Hearing culture (H) connected for communication through the individual interpreter (i).

(D) _____(i)_____(H)

It is our opinion that this model fails on two counts, one prescriptive and the other descriptive. First, the model tells us that while the Deaf and Hearing persons are free to draw upon all their skills and capacities as communicating individuals, the interpreter is restricted to the technical process of facilitating communication. That is, the model prescribes a behavior on the part of the interpreter that suggests the role of the interpreter is to be less a person than the persons who are communicating. People who try to eliminate anything personal from their professional performance experience a loss of self that results in confusion, frustration, anger and a significant reduction of job satisfaction. While the arrangement between Deaf and Hearing communicators described in the model reflects their interests in unimpeded communication, it does not satisfy the basic on-the-job human needs of the interpreter. Additionally, when used as a device for training new interpreters, the model perpetuates the self-concept of the interpreter as "non-person" and causes the new interpreter to experience, from the very beginning of her or his interpreting career, loss of self and isolation from a sense of personal satisfaction at work.

Second, in the same way the Hearing and Deaf persons are representatives of their cultures in communication, the individual interpreter acts as a representative of the culture of interpreting. The model fails in that it conceives of the interpreter as an individual mediating between Hearing and Deaf cultures. By focusing on the individual interpreter, the model directs our attention away from the influence that interpreter culture has upon the individual interpreter and upon the cultures of the Deaf and Hearing. The model denies the existence and presence of interpreter culture and ignores its influence on interpreted communications.

We intend to demonstrate here that interpreters are people who make up a community that is guided, maintained and regenerated by a culture all their own. That is, it is our position that interpreters act as representatives of an interpreter culture that mediates with and between the cultures of the Hearing and Deaf. We propose a new model of interpreting, based on the old model, with the addition of a third force: Interpreter Culture (I).



In the following discussion we will describe and elaborate this new model and demonstrate its superiority over the old view.

In a recent series of interviews with interpreters of various skill levels and backgrounds, many described situations and their personal responses that indicate widespread job dissatisfaction and personal conflict. Several typical stressful situations are described below.

Student interpreters often complain that they are being confronted with seemingly impossible requirements for technical skill yet believe they are not getting the training they need to meet these requirements. Many interpreters recount experiences in which they knew one or both clients were not understanding the message of the other; yet, as interpreters, they were bound by the Code of Ethics not to intervene. They were not even able simply to state, "This person does not understand what you are saying." As the so-called communication disintegrated into confusion, these interpreters sensed that they were being held responsible for the communication breakdown and they were prohibited from facilitating the communication. This double bind of not being able to support communication and being held responsible for its breakdown was profoundly dissatisfying and generated considerable internal personal conflict.

Women interpreters have been compelled to interpret obscene jokes in settings where the joke was not a matter of communication between the Hearing and Deaf persons; rather the intent was to force the interpreter to repeat the comments and play the "Let's-embarrass-the-interpreter" game. This amounts to blatant sexual harassment: yet one relatively new but skilled interpreter felt ethically bound to continue the assignment, not intervene or object to the way she was being treated. Later, she was afraid to report the incident for fear of violating the ethic of confidentiality.

Many interpreters feel professionally compelled to block their personal feelings while interpreting, yet find this impossible. The inability to eliminate themselves from their work causes some interpreters to doubt their competence as professionals.

Just before interpreting over the telephone, one interpreter was informed by the Deaf client that, "What I want to talk about is none of your business." The interpreter felt angry and did not want to interpret the call, but was compelled to perform the assignment under very stressful conditions.

Many interpreters are angry that they can discuss interpreting situations with interpreter trainers and coordinators, but cannot discuss them

among themselves. They would like to be able to learn from each other and are frustrated that they are not allowed to share their experiences openly with other professionals.

Who is responsible for these negative experiences and feelings? Rather than blame interpreters for the unhappiness they feel, it is important to look for forces at work that are larger than the individual victim. When many individuals experience the same pressure as a group, one should avoid analysis that "blames the victim." That is, one must search for a force or forces larger than the individual person that is acting against the group. Two obvious social forces that influence the interpreter are the world of the Hearing and the world of the Deaf. A hidden but powerful third force rarely discussed by interpreters is the social world of the interpreter.

Much of the pressure interpreters experience from the world or culture of the Hearing stems from four sources: Hearing misunderstanding of the role of the interpreter; technical problems associated with changing communication from one language to another; the general fear among Hearing people of deafness and of Deaf people; and traditional sexist bias that discriminates against women and women's occupations.

Uninformed hearing clients who do not understand the role of the interpreter often mistake interpreter neutrality for hostility or bias in favor of the deaf client. Consequently, interpreters have to develop a set of techniques for educating the hearing client in order to reduce bearing person's anxiety and to educate the hearing person so that the interpreter can proceed without being called on to participate. This takes time and effort and often interferes with the interpreting assignment.

The difficulty of interpreting spoken English into sign language is underestimated by most hearing persons. Hearing persons often expect interpreters to perform unimaginable feats of communication and interpreters find themselves having to interpret language, as well as explain to hearing persons that certain expressions and idioms in English do not have equivalents in ASL. When ethical guidelines prevent the interpreter from explaining to the hearing persons that, "What you said has no meaning to this person," the interpreter can experience tremendous stress with no recourse to resolve it.

Fear of persons with disabilities is a powerful force in the Hearing world. Encounters with Deaf persons can be stressful and it is common for the fearful Hearing person to unload that stress directly onto the interpreter. The necessity of dealing with this extra tension—mediating this conflict between the Hearing person and his/her fear—adds to the already difficult task of facilitating communication. The interpreter has to develop a special set of techniques for dealing with Hearing preoccupation with "wholeness" and the Hearing person's fear of anyone who seems different.

Approximately eighty per cent of interpreters are women and interpreting is characterized by the relatively low levels of pay and prestige that plague the so-called "Women's Occupations." Additionally, women professionals in any occupation feel tremendous frustration from men peers and co-workers who do not take women as seriously as they take

men. Women interpreters experience much of this bias on the job when they, as women in a professional environment, are required continually to demonstrate their skill in the face of chauvinistic sexist bias. Again, this only adds to the difficult task of interpreting and the overall effect is to increase the internal stress interpreters feel on the job. Women are sometimes sexually harassed on the job and may have little or no opportunity to defend themselves during the assignment or after the situation is over. Sexist pressure is very powerful and greatly increases interpreter stress.

In all, the pressures peculiar to serving the Hearing culture increase the already difficult task of facilitating communication. These pressures add to the technical requirements and generate conditions of high stress on the job.

Since most interpreters are hearing people, they participate in the general tension that exists between the Hearing and Deaf worlds. The interpreter has to mediate a personal relationship as a Hearing person in the interpreting situation in order to establish trust between her/himself and the Deaf client. All of this takes time and effort that adds to the burden of communication.

Deaf consumers of interpreting services are not always informed as to the specific task of the interpreter and may sect the interpreter to perform in a role other than that of neutral facilitator. Some Deaf clients want the interpreter to perform as advocate and, when the interpreter fails to do this, the Deaf person may respond in a negative fashion, thus increasing the problem of interpreting. A Deaf client may place extreme demands on an interpreter whose neutrality prevents her or him from complying. The Deaf client may consider this interpreter neutrality as bias in favor of the Hearing client and may respond in a manner that impedes communication. The interpreter has to work to mediate this conflict.

Interpreting students are encouraged to socialize with Deaf people in order to improve their signing skills; yet, when they approach a level of competency that makes them eligible for interpreting work, they are encouraged to stop socializing with the Deaf community in order to establish "professional distance" from potential clients. This trend among interpreters to socialize for a time and then to abandon their Deaf friends generates significant tension on both sides and tends to increase the level of distrust between interpreters and the Deaf.

Deaf men can be just as sexist as Hearing men and gender-related pressure from the Deaf client is no different from the pressure women interpreters get from Hearing men.

All of this cultural influence from the Deaf world adds to the tension interpreters have on the job and greatly increases stress. The individual interpreter on the job also experiences tremendous pressure from the world of interpretation. Competition is high among interpreters. Freelance interpreters who compete for jobs can easily find themselves at odds with each other over access to work. Employment depends on reputation and peer evaluation is constant among interpreters. The interpreter grapevine is a powerful force; anyone who gets into personal and political contests with another interpreter risks losing prestige in the field. Interpreting in

the presence of other interpreters can be particularly stressful, especially when some interpreters feel compelled to comment on one's interpretation either after or during the interpreting situation. Knowing that other members of the audience are waiting for any slip-up compounds the tension the interpreter experiences on the job. Also, the risk to reputation associated with attempting to become certified and failing the evaluation can keep an interpreter from advancing. Lack of confidence — a product of the high stress of interpreting in front of one's peers — can keep a qualified interpreter from seeking the advancement that comes with increased levels of certification. This tension and low self-esteem move in a vicious cycle that drives many good interpreters out of the field.

Additionally, the ethic of confidentiality tends to keep interpreters from openly discussing their experiences in detail and can keep interpreters from finding a way to let off steam or prevent them from learning from the experiences of other interpreters. The lack of training programs available to interpreters makes the local interpreter the primary source of information. Interpreters do not often use one another as resources partly because of the atmosphere of tension that surrounds competition between interpreters.

But the most potent force operating against the interpreter is the lack of identity many interpreters experience. Interpreters report stress, anger and significant loss of a sense of who they are. This lack of interpreter self-consciousness stems from the general absence among interpreters of interpreter cultural consciousness. The loneliness and isolation many interpreters experience is perpetuated by the failure of interpreters to see themselves as a community with a culture. Interpreting is a culture in and of itself. Interpreters make up a community. Sign language interpretation has its own unique history, its own form of language, its own art and its own way of life.

Interpreters today are the products of a unique history that dates back as far as Deaf history. The earliest "interpreters" were hearing members of families with deaf persons and other people concerned about the isolation of deafness. We would call these people "signers" these days; yet their role in mediating and facilitating communication between Deaf and Hearing had a major influence on the Deaf Movement and the rise of Deaf cultural consciousness. As Deaf people moved forward to claim their rights as valuable human beings and the role of the signer became more closely defined, the level of skill and quality of interpretation improved. Early signers took it upon themselves to improve their skills and to establish standards for providing interpreting services to the Deaf. This movement to improve the skill of the interpreter shaped the way the modern professional interpreter goes about the business of facilitating communication. Today, it is not enough to be a signer. One must become skilled at a wide variety of procedures in order to render accurate and reliable interpretation. Interpreters are compelled to perform at a high level of professionalism; yet they often fail to recognize that this professionalism has required many decades of hard work and that interpretation today is founded on a solid heritage.

The capacity to draw upon and express oneself in two entirely different and independent language systems at the same time is unique to sign language interpreting. Interpreters, communicating with one another, switch from spoken English to sign language and back as they move from one vocabulary to the other in search of expression. Sometimes they speak and sign at the same time. These may be in parallel but often the meaning of a word is balanced against the meaning of a sign, with intended meaning hinging on both. Interpreters often pun in one language against the other. And interpreters in noisy bars can keep communicating when the band starts playing. This capacity to communicate in parallel greatly expands the communicative field among interpreters and provides technical means for self-expression in the context of a wide ranging cultural and linguistic system.

Although less than one per cent of RID certificates are Skills Certificate: Performing Arts, this specialization offers significant breadth of ethics that increasing numbers of Interpreters seek. In the 1980 edition of the RID *Introduction to Interpreting*, Stangarone and Kirchner write: "In Performing Arts interpreting one must exhibit a high degree of flexibility and creativity" (p. 80). Interpretive flexibility and creativity are necessary but sometimes risky tools in much professional sign language interpreting; yet they are absolutely appropriate for Performing Arts Interpreting in that they allow the Interpreter to *"function in a manner appropriate to the situation."* Performing Arts interpreters are gaining national notoriety for their artistic expertise in facilitating artistic communication. The theme of this convention, "Interpreting: The Art of Cross-Cultural Mediation," announces to anyone who did not yet know that cultural mediation requires an artist for an interpreter. Interpreter art is good for interpreting and the capacity for self-expression available to the Performing Arts Interpreter is, again, unique among cultures.

The extent to which interpretation is a way of life that influences the total behavior of the interpreter is a question best left to the individual. One's clothing, appearance, friendships, daily schedule and self-esteem are linked to interpreting ethics. Career decisions and personal goals revolve around interpreting. Although interpreting is a relatively small occupation, the world of interpreting is complex and broad-based. In some ways it moves with the Deaf world and in others it moves with the Hearing. But Interpreter Culture is its own way of life and it empowers the individual interpreter, as a representative of the culture, to mediate with and between the cultures of the Hearing and the Deaf.

What is the problem with interpreting? We believe interpreters are not communicating enough with each other. Our solution is that interpreters need to facilitate communication among themselves. This will reduce competition among interpreters and the stress of interpreting. Through communication, interpreters can learn from and support one another.

If interpreters deem it necessary to communicate with one another as a requirement of the profession, then perhaps they can use the new RID Bylaws to give themselves the right to do so. Regardless, interpreters needs to find ways to express their dissatisfaction in order to make interpreting healthy for the interpreter.