

The Importance of Context in American Sign Language Interpreting

American Sign Language
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After this worksheet, you will

Better understand:

- 1) appropriate and inappropriate examples of voice-to-sign and sign-to-voice interpreting
- 2) the common errors in ASL interpreting
- 3) the role of context in ASL interpreting

- 4) how to use contextualization skills to make your interpreting work look and sound better
- 5) the various linguistic hurdles between English and ASL that interpreters face

1) What are some of the common mistakes we make in our interpreting work?

According to Cokely, the most common errors are *omissions*. Interpretations tend to relay the finest details, but lack and miss cohesion, or the “glue” that holds language together:

- body shifts
- prepositions and prepositional phrases
- new idea recognition
- articles (a, an, the)

Another typical error is the inability to connect hearing audiences with the Deaf perspective and culturally important information:

- understanding of a visual-spatial world
- Deaf cultural meanings of signs, not English equivalents. For example; to a Deaf audience, the sign DEAF-SCHOOL has great significance. To a hearing audience, any words that require a prefix before “school” (*deaf* school, *blind* school, *state* school) or the word “institute” have negative connotations and convey exactly the opposite meaning to the Deaf-world.

Typically, interpretation errors can be lumped into one of five categories:

- *Omissions*. These are examples where SL (source language) information has been left out of the TL (target language) interpretation
- *Additions*. These are examples where information shows up in the TL that was not found in the SL
- *Substitutions*. These are examples where information in the SL has been replaced in the TL with information that was thought to mean the same
- *Intrusions*. These are examples where the structure of the TL is dropped and the interpreter uses the structure of the SL
- *Anomalies*. These are examples where the TL is meaningless or the error does not fit in any other category

Interpretation errors happen because of two basic reasons:

1. Lack of processing time. It takes time to be able to digest a message in the SL, understand it, and figure out how to correctly convey it in the TL. Studies show that when interpreters are patient, wait a little longer and double their lagtime, the overall amount of errors drops over 60%.
2. Lack of comprehension. The message and *context* was either missed or misunderstood by the interpreter. This generally means the interpreter doesn't fully understand how to communicate ASL or English grammar, vocabulary, or other cultural information *in the appropriate context* well enough to be able to produce a correct interpretation.

- The goal is not to produce error-free interpretations, however; the goal is to produce clear and informative interpretations.

2) a. What does context have to do with anything?

Context is important in any language. It determines why a certain word or sign is used in a certain situation. As Deaf ASL users and hearing English speakers see and experience the world differently, they create and require different levels of context:

High-context cultures and languages like the American Deaf Community and ASL:

- use intuition, experience, and consequence as the basis for decision making
- place the information in the context or person and less in the actual language or words the message uses

Using signs in context differentiates ASL from other English codes (MCEs) like SEE, LOVE, PSE, etc. Because of their derivations, ASL signs have different contexts, therefore, many ASL signs cannot correctly be used in PSE or SEE signing systems.

Low-context cultures and languages like mainstream America and English:

- use facts, options, and choices as the basis for decision making
- place the information in the actual language and words; there is a desire for direct communication with little ambiguity

2) b. What is contextualization?

Contextualization refers to the detail or information that is conveyed to elaborate a topic, expand an idea, or provide illustration of a point. ASL is referred to as a “high-context language” and, as such, the discourse style of ASL uses frequent contextualization. It is this process which makes ASL visually

dynamic and interesting. Additionally, since native users of ASL typically share such a rich common experience and world view, the level of detail is often what makes a story, discussion, or lecture unique or different.

3) Identifying and using contextualization skills.

1) *Specifying Description*. This strategy involves the use of adjectival information to more specifically elaborate a subject or a certain aspect of a subject. This is common strategy for creating specific noun categories/types.

Examples:

2) *Comparing*. The use of examples which are similar to the topic being addressed as a way of illustrating the topic or providing additional context for the subject. Comparisons are typically marked by the phrases ALMOST-SAME-AS, SAME-IDEA, LOOKS-LIKE. The idea compared can also be conveyed side to side.

Examples:

3) *Contrasting*. The use of examples which are opposite or different than the subject being discussed as a way of referencing something specific or for emphasis. Contrasts are often marked with a negative form; NOT, NONE, #NO, CAN'T. Additionally, contrasting ideas are presented side by side.

Examples:

4) *Reiteration*. Repeating certain details or aspects of a subject for emphasis, stress, or to heighten the value of the subject. This is often a flag for culturally-laden or emotional information.

Examples:

5) *Listing*. The listing of nouns, events, or behaviors to illustrate a particular noun category, topic, or subject. The number of items listed will range from two to four and seems to be influenced by how common or familiar the topic is to the audience. The list can be general or specific. General lists are typically marked at the beginning (with a sign like LIKE or SAME-AS) and at the end of the list (with a sign like OTHER or ETC.)

Examples:

6) *Shifting perspective*. Utilizes shifts from a "close-up" to a "long-shot" of events, actions, or interactions as a way to provide a more visually dynamic perspective

on the topic being addressed. This process often involves the use of "role-taking" as a way to shift perspectives.

Examples:

7) *Topic Elaboration*. The process of providing numerous detail and/or examples to elaborate a subject and provide an "in the moment" description of what will or has transpired. This strategy is often used to introduce a new or unfamiliar topic, event, or setting.

Examples:

8) *Labeling*. The use of labels, typically lexicalized or "loan signed" fingerspelling which are spatialized on an object or person to create a unique or specific type of label or reference.

Examples:

9) *Demonstration*. To exemplify a comment or point by demonstrating what happened or what was done. This demonstration always comes after a point or comment has been made; identify, then "do."

Examples:

10) *Detailing*. The use of numerous adjectives and classifiers to detail the appearance of a person, place, or thing. This strategy can also include the shifting of perspectives. The process of detailing creates multiple layers of detail and is a common strategy used in storytelling.

Examples: