Editor's Comments

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A positive sign of professional growth among Sign Language interpreters is the realization that accurate interpretation demands not only bilingual, but also bicultural competence. However, there is a sense in which the distinction between bilingual and bicultural competence is an artificial one. That is, because language and culture are so intricately related, one could argue that it is impossible to be bilingual without being bicultural, or that it is impossible to achieve bicultural status without being bilingual. Nevertheless, interpreters and interpreter trainers have found it helpful and necessary to make the distinction.

That bicultural competence is a prerequisite to accurate interpretation should be rather obvious. Interpreters clearly need to be concerned with and aware of the cultural significance of, among other things, the lexical items that they use in conveying interpreted messages. Failure to do so can often result in a distortion of the intent of the original message. Consider, for example, the different cultural significance of a commonly used lexical item in ASL (STATE-SCHOOL) and its most common English interpretations ("state school for the deaf", "residential school for the deaf").

The cultural experience and heritage of most Deaf people have resulted in more positive than negative feelings being ascribed to the lexical item STATE-SCHOOL. It was and is, after all, the locus of entry for many deaf people into the Deaf Community and Deaf Culture. It is remembered, not for the classroom teaching that occurred there, but rather for the life-education provided by peers and those all-too-few Deaf teachers. It is remembered, not for the attempts of some to make deaf students more like hearing students, but rather for the unconditional acceptance and understanding of peers and Deaf role models. In short, the sign STATE-SCHOOL generally carries with it an enormous range of positive overtones.

Contrast these positive overtones with the overtones conveyed by the most common English interpretations of that sign. It is probably safe to say that, for most hearing people who know little or nothing of deafness or Deaf people, the phrases "state school for the deaf" or "residential school for the deaf" are either neutrally or negatively weighted. To some hearing people, the very idea of a "state school" or a "residential school" implies isolation, separation from family, and/or possible punishment. Clearly, for these people, there are negative implications attached to the interpretations. Still others, not understanding the cultural and communal significance and influence, likely place STATE-SCHOOL in the same category as they place state schools and programs for visually impaired, mentally handicapped and other "special population" groups. For these people, while there may be no overt negative influence attached to the interpretations, there are no positive influences ascribed either.

Consider, for example, the possible reactions of an audience to Deaf speakers who talk in positive, and even fond terms of their experiences at STATE-SCHOOL. The Deaf members of the audience need little or no background information to appreciate the positive value and importance of STATE-SCHOOL. They will undoubtedly provide positive, supportive feedback to the speakers. The hearing members of the audience, on the other hand, must overcome their neutral or negative stereotypes of "state schools" or "residential schools". Thus, they may require considerable background information before they can understand or appreciate the positive value and importance of STATE-SCHOOL. Initially, they will likely provide skeptical and even negative feedback to the speakers. In such a situation, there are at least three possible reasons why the hearing members of the audience might not fully understand and appreciate STATE-SCHOOL. The first reason may be that the Deaf speakers did not provide sufficient background information to help the hearing audience members overcome their negative stereotypes. The second reason may be that, although aware of the different cultural perceptions of STATE-SCHOOL and

"state school for the deaf", the interpreter is unable to think of a more appropriate interpretation at that time. The third reason may be that the interpreter simply does not know that in this case "state school for the deaf" does not convey for most hearing people the meaning that STATE-SCHOOL conveys for most deaf people.

While this may be a rather simplistic and obvious example, it does point out the need for interpreters to be biculturally competent and biculturally aware. Fortunately, interpreters and interpreter training programs are beginning to realize this. While Sign Language interpreters must be competent in the cultures of the consumers that they serve (Deaf and Hearing), this level of cultural competency alone may be insufficient to ensure accurate interpretation.

It can safely be said that when deaf and hearing individuals rely upon the services of an interpreter to interact with each other, deaf people interact differently than they do with deaf people and hearing people interact differently than they do with hearing people. At least the following differences are evident:

1) Neither person can completely use the turn-taking behaviors that are appropriate for their respective linguistic/cultural group. Consumers who regularly use the services of an interpreter rather quickly develop or learn the turn-taking behaviors that are needed for mediated interaction. Perhaps the clearest example of this occurs when there is no visual means of detecting turn-taking clues—interpreted telephone calls. The periods of silence, the false starts, and the overlaps that often occur during interpreted telephone calls can largely be attributed to the fact that the hearing participant is conditioned (even though told differently) to interact according to the turn-taking norms that apply when conversing directly with hearing people on the telephone.

Rightly or wrongly, there are times when the onus of regulating the "flow" of the interaction is assumed by or is given to the interpreter. This is especially true when interpreting group discussions or meetings in which the deaf or hearing consumer is in the minority. In such cases, it is often true that the turn-taking behaviors of the majority are followed. This often results in the virtual exclusion of the minority participants. It can also lead to "impossible to interpret" exchanges such as occur when several deaf or hearing people are competing for a turn or for the floor and are talking/signing at the same time. When this behavior is pointed out, the group must then assume some means of regulating the "flow" that is unlike what they would do in a monolingual/monocultural situation (e.g. they are asked to raise their hands or wait for the chair to call on each person in turn).

2) In general, the topics that are discussed in interpreted interactions are somewhat restricted and purposeful in nature. The topics are restricted because generally one of the participants in an interpreted interaction has a specific reason for initiating the interaction. Neither of the participants is very likely to feel the freedom to initiate discussion of the range of topics that s/he would feel if interacting with his/her own linguistic/cultural group.

Additionally, the way that topics are discussed is likely to be different than if they were being discussed in a monolingual/monocultural conversation. For example, the participants may feel compelled to make overt certain background information that they would not make overt in a monolingual/monocultural setting.

3) Certain cultural behaviors may be suppressed or suspended during interpreted interactions. For example, among members of the Deaf Community, if you have something to say to someone (usually about something that is bothering you), it is accepted behavior to be "straight-forward" or "direct and to the point". Among hearing people such behavior is generally considered blunt, curt, or brusque. This accepted way of interacting among members of the Deaf Community is generally not exercised when interacting with hearing people in an interpreted situation.

In addition to the examples cited above, there are other areas in which it can safely be said that when deaf and hearing individuals rely upon the services of an interpreter to interact with each other, deaf people interact differently than they do with deaf people and hearing people interact differently than they do with hearing people. For example, it is likely that the level of trust that the participants have in their conversational partner is different when the interaction is interpreted than when it is monolingual. It is also true that communicative behaviors such as compliments, complaints, invitations and other behaviors that function as "social lubricants" are handled differently in mediated as opposed to monolingual interactions.

The point is that it is not enough for interpreters to be biculturally competent and aware. They must also realize that any interpreted interaction consists of an interpreter and (at least) two individuals who are "representatives" of their respective languages and cultures. Moreover, these "representatives" are engaged in a process of interacting within a set of "cross-cultural norms" (attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors) that is not identical with nor completely reflective of their respective native cultural norms. The "cross-cultural norms" that apply in interpreted interactions are created by individuals from different linguistic/cultural groups and are different from the cultural norms of either group.

Interpreters, then, must not only be *bi*lingually competent. There is also a sense in which they must be *tri*culturally competent and aware. They must be aware of and competent in the culture of the Deaf Community, the culture of the Hearing Community and the "culture" of interpreted interaction.