**NCIEC**
National Consortium of Interpreter Education Centers

# A Road Being Built…
**By MJ Bienvenu**

*This article is of historic importance as it may represent the first attempt to thoroughly document the process used to translate an English text into ASL. The author first discusses general problems one encounters when undertaking an English-ASL translation project. Many of these problems persist today – the lack of a history translating academic work means that there are no standards against which to measure one's work; the lack of research into formal ASL means that there is little guidance for the translator in achieving equivalence in register and style; and the limited number of experienced translators presents challenges for getting feedback on various stages of a translation project.*

*Of particular value and importance is the discussion of cultural "adjustments" made by the translator. Decisions about how to transmit the meaning of culturally salient realities must also be made by interpreters, albeit in real time. The discussion of how to adequately convey equivalent register, style and affect remain informative and germane for translators and interpreters.*

**Introduction**

As a special student in the Fall 1983 semester, I took a course that was offered to A.A. students at Gallaudet College. The course was entitled "Interpreting ASL/English-English/ASL: Theory and Practice". With the permission and cooperation of the instructor (Betty M. Colonomos) the course requirements were adapted for a graduate level course and the focus of the course was altered to suit my interests. One of the requirements for this tailor- made course ("Translating ASL/English- English/ASL: Theory and Practice") was to submit a major project. Within the project I would have to show that I had adapted some of the material that was covered in the class. For example, the interpretation process I was covered and I had to try to adapt that process to the process of translation. My major project was to select an article written in English and to submit a videotaped ASL translation of the article.

In my proposal to the instructor I planned to translate an article entitled "Personal Awareness and Advocacy in the Deaf Community" (Kannapell, 1980). My initial plan was to read and re-read the article until I understood it thoroughly, make a first draft and then hand in a final videotaped translation of the article. After the project was approved, I wrote to Barbara Kannapell and was given permission to translate her article.

I proceeded with my initial plan – reading and re- reading the article and then making a first videotaped draft. I then asked four consultants to give me feedback and suggestions that would improve the quality of the translation. Then I did a second draft. After the second draft (which I thought was the final draft) I received feedback from the instructor. As the instructor and I worked on the first part of the article, it was clear that a third draft was needed. At that time I realized that I could not complete the project in only six months. Because the project could not be completed in six months, I changed the focus of the project to deal with my own analysis of the second part of the article. This article will deal with the result of the re-focused project. Although the major emphasis of this article is on the second portion of Kannapell's article, I will use a few examples from the first portion- "Confessions of a Deaf Advocate". The second portion of Kannapell's article is subtitled "Bilingual Education for Deaf Children".

**General Problems**

The first problem was that the effort to do a "formal" translated version of an article written in English was unique. Consequently, I lacked the resources and/or previous translation work of this type to help me in translating the article. I had nothing to depend on that could help me in this effort.

Another problem was my limited exposure to formal ASL, especially models on videotape that could be studied and analyzed. There are certainly a number of obvious reasons why this is the case, but I feel that the major reason lies with the status of ASL. ASL is an oppressed language in a diglossic community where the English language is considered superior. Instruction in the education of Deaf students is almost always in "English" whether it is a Manual Code for English, Pidgin Sign English, and/or the Oral Method of Communication (communication indeed!). History says that this has been the case from about 1915 to the present. Because of our educational background, Deaf people have tended to switch to a more English-like form of signing when in formal situations.

Another problem is the lack of formal research in this area. Although there may seem to be plenty of formal research on ASL, we must remember that it is still in its' beginning stages. Also what research there is has usually focused on describing the linguistic aspects of ASL. There has been little or no research that focuses on interpreting from English to ASL (except Cokely, in preparation). Because the field of English/ ASL-ASL/English translation is so new, research is simply unavailable or, more likely, not even thought of. However, there are many aspects of translation that are overlooked when discussing interpretation.

Another general problem that was evident was obtaining feedback on the quality of my translation. Initially I tried to get feedback from two interpreters (who had previously taken the "Interpreting ASL/English-English/ASL:  Theory and Practice" course) and two Deaf native signers (who have developed their intuitive judgments about ASL). Getting these people to agree to help was not as problematic as telling them what to look for that would give me helpful feedback. The process was easier with the two interpreters – they were trained to analyze a text for context, content, affect, style, and

register. However, the process of interpretation is different than the process of translation; interpretation is "spontaneous", translation is "extended in time". Also, interpretation between ASL and English involves changing modalities from one naturally developed language to another. English/ ASL translation involves a written (coded or frozen) form of a language and a form of a language that is used in face-to-face interaction.

As for the Deaf consultants, they had no formal training in interpretation/translation. Like me, they have had limited exposure to formal ASL. Although they have developed their intuitive judgments about ASL, they sometimes had difficulty separating ASL from Pidgin Sign English (PSE). They, too, were educated in an "English-is-superior" environment and were influenced by "Deaf PSE" which sometimes looks like ASL.

The two interpreters mainly provided feedback on the process itself and the two Deaf consultants focused more on the language. Although J felt that the feedback was very helpful, there were some aspects missing. For example, occasionally we would analyze an ASL sentence and "approve" it. However, we would "forget" the English sentence and then have to go back and look at the source (original) language. A separate article could be devoted to an in-depth discussion of this portion of the overall translation process. However that is beyond the scope of this present article.

**Technical Problems**

One problem area that cannot be overlooked is the technical problems that may be encountered. This is an extremely crucial area because translation from English to ASL requires the use of videotape equipment. The first major problem has to do with accessibility to videotape equipment. At the Gallaudet College library, I would have to reserve the equipment in advance. While it was relatively easy to reserve the videotaping room, the problem was that often my mood was not right. When an interpreter stands before an audience, his/her adrenaline rises; in a translation task of this type there is no such pressure – the camera is the only audience!

Another problem is accessibility of original material and of translation drafts. With two languages that have written systems, a translator can spread his/her draft and original papers around and continuously refer to them while translating. In one sitting the translator is able to compare messages, mark and correct errors, make notes, etc. The English/ ASL translation situation is quite different. It is not possible to spread source language papers around and then sign for the videotape. Also it is not possible to mark translation errors on the videotape- previous work must be erased in order to record any corrections. This means that the videotape must be rewound, the right location on the tape must be found and recorded over. Of course this means that the initial translation is lost. Additionally, unlike translators working with two written languages, the English/ASL translator must rely a great deal on memory of both the original written text and any previously signed translation.

There were other technical difficulties that arose. However, these were the major ones and serve to make the point that there are more technical difficulties involved in English/ASL translation than in translation between two languages with written forms.

**The Process**

Before discussing the specifics of translating the Kannapell article, it is necessary to briefly discuss the translation process itself. The translation process that I used is based on a model of the interpretation

process. Because of the limitations of space, I will only discuss certain highlights of the process. Also these highlights are the most important for purposes of this article.

Briefly, the major stages involved are:

*1) Concentration:* In order to understand the message, it is necessary to concentrate on what is being read. This means that the article must be read and re-read. Unlike reading for pleasure, one cannot daydream while reading in preparation for a translation task.

*2) Visualization:* In order to understand the message, one has to visualize. This is the stage where the translator reaches "the blob"; that is, that portion of the process where no specific language is involved – no words, no syntax-just the meaning of message itself. This is where the translator gets to look at the concept itself.

*3) Rehearsal:* In order to ensure appropriate rendition into the target language, the translator has to rehearse. In interpretation, this is done inside the mind; for the translator working with two languages with written forms, this is done through rough drafts. In my case, rehearsal was done in front of the camera without recording (a practice run). The videotape camera was focused on me, the TV monitor and the videotape recording deck were turned on, but the record button was not pressed. I was then able to watch myself on the TV monitor, determine if the meaning of my signing were clear and if the message was correct. (I did not do this at the beginning of the project but discovered this technique during the third draft. I now realize that this step is a *must!).*

Initially, my concentration was somewhat low. This affected the next two stages. In reality what I was doing was "sight translation" – I had the original article in English in front of me. I tried to translate the entire article without visualizing or rehearsing. Obviously this was a mistake – I should have stopped and "signed out loud". By doing that I could have noted whether or not I had properly understood the original message and focused on my target language use. If I wasn't using the target language or if there were places where I didn't feel confident, then I could have gone back to visualization and/or concentration. Instead what I did on the initial drafts was to ignore these important tasks and just continuously sign.

*4) Memory:* In interpretation, a well-developed working memory is essential. In translation in general it is probably not essential because the translator works with messages recorded on paper and can constantly refer back and forth. In the case of English/ASL translation it is quite different. Because the translation is from a written form (English) to a signed form (ASL), it is not possible to have the translated version continuously visible nor is it possible/natural to constantly look at (read) the original version while making the translation recording. This meant that the original article had to be memorized. Initially I attempted to memorize the entire article (about ten typeset pages in length). What I should have done – and will do in the future- is to select one segment of the article that naturally seems to fit together (limited to one or two paragraphs). Then it would be possible to visualize that entire segment, rehearse it, and then use the visual memory of the rehearsed version (from the unrecorded viewing) to produce the translation. This "segmented" approach to translation is difficult because often the original message is quite lengthy and that means that I must be sure of my "gut feelings" (confidence in knowing the message) before recording the translation on videotape.

*5) Monitor:* In interpretation, the interpreter has to "listen" to his/her target language output to make sure that the flow is appropriate and, at the same time, watch the audience to determine if they seem to understand the message. In English/ASL translation, the translator can "watch" his/her output to make sure that the flow is appropriate, but the camera is the only audience. That means that the English/ASL translator has a dual role to play while rehearsing and while translating – watching the target language output and serving as the audience. I had to remember that I am a viewer. This means that I must constantly be aware of the audience that I am translating for and must form a mental profile of that audience. Then, when I am a viewer, I must represent that audience. Do I understand what is being signed? Is the target language production clear? Is the message clear? At the same time I had to monitor myself to make sure that the translation flow was appropriate and that other aspects of the translation (e.g. style, affect) were correct.

**The Message**

"You cannot interpret if you do not understand." This is one statement that every interpreter and translator knows or should know. It was obvious to me that there were portions of the Kannapell article that I did not understand. This was evident when I would follow the (English) form of the original message and did not produce a semantically correct translation of the message. An example of this is the following:

original: "…teach them English through English."
<u>rh-q</u>
translation. TEACH-cntr ENGLISH HOW, ENGLISH

In this example the meaning of the translation is not clear, nor equivalent to that of the original. There are at least three reasons why this is so: a) who was being taught? The directional verb -TEACH- was ambiguous since no referent meaning had been established for -cntr; b) the meaning of "English" in this context is not clear since it can vary from a manually coded form of English to an oral representation of English; c) it is not clear that translating "through" by the rhetorical question HOW accurately retains the intended meaning.

Another message-related area that is of concern to the translator is semantics. Obviously the translator must use the correct signs to convey the intended meaning of the original message. This necessarily involves judgments about the way that signs can and cannot be used. For example, is it appropriate to use the sign "-LOOK-AT-" with "education" as the subject of the verb? Or is it appropriate to use the sign USE to translate a phrase such as "using the language", when it is clear that the meaning is "producing the language"? Another similar example occurred when the author was defining different categories of bilinguals and was using terms for those categories that had been originally used by a person named Lambert. In the translated version, I first signed the categories of bilinguals and then signed "… WORD CALL-them THAT L-A-M-B-E-R- T". The meaning that was conveyed was that "Lambert" was a name for all types of bilinguals. Inappropriate or unrecognized semantic features can cause inappropriate use of the target language can also cause grammatical errors.

**Target Language**

Descriptive research on the syntax, "word" order, non-manual grammatical signals/markers, etc. of ASL makes it possible to better analyze the target language in an English/ ASL translation situation. However, in this area there were two main problems

that I faced. As mentioned above, my own exposure to formal ASL has been limited. In addition to this, it is well known that Deaf people have tended to "code-switch" (i.e. use a variety of signing that is less like ASL) when discussing "academic" topics. In translating the Kannapell article, my use of non- manual signals was consistent, but my "word" order
was often more English-like. For example:

original: "There are several types of bilinguals" .

translation: "HAVE DIFFERENT GROUP-cntr GROUP-rt DOUBLE LANGUAGE HAVE"

The first part of the translated sentence HAVE DIFFERENT GROUP seems to have a Subject Verb Object order with an implied "there". This seems to be unlike what one would expect given the research on ASL syntax. To improve the translation of this sentence I would now sign:

$$\overline{\hspace{6cm}}^{\,t}$$
"DOUBLE LANGUAGE PEOPLE GROUP+ +, <u>nodding +</u>      <u>mm</u>DIFFERENT + + . "

Another problem was that my use of space was at times ungrammatical. By this I mean that I was not consistent in assigning referents to specific locations in space. For example, initially I had located "ASL" to my right and "English" to my left. Later in the translation I noticed that "English" was located to the right and "ASL" was located to the left. One possibility is that I did not monitor myself enough during the translation to catch these inconsistencies. I suspect, however, that it has more to do with the technology of videotaping. As I would sign the translation I would see myself assign a location to my right. But since I was also watching myself in the TV monitor, that location would be to my left. That is, what is the signer's right is the viewer's left. Since I was both signer and viewer, I suspect that my viewer's visual memory may have influenced my production as signer. This is not unlike what happens in an ASL conversation when a location that has been assigned by one of the conversational partners is then used throughout the conversation until/unless it is changed. This means that I must not only have developed a working memory and be able to monitor myself, but I must also train myself to "contralateralize" when watching myself on TV.

My vocabulary usage in the target language seemed appropriate except for those occasions when I would stick to the surface form of the original message. As mentioned above, there is a tendency to code-switch away from ASL when discussing "academic" topics. Thus, I noticed myself using signs that would be characterized as less like ASL and, perhaps, more English-like. For example, the signs "HAVE", "USE" (as in "use the language"), and "AND". It would have been possible to convey the meaning of these vocabulary items in a way that as more in keeping with ASL. Thus, I could have changed spatial locations, used fingers in a listing behavior, and/or used body shifts instead of using the sign "AND".

**Cultural Adjustments**
The major difficulty encountered here is the tendency to code-switch when discussing academic or professional topics. In fact, this was the biggest problem that I encountered during this project. The first issue had to do with whether or not I would "take a stand". Should I accept and follow the "cultural rule" of Deaf people that would require code switching? This was not really an issue in translating the first portion of the Kannapell article "Confessions of a Deaf Advocate" since it dealt with personal experiences and a personal point of view. However, the second portion, "Bilingual

Education for Deaf Children", was clearly a discussion of a more academic/profession topic-the education of Deaf children. The problem was whether I should use the target language in producing the translation (which one would expect in a translation) or whether I should follow the "cultural rule" and code-switch (which might more properly fit the expectations of Deaf people). This is where I, as the translator, must take a stand. This is definitely an inner conflict for the translator – can I ignore my "gut feelings" and not code-switch? Also, if I decide to attempt a "full" translation, what do I depend on as a model since academic discussions have rarely been held in ASL?

Given my conscious linguistic knowledge of ASL, I knew that "full" translation could be done. Also, given my "pioneer-ism", I decided to attempt a full translation. This meant several things: extra analysis of meanings, try to better understand my "gut feelings" to ensure accurate translations, try to remember what Deaf people would say/use in terms of target language accuracy, and try to control the "cultural rule" so that I would be able to accurately and fully use ASL.

There were some additional cultural adjustments that were necessary. Among these adjustments were:

a) the use of name signs. In the first portion of the article this was rather easy and quite appropriate. In the second portion of the article, it seemed more difficult again because of the subject matter that was being discussed.

b) signaling topic shift. In written English it is often the case that a new paragraph signals the beginning of a new topic of discussion or a shift in topics. For example, in the Kannapell article a new paragraph signaled the temporary end of a discussion of Deaf education and the beginning of a discussion of bilingualism in general. The discussion of Deaf education was resumed two paragraphs later. In ASL such shifts in topics must be clearly communicated. Thus a topic shift signal must be added such as "NOW ME GROUP-PUT-ASIDE-TO-rt".

c) culturally-loaded lexical items. The question here is to what extent certain lexical items are equivalent. For example, can the term "educational system" be signed SCHOOL-FOR-THE-DEAF? In some cases it is necessary to add certain information that may be implied/intended by the original lexical item. Thus to translate the original phrase "…English through English" I felt that I had to make clear the range of possibilities intended by this phrase. My translation was: "…ENGLISH HOW, SIGN-PSE, FlNGERSPELL, ORAL". What is not always clear is whether adjustments such as these are necessitated by language differences, by cultural differences, or by both.

Certainly some of the cultural adjustments that need to be made are obvious; others require indepth analysis of both the original message and the proposed translation. This is where the translator has to depend on intuition, personal analysis of cultural similarities and differences, and on-going discussions with Deaf people. Of course, discussion of these issues with Deaf people may be difficult at present because of the lack of training and/or lack of adequate understanding of what is involved in interpretation and translation.

### Register

There have been research efforts to describe the registers of English (e.g. formal, informal). Also there is general recognition of the differences in register in English. However, there is no formal descriptive research dealing with the registers of ASL. Thus, at this point, decisions about appropriateness and

equivalence of register have to be based on the translator's personal observations and intuitions. One difficulty in this regard is the tendency of many Deaf people to code-switch. One approach that helped me in the translation of the Kannapell article was to try to visualize an older Deaf person giving advice at a Deaf club. I would try to visualize what that person would look like. I would also try to visualize, among other things, what adverb markings would be allowed, what vocabulary would be used, and how that person would use space.

One non-manual adverb marker that generally seems restricted to informal use is the 'th' marker For example, in the translation I signed If-RELATE- TO-rt and used the 'th' non-manual signal. However, the appropriate non-manual signal was 'tight lips'. Obviously these non-manual markers not only signal a higher or lower register, but they also alter the meaning of the sign that they accompany. (Another non-manual marker of this type seems to be 'puffed cheeks'.)

Thus I would try to avoid this type of non- manual marker in my translation.

Another indication of informal register is the use of non-manual behaviors without accompanying manual signs. Thus, in informal ASL a rhetorical question can be signaled by only using the appropriate non-manual behaviors. In formal ASL, Deaf people tend to use a manual sign in addition to the non-manual signal. Likewise in informal ASL a headshake without an accompanying #NO can be used to signal negation. However, in formal ASL the #NO seems to be required. Or in informal ASL one could simply sign:

         <u>        neg</u>
REMEMBER

But to express the same meaning in formal ASL would require:

             <u>    neg</u>
REMEMBER NOT

In the translation I found myself not using these formal strategies. In the following example I feel that a "NOT" or a "#NO" should have been manually produced.

original: "There are also people who can understand the second language, even though they, themselves, never use it."

translation: '                           <u>neg</u>
  ". . . USE INDEX-second language

                                   <u>     nod</u>
  EYE-RECEIVE EAR-RECEIVE UNDERSTAND. . ."

Another feature that distinguishes formal and informal ASL is the use of space and the way that locations in space are referred to. Indexing with the index finger or an open, palm up hand is more formal than indexing with the thumb or simply using eye-gaze. Formal ASL seems to require manual as well as non-manual devices to signal pronominal reference, while informal ASL seems to allow either manual/non-manual or simply non-manual devices to signal pronominal reference.

**Style**

Style, like register, seems easier to identify in English than in ASL. One reason for this is the lack of research on style in ASL. It is important that the translator recognize that s/he has a particular signing style, a particular way of organizing ideas and presenting them, and even a particular type of humor. For example, my own signing style and way of organizing and presenting ideas caused me to use certain signs that might be considered poetic or metaphoric or, in some cases, I would make an abstract idea a concrete object. Thus, when coming to a reintroduced topic, I used a phrase like:

"GROUP-PUT-ASlDE-  TO-rt, LOOK-AT-group".

It was difficult for me to be objective and determine whether this was a cultural/language adjustment or whether it was my own personal signing style. There were times when I would view my translation drafts and would see myself talking rather than translating someone else's message.

It was also difficult to analyze the style of a written article. I know that Kannapell is a native user of ASL and I know that she had to write the article in her second language-English. For that reason her own personal style may be somewhat lost. This made it doubly difficult to determine her personal style. There was one element of her style that I was able to recognize and, I believe, was able to remain faithful to in my translation-unexpected topic shifts. For example, in the middle of a discussion of bilingualism there was a sudden shift to a discussion of monolinguals. (Of course I had to determine whether it was her personal style or a second language error type. In addition, I feel that such digressions are culturally and linguistically allowed).

It is important that the translator not overlook style and, at the same time, because of the lack of research in this area translators should also explore style in-depth. For example, with the drafts of the translation of this article I could try to get feedback from people watching the tapes (paying special attention to the feedback of those who understand the tasks and functions of interpretation and translation). In our discussions of style, however, we must remember that a person's spoken and written styles are different – even for native speakers of a language. It may be that there are even more differences when writing in a second language.

**Affect**

Affect is probably the aspect that I understand the least. It is not clear to me how I take affect from a written form and convey it in a signed natural form. This is an area that I need to focus on more the next time that I analyze the translation tape and try to develop a feeling for affect. For example, there were times when the author tried to make an impact on the reader by using a specific word to highlight or emphasize her point (e.g. "essentially"). My initial (probably incorrect) approach to translating such words was to use redundancy. That is, I would sign the same sentence twice! What I should have done was to use an equally emphatic vocabulary item from ASL or to produce the translated ASL sentence more intensely.

**Conclusion**

Given the above discussion, it should be obvious that translating an article from English to ASL is a very difficult and time-consuming task. It should also be clear why the finished product (a "full" translation) could not be completed in six months.

There is one last point that needs to be mentioned briefly. This has to do with the overall organization of the article and the resultant organization of the translation. Some people believe that the way that ideas

and information are organized, presented, and developed in English and ASL are quite different. If this is true then the final translation may be accurate, acceptable ASL if analyzed sentence by sentence; however, if analyzed as a whole text the translation may still reflect an English ordering of ideas and information.

As a final step (before the final product is completed) I need to, and want to, view the translated text as a whole and determine whether or not the translation seems to fit the overall discourse style of ASL. Of course this will be extremely difficult because it will mean viewing a videotape that is approximately 45 minutes long. And then, if changes seem necessary, I will need to determine how to reorganize the translation. Unfortunately there is insufficient research in the area of ASL discourse features to guide any analysis that will be done. But from a translator's point of view, I feel that this step is necessary.

Although there were problems in this translation task (e.g. lack of resources), I feel that this project (and the discussion in this article) represents a breakthrough of sorts. Obviously there is a need for research in the area of translation. But, as a starting point, we can begin by sharing our personal experience and analysis in translation tasks.

Personally, this project was an overwhelming experience for me-and an extremely stimulating experience. However it was also very frustrating; so frustrating that there were times when I was ready to give up. But English/ASL-ASL/English translation is an exciting, undeveloped area. I see a road ahead of me (and other pioneer translators) that needs paving; white lines to be painted; shoulders to be built to rest on. When that initial portion of the road is complete, others (hopefully Deaf people) can travel on it smoothly. They will find that the road is not only scenic and stimulating, but also that it leads to a new field. And then they can build a longer road-themselves.

**Footnotes**

1 The interpretation process that was presented detailed the various mental tasks involved in interpretation from a source language to a target language. For example, it included such tasks as: "listening" to the source language message, analysis (in both source and target languages), reaching the point where the message is understood on a conceptual level-no language forms exist at this point (This is referred to as "The blob"). A task analysis of the interpretation process was one of the topics at the 1984 Conference of Interpreter Trainers (CIT) Conference and will be presented in the 1984 CIT Proceedings (in preparation).

2 In the interpretation process model used, analysis of a message involved analyzing five factors: content (situation, setting), context (what has been said thus far), affect (the type of impact that a presenter wishes to have on the audience), style (how the presenter chooses to deliver his/her ideas; e.g. humor), and register (frozen, formal, consultative, informal, and intimate).

3 On an ASL-English continuum, "Deaf PSE" covers an area that is closer to ASL than to English. It may include many ASL features. but in general it follows English word order. In fact, since a pidgin does not have a fully developed set of rules (when compared with a naturally developed language), "Deaf PSE" is difficult to define.

4 Sight translation is a type of translation in which the translator reads a written message and translates while reading.

# References

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