CHAPTER

1 Introduction

The principal task of an interpreter is to help one person understand what another person is saying. The situation that immediately comes to mind is one in which an interpreter uses American Sign Language (ASL) so that a deaf person can understand what a hearing person is saying in English. But because the hearing person likely does not know ASL, we expand the role of the interpreter to include speaking in English what a deaf person is saying in ASL for the benefit of the hearing person.

Although these examples are illustrative of most interpreting situations, they are not the complete picture. Interpreting is not a simple ASL-to-English or English-to-ASL, or, more generally, a sign-to-spoken or spoken-to-sign task. Good interpreting involves a command of two languages and an understanding of the cultures associated with those languages. Interpreters must have an awareness of the background that people bring to their communications, such as whether they are teachers, law enforcement officers, retail salespersons, or members of other professions and trades. To plan accurate interpretations, interpreters must have a practical understanding of the content that is being conveyed from one language or code to another. To avoid misinterpretations, they must have a sense of the speaker's emotions. There are many more factors involved in the task of interpreting. Effectively analyzing and integrating responses to these factors is the goal of those who undertake interpreting as their profession.

It is impossible to describe the "typical" interpreter. Interpreters come from many walks of life and bring to their field a diversity equal to that of the situations in which they find themselves. This diversity creates a pool of talent that helps the field mediate communication between people.

Let us introduce you to three sign language interpreters, Ruth, Debbie, and Frank. They represent different reasons for becoming interpreters, different preparations for their positions, and different types of practice.

- Ruth's mother and father are Deaf. They communicate with extended family members by lipreading, gesture, some simple signs, and written notes. With Ruth, however, they signed ASL from the day she was first held in her mother's arms, even though she has normal hearing and speech. With that background, interpreting came naturally to her. Today, Ruth has a thriving private practice interpreting in a large metropolitan area.

- Debbie's parents are not Deaf, but when she was growing up she had neighbors who were Deaf. They often asked her to babysit, and she learned fingerspelling and some signs from them. When she was looking for a job after graduating from high school, Debbie saw an advertisement for a teacher's aide who could work with deaf students. She applied for the position and was hired by the school with the understanding that her role would eventually be switched to that of an interpreter. Upon accepting the job, she enrolled in an interpreter-preparation program in a nearby community college. Now in her third year as an interpreter and aide, Debbie has started taking courses toward a university degree in elementary education. She plans to become a teacher of deaf students.
- Frank never saw anyone sign until one Sunday when his church was visited by a "signing choir," a group of young people who rendered hymns in ASL. He was fascinated by the beauty and power of their presentation. Then and there he decided to learn ASL. Without giving any further thought to how he would make use of that knowledge, he grasped every opportunity to study sign language that came his way. He was encouraged by an ASL teacher to enroll in a two-year interpreting program at his local community college. Now he interprets full-time for a rehabilitation agency.

Ruth, Debbie, and Frank are a composite example of sign language interpreters. Elements of these sketches occur in many interpreter biographies, although the real stories have details that make them unique. These three brief accounts illustrate various paths people follow to an interpreting career. How their diverse backgrounds have shaped their professional lives will be examined in the pages that follow. At this point, however, we only want you to recognize that professional interpreters have significantly different antecedents and motivations and pursue their careers in a variety of settings.

Our Philosophy

Although we have begun this book by introducing three interpreters, and we will be considering many others, we hasten to say again that this book does not see interpreting solely from the interpreter's point of view. Interpreting is a *social process* whose outcomes depend on all the participants, not on the interpreter alone. The effectiveness of interpreting is also determined by the other participants—both those who are deaf and those who can hear. They play crucial roles in the clarity of communication that is the essence of interpreting. That is what we mean by describing interpreting as a social process.

In the preface we spoke about a communication gap between hearing and deaf people. This *gap* has three referents, not one. First is the obvious communication gap between those who cannot hear and those who do not sign. Second is a gap between general impressions of what interpreting means and what it is really like, between what naive people expect interpreters to do and what they actually

can do. The third gap is between an unsystematic, largely anecdotal knowledge of interpreting and a scientific account of the process.

Interpreting for deaf people has become a profession relatively recently. For that reason, many questions arise about it that do not usually arise about older professions:

- What are the qualifications of sign language interpreters?
- How do you define a *qualified* interpreter?
- Where and how do interpreters prepare for their profession?
- What conditions affect interpreting services, and how do interpreters manage those conditions?
- What factors distinguish sign language interpreting from other types of interpreting? How are they similar?
- Where do interpreters work? By whom are they employed?
- Are there rules of conduct that govern an interpreter's professional behavior?
- How are interpreters compensated?

In addressing these and other questions we will aim to be descriptive, not prescriptive. We present as many opposing views as we can, without choosing among them, in order to be consistent with our view of interpreting as a social enterprise. The answers to the questions just posed and to many others often involve policies as well as facts; they frequently depend on preferences as well as on theoretical considerations. That is why we avoid insistence on any one solution to the problems that interpreting poses. We believe the stakeholders should develop answers by consensus. To do so, however, they need to be aware of the problems and possible solutions.

The Stakeholders

We avoid saying "interpreting for deaf people" because deaf people rightly point out that interpreters would not be needed if those with whom they communicate knew sign language. The interpreter serves the needs of both those who cannot hear but know sign language and those who do not know sign language, whether or not they can hear. That means that there are three groups of stakeholders in decisions about interpreting: the sign language interpreters, the deaf participants, and the hearing participants.

There is a fourth category of stakeholders: those who engage interpreters. Schools, rehabilitation services, government agencies, and other segments of the general public all have a stake in the interpreting process, whether directly, as employers, or indirectly, as taxpayers (see Figure 1.1). The public interest, too, should be considered in policymaking that affects sign language interpreting.

The Interpreter's Role

We reject a purely *mechanistic* view of interpreters. As we hope to clarify in Chapter 3, what the interpreter does is influenced on the one hand by the initiator of a

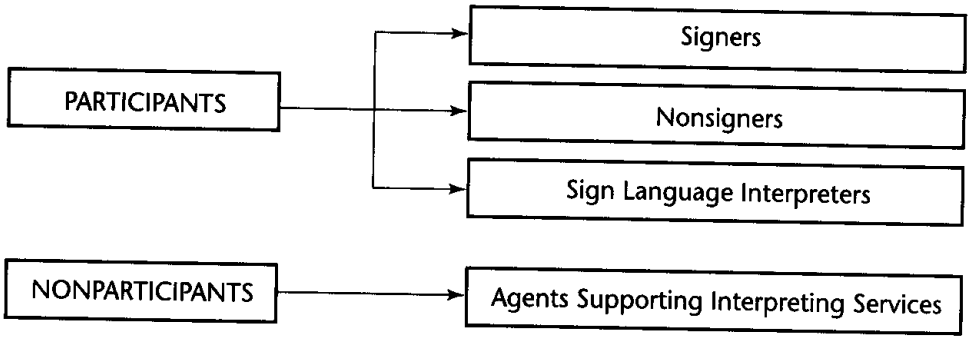

FIGURE 1.1 The Four Primary Stakeholders Associated with a Sign Language Interpreting Situation

message, and on the other hand by the receiver of the message. If the initial message is unclear, the interpreter does not bear the sole burden for clarifying it. If the people to whom a message is directed lack the abilities or education to comprehend that message, the interpreter alone cannot overcome their deficits. Interpreting is the result of actions of the three or more parties involved. Hence, we do not regard interpreters as "bridges." True, their *function* is to span the gulf between parties who do not share a common language, but in carrying out that function, interpreters contribute actively to the communication process. Both their strengths and their weaknesses affect the human interaction called interpreting. They have complex, demanding roles in every phase of the interpreting process, but all the participants enhance or debilitate it by their actions and by their inherent limitations.

Terminology

Too much damage has been done to the study of deaf people and Deaf culture by the careless use of language. Many terms we use can be defined in two or more ways—ways that contradict each other. As an example, there is some confusion in the field with the use of the terms *deaf* and *Deaf*. The first is generally taken to refer to any person who has a hearing loss severe enough to hinder communication through the use of speech and hearing. The capitalized *Deaf* denotes cultural and linguistic elements pertinent to the Deaf community. Thus, a Deaf person might be someone who has some degree of hearing loss, identifies with the Deaf community, and uses ASL as a primary means of communication. Some authors now use the term D/deaf to refer to both groups of people.

We will try to use key terms in a precise fashion that conveys the usual meanings given them by professionals. Precision in the use of words is the hallmark of professionals. For interpreters, correct use of language is the very essence of their profession.

Some Professional Issues

Many issues that are fundamental to interpreting need to be addressed, and here we present some that give a foretaste of what is to follow. As we investigate specific aspects and technical matters in the following chapters, we hope that readers will be stimulated to raise their own questions and seek their own answers.

Profession or Trade?

Dictionaries provide us with definitions that sometimes conflict or, at least, are ambiguous. Consider two definitions of *profession* from two authoritative sources:

- *Profession:* The occupation which one professes to be skilled in and to follow. (a). A vocation in which a professed knowledge of some department of learning is used in its application to the affairs of others, or in the practice of an art founded upon it. Applied spec. to the three learned professions of divinity, law, and medicine; also to the military profession. (b). In a wider sense: Any calling or occupation by which a person habitually earns his living. (*The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*, 1973, Oxford University Press, p. 1680)
- *Profession:* (1) a vocation requiring knowledge of some department of learning or science; *the profession of teaching.* (2) any vocation or business. (*The Random House Dictionary of the English Language*, 1983, p. 1148)

On the basis of those two definitions, most people would agree that interpreting *is* a profession. True, it is not one of the learned professions, but that does not mean that it does not require expertise and knowledge of a very high order, nor does not being one of the learned professions demean the interpreting profession.

The semantic distinction between a *profession* and a *trade* bears on two issues vital to interpreters: compensation and control. Should interpreters be paid like tradespeople, like people whose occupations require less education and do not require that they abide by a code of ethical behavior? Or should interpreters be compared to attorneys, clerics, and physicians and be paid accordingly? Second, are interpreters mere hourly employees, with little say in how they do their work? Or are they professionals who should be accorded wide latitude in determining how and under what conditions they conduct their assignments?

Deciding how to characterize an interpreter does not answer those questions, but it can frame the discussions differently. As professionals, interpreters would seem to be entitled to pay consistent with their education, experience, and skills, not on scales set for teacher aides and clerical workers. With respect to control of their practices, it would seem that interpreters' decisions about their employment conditions would deserve the same weight that is given to other professionals in the performance of their duties.

Social Relations between Interpreters and Deaf People

As president of the National Association of the Deaf, Robert Sanderson presented his views of interpreters at the Ball State Workshop in 1964 (see box titled "The Value of Interpreting"). For Sanderson, interpreters were his friends, people he could call on for the *favor* of interpreting. Ironically, Ball State, along with subsequent events, changed that attitude—probably irrevocably. Not that deaf people may not regard interpreters in a friendly fashion, just as they might regard their physicians or attorneys, but fundamentally they now see interpreters as professionals who render them paid services, not favors.

Given the history of interpreting services for deaf people, it should be no surprise that some deaf people oppose the purchase of interpreting services. That attitude may be generational, with only older deaf adults among the few resenting having to pay for what they used to get free of charge. When they were young, their schoolteachers and parents interpreted for them. As young adults, they encountered interpreters in church who signed as a religious duty. In none of those instances did anyone pay for the interpreting, nor did those who performed those services usually complain. As exemplified by one interpreter years ago, "We are all the time assisting our deaf brothers and sisters. Our gifts are ours to use in His service, and to His glory" (MacKenzie, 1964, p. 54).

Younger deaf people schooled in integrated classes have experienced interpreters as paid members of school staffs. As deaf adults they usually recognize the advantages of a professional service as opposed to the unregulated, undependable favors of amateurs—no matter if they are friends or relatives and no matter how talented they may be as signers. In turn, most interpreters do not see themselves as superior beings ministering to inferior deaf people. Like members of any other profession, interpreters regard deaf people as equals and expect pay for the services they render.

The Value of Interpreting

Speaking at the first national workshop on interpreting in the United States, the president of the National Association of the Deaf closed his remarks with these words:

> Without interpreters, our world would be much narrower than it is. These wonderful people, understanding, dedicated, are our bridges and our gates to the world of sound, our escape from silence. Through their ears we communicate with the hearing. Through their hearts we feel the ties of brotherhood even through the invisible wall of silence that sets us apart.
>
> We know that we impose upon them, often too much; and that we abuse their friendship and stretch their tolerance. Yet I know that they realize their satisfaction in knowing that they serve their fellow man. I can think of no higher satisfaction, no higher calling; I can think of no other group of people who are held in higher esteem than that in which we deaf people hold our friends, the interpreters. (Sanderson, 1964, p. 34)

The issue of compensation aside, however, other questions remain. For example, how should interpreters relate to deaf people outside interpreting assignments? Because Deaf communities in most areas are small, it is difficult for interpreters to maintain impartiality—that is, to mingle with the very same people for whom they interpret yet not to let that interfere with their relationship. Interpreters often find that when they attend social events they are called on—or feel obligated—to interpret without any prior agreement to do so. This on-the-spot interpreting assignment, even when it is brief and done free of charge, reduces the interpreters' enjoyment of the entertainment and denies them opportunities to relax and interact socially and informally with others.

But the fact remains that some deaf people and interpreters do socialize with one another. Indeed, some deaf people regard interpreters who stay aloof from social contacts as being "standoffish" and disdainful of deaf people. "They are only interested in using us to make a living" is something more than one interpreter has heard. Other deaf people resent interpreters who *do* take part in social interactions with deaf people. They see the presence of interpreters socially as an intrusion. The severity of the intrusion may be worsened by the perception of an interpreter's access to the social life of deaf people as due to the interpreter's knowing sign language rather than to a sincere desire for lasting social contact. Today, many deaf people believe, as a practical matter, that interpreters should mingle socially with them to broaden their knowledge and understanding of Deaf culture and to learn local signs. In other words, there is an educational motive to the social interactions of interpreters and deaf people that might ultimately benefit both. It is an issue that merits exchanges of opinions between deaf people and interpreters.

How Effective Is Interpreting?

Do interpreted messages carry the same information load as those in which speakers sign for themselves? How effective is mediated or facilitated communication in education, rhetoric, psychotherapy, and interpersonal exchanges? Although answers to those questions are crucial to assessing the value of interpreters, they are not readily available. The context and the participants in an interpreting situation play roles in determining the effectiveness of interpreting. Accuracy of the interpreted message, too, is an insufficient measure of effectiveness. An accurately interpreted message has little value if a deaf person does not have access to the code in which it was presented. For instance, an interpreted message that contains the fingerspelling of several technical terms is worthless if a Deaf person receiving the message lacks the English vocabulary necessary to understand the fingerspelled words. Similarly, a message interpreted into ASL is of little value if the deaf person does not have the language skills needed to understand ASL.

Still, if studies showed that interpreted communication was not as effective as direct communication, then researchers should investigate the reasons for that. This is true for all situations involving interpreters, but perhaps especially true for interpreting in school settings, where there is much variation in the language, education, and signing ability of deaf students. Teasing out the interpreting factors

that reduce or enhance effectiveness would then direct efforts to improve interpreting services—a goal that all stakeholders could enthusiastically support.

Progress begins with questioning the status quo.

Organization of the Book

Here we offer a chapter-by-chapter preview of the contents that follow.

Chapter 2. From Favor to Profession: The History of Interpreting

Sign language interpreting may be old, but the interpreting *profession* is of recent origin. This chapter outlines the history of interpreting and of the interpreting profession. In doing so, it also considers some philosophical points underlying the practice of interpreting.

Chapter 3. Models of Interpreting

To clarify what we mean by interpreting and set the stage for the remainder of the book, we devote this chapter to advancing our conception of the art and science of interpreting and reviewing other interpreting models. Doing so enables us to (1) delineate factors that influence interpreting, (2) suggest ways to prepare interpreters so they can improve their services, and (3) propose fruitful directions for much-needed research.

Chapter 4. Physical Factors

Interpreting is influenced by environmental conditions: positioning of initiators and receivers in relation to each other, ambient noise, lighting, other potential visual distractions. Interpreters are also affected by mental fatigue and by the strain signing places on their hands, wrists, and arms. The discussion of these factors considers how to recognize and deal with these factors.

Chapter 5. Psychological Factors

More than language is involved in interpreting. The psychological component of "more" is considered in this section of the book, especially with respect to the relationships between participants. The interpreting process itself arouses psychological questions, especially those relating to cognition. Interpreters must contend with psychological stresses, some like those that arise in any work and some that are specific to interpreting.

Chapter 6. Varieties of Settings

This chapter examines some special interpreting assignments—health-related, legal, theatrical, and so on. Each setting brings with it specific problems for interpreters, and over the years interpreters have devised strategies and tactics for managing the problems in these varied situations.

Chapter 7. Language and Culture

It may overstate the obvious to say it, but the interpreter's stock-in-trade is language. In this chapter, language is discussed strictly from the standpoint of interpreting. The languages from which and into which one interprets affect the process—a point this chapter will clarify.

Chapter 8. The Business of Interpreting

This section of the book attempts a broad description of the participants. Of course, almost anyone might be involved in an interpreted communication at one time or another, but the focus here is on typical participants: both deaf and hearing. Then the chapter takes up such economic questions as those addressing supply and demand, cost-benefit analyses, interpreter compensation, and who is responsible for paying interpreters.

Chapter 9. Ethics

Fundamental to any profession are its ethical principles: its standards of practice and codes of behavior. From their founding, interpreter organizations in the United States and Canada have endorsed sets of ethical principles. These have changed over time. The changes are delineated, and the principles now adopted by interpreters in those two countries are discussed.

Chapter 10. Educational Interpreting

Educational interpreting gets a special chapter because it is the largest source of interpreter assignments. Like the other settings, the classroom raises issues that are unique to it.

Chapter 11. The Future

The book closes with a look to the future of interpreting for deaf people. This concluding chapter summarizes trends, advances hopes, and offers guesses at the developments that lie ahead. Above all, the final chapter reinforces a major theme of this book: *interpreting is an evolving process.* Many of its critical issues are in flux;

some have had little attention directed toward their recognition and resolution, and others will change as a result of continued debates among those concerned.

This book is designed to stimulate discussion among students of interpreting as well as to encourage a greater appreciation of the complex issues embedded in the field of interpreting. To that end, each chapter is followed by a study guide and activities that will help the reader further understand the art and science of sign language interpreting.

Attached to the main body of this book are four appendixes. Appendix A, Interpreter and Transliterator Certifications, provides a current listing of all certifications offered by the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf. Appendix B, Participant Perspectives on Interpreting, contains real-life interpreting scenarios with sample answers from an experienced interpreter and a Deaf consumer. These can be used to further stimulate discussions about how interpreters might behave in certain situations. Real incidents that have happened to interpreters provide an opportunity for readers to reflect on the dilemmas that can arise during the course of interpreting. Appendix C, Profiles, contains nine profiles of interpreters and deaf people, who relate their thoughts on various aspects of interpreting. Appendix D, the NAD-RID National Council on Interpreting, prints in its entirety a document prepared by a joint committee of the National Association of the Deaf and the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf that describes the historical process involved in the development of the National Council on Interpreting.

STUDY GUIDE

1. Discuss some of the skills involved in good interpreting.
2. Why is it impossible to describe a "typical" interpreter?
3. Discuss the concept of interpreting as a social process.
4. In addition to the communication gap between those who cannot hear and those who cannot sign, what are two other types of gaps discussed in the chapter?
5. Explain why this book aims to be descriptive rather than prescriptive.
6. Why would someone avoid using the expression "interpreting for deaf people"?
7. List the three participating stakeholders and the one nonparticipating stakeholder in any sign language interpreting situation.
8. Explain the role of the fourth stakeholder, the nonparticipating stakeholder.
9. Why is it important to use precise terminology when discussing sign language interpreting?
10. Describe how the use of the terms "profession" and "trade" influences ideas associated with issues of interpreter's compensation and being able to make decisions about employment conditions.

11. Discuss several points of view surrounding the topic of whether or not interpreters should socialize with deaf people. How does this affect the interpreting profession?
12. Why should an interpreter be concerned about ways to measure the effectiveness of interpreting?
13. What factors might be considered in the categories of reducing and enhancing the effectiveness of interpreting?

ACTIVITIES

1. Interview three or more interpreters about their reasons for selecting sign language interpreting as a profession. Write a brief profile of each of the interpreters involved.
2. Interview two elderly deaf people and two young deaf adults or adolescents. Ask questions that will help you determine their viewpoints about interpreters. Use information from this chapter to help you compare the viewpoints of the two groups of deaf people. Examples of questions that can be asked are:
   - How often do you use interpreters?
   - In what situations do you use interpreters?
   - Who pays for the interpreting services?
   - Who is responsible for the accuracy of interpreting?
3. Give some possible answers to the questions listed on page 3 related to the emergence of interpreting as a profession.