



# Characteristics of Oppressed and Oppressor Peoples: Their Effect on the Interpreting Context

By Charlotte Baker-Shenk

Both spoken language interpreters and signed language interpreters function as mediators between members of different linguistic and cultural groups. However, signed language interpreters additionally function as mediators between members of the powerful majority (hearing) and members of an oppressed minority (deaf). And most signed language interpreters, by virtue of their hearing status, are members of that powerful majority. These basic facts are of critical importance for understanding the context in which interpreters work, and they need to be examined openly if we are to get beyond the mutual hurting and confusion that permeate the field of signed language interpreting.

## Introduction

This paper will describe some of the painful realities that make of the context in which interpreters work-- including the attitudes and behaviors of deaf people toward interpreters, and the attitudes and behaviors of interpreters toward deaf people. It is often hard for us to talk about these things without becoming very emotional, even angry or hurt. We usually are not neutral on these issues. I am not, and I often become internally upset when giving a presentation on my understanding of these realities. Unfortunately, sometimes I become self-righteous and oppressive to some people. That is not what I want to do, but it is a real temptation for me-- like the arrogance of a recent convert or someone who just stopped smoking. So I begin this paper with that confession, earnestly desiring to communicate non-offensively but honestly, and hoping to communicate with your hearts as well as your heads.

The "language" I will be using to discuss these issues may seem strange to some of you. It is the language of power that Harlan Lane refers to in his paper. This language divides people into two categories: the oppressed and the oppressors. In this country, people who are white, middle class, hearing, and heterosexual often find that this language seems too sharp, too "black and white." They do not see things this way. Yet this language is very familiar to people in many other countries in Latin America, in South Africa, and in the Philippines; it is also more familiar to some groups of people in

this country, like Black people and Deaf people. Some women have also used this language to describe their experience.

I begin with the assumption that everyone has experienced being oppressed, that is, hurt by someone putting you down, making you feel inferior, or unfairly denying some opportunity to you. I also assume that all of us have oppressed other people, that we have made others feel inferior, perhaps taking advantage of someone else's problems, or trying to make ourselves look good at the expense of others. In both cases, we may not use the language of oppression to describe our experience, but we have experienced what oppression is.

Some groups or classes of people are oppressed. In many countries, such as El Salvador and Guatemala, poor peasants are oppressed by the wealthy and powerful people of those countries. In the United States, Black people and Native American Indians have been and are oppressed by groups of White people. Some of you might want to argue that signed language interpreters are an oppressed group. What I want to focus on in this paper is the oppression of the deaf minority by the powerful hearing majority.

There are four basic points I want to make:

(1) that deaf people are a highly oppressed group who show many of the same characteristics seen in other oppressed people of the world;

(2) that interpreters, by virtue of their "hearing heritage" and the context in which they work, run a serious risk of behaving in an oppressive manner;

(3) that many of the conflicts that interpreters face can be better understood by analyzing them in terms of power and control, and by remembering the oppressed condition of deaf people;

(4) that understanding these conflicts in this way can encourage deaf and hearing people to become more trusting and trustworthy, and hence, help resolve the tensions.

### **Minority oppression**

What does it mean, in concrete terms, to say that someone is a member of an oppressed minority group?

It means you suffer because the dominant group denigrates your self-worth, your abilities, your intelligence, and your right to be different and affirmed in your difference. It means having neither power in the institutions that impact your life, nor opportunities for self-determination. It often means a denial of your language, its worth or your opportunities to use it, and a denigration of your culture. (Consider the experience of Black, Hispanic, and Native American Indian people in the United States.) It frequently means receiving a poor quality education, and then facing a lack of jobs and opportunities for job advancement. It often results in discrimination in housing, bank

loans, and medical services.

What does it mean, in concrete terms, to say that a deaf person is a member of an oppressed minority?

It means having your teachers and counselors tell you that you have no language, that American Sign Language (ASL) is not a language, that Deaf people don't have a "culture." It means a denigration of ASL as less intelligent and less than fully human and an intolerance of and prohibition against its use in your schools. It generally means having teachers who cannot communicate with you and hence, cannot help you learn -- while at the same time you are blamed for your poor academic performance. It means being deeply aware that hearing people view your group as being less intelligent, emotionally and behaviorally deviant, and incapable of self-determination. It means being told that you cannot make mature and intelligent decisions on your own, that you need hearing people to help you. It means receiving a poor quality education, and then a lack of jobs or opportunity for job advancement, and a lower average income. It also means not having decision- and policy-making power in the educational, medical, rehabilitation and social service institutions that are supposedly serving you.

What lies behind this oppression of minority groups? How does it happen?

Goffman, (1963) a well-known sociologist, explains that oppressed minorities tend to have a stigma; they are stigmatized. This stigma is a "deeply discrediting trait" seen as a defect in the persons who have it. That is, as a rule, people develop expectations about the way others should act and what they should look like. Those people who are members of the dominant power group in society also develop such expectations about the way others should appear, behave, and think -- using themselves as the standard (Higgins, 1980, p. 123). And then when some people do not measure up these supposed "standards," they are "reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one" (Goffman, 1963, p. 3). This is what characteristically happens to Black people, deaf people, and homosexuals, among others.

Unfortunately, those dominant group members who create and control the larger social world often treat this perceived "defect" or "failing" as an overriding, all-encompassing characteristic of the person who has it (Higgins, 1980). That is, all of the individual differences among such persons are overlooked, and all of the persons with this "defect" are viewed as if they were all the same. So the Black man who shines shoes and the Black man who has a Ph.D. in engineering are seen as the same -- because they are both Black. Of course, members of the same minority group have very different perceptions about themselves and are quite aware of their individual differences. Similarly, deaf people know that they are a diverse group, even when hearing people lump them all together in classrooms or in their speeches.

The next oppressive phenomenon that happens is that the "defect" spreads (Goode, 1978; Higgins, 1980). That is, because if the original "defect" or difference, other

additional negative characteristics are attributed to the minority group. For example, because Black people are black, they are then stereotyped as lazy, intellectually inferior, irresponsible, etc. Similarly, many hearing people assume that since Deaf people are deaf and hence, "don't use our language properly," they are intellectually inferior. Explaining this hearing view, Lane (1980a) writes "Only two kinds of people, after all, fail to use your language properly: foreigners and retardates." Since deaf people are clearly not foreigners, they must be retarded.

This defect "spread" can also be seen in the semi-humorous stories of deaf people being led by the hand to the appropriate gate at the airport (as if they can't find it themselves) or even being driven to the gate on a personal transport car (as if they cannot walk). Similarly, deaf people have been described in the clinical and educational literature as egocentric, easily irritable, and impulsive (Levine, 1956), dependent and lacking in empathy (Altshuler, 1974), immature, rigid rather than flexible, exploitative of others, and abusive of relationships (Hurwitz, 1967). A prominent speaker in the 1971 International Ecumenical Seminar on Pastoral Care of the Deaf, Father A. van Uden, adds another example to the list: "It seems evident that it is more difficult for deaf children than for hearing children to attain authentic, selfless love."

### **Characteristics of oppressed people**

What is the impact of this stigmatization and negative stereotyping on members of the oppressed minority?

Goffman (1963), Freire (1970), a Brazilian sociologist and educator who has worked closely with poor people in several countries, and Ben Schowe (1979), a deaf thinker and author, have each described the way oppressed people feel about the trait or different feature which stigmatizes them. Goffman describes this feeling as ambivalence, noting that stigmatized people tend to both embrace the feature that makes them different, viewing it as an essential part of their identity, and also to degrade themselves and other group members because of the feature that makes them different. The latter shows an acceptance of the majority view; the former is seen in such one-liners as "Black is beautiful," "I'm gay and proud," and "Ain't I a woman," as well as the signed assertion "I'm deaf," in which the movement of the sign DEAF is large and emphatic with one cheek puffed out. Schowe notes that positive identification with the stigmatizing feature leads to "group solidarity" whereas negative identification with the feature leads to "self-hatred."

Freire also talks about this ambivalence and calls it an existential duality. On the one hand, oppressed people desire to break away from the oppressor, to become free and self-determining, to speak and act on their own thoughts, to have choices, to break their silence. For example, women of the past several decades have claimed their right to work outside the home and run for public office. Homosexuals have been abandoning their silence, their so-called "closet," demanding acceptance of their difference and freedom from previous sanctions against them.

Oppressed people's desire for freedom is also seen in their expressions of resentment

and even hatred toward the oppressor, as well as their fantasies of revenge. These expressions show their desire to get out from under the foot that's stopping on them and denying their freedom.

On the other hand, oppressed people often wish to be like the oppressor. They have internalized the dominant group's values and way of thinking about their (oppressor's) own superiority. The oppressed feel an irresistible attraction to the oppressors and their way of life; they want to imitate and follow them. Black people have desired big cars, big houses, and big TV's. Women have worn suits and ties and sought to be powerful executives. Deaf people have told each other sound-based puns.

This ambivalence is personally felt by some group members more than others. Members also may change in how strongly they experience one pole or another. For example, one product of the Black Liberation movement of the 1960's and 70's was that some Black people who used to straighten their hair, smile, try to "talk White" and fit in began to proclaim "Black is beautiful," wearing Afros and dashikis, and publicly delighting in their own dialect (rappin', jivin', gettin' down, etc.)-- which was then copied by certain members of the White majority. Similarly, some deaf people who used to pretend that they understood what a hearing person was saying and who used to watching hearing people out of the corners of their eyes to find out when it was time to laugh are now insisting on their right to understand and to be Deaf. Some are now saying "Don't bother me with your sound-based jokes-- or your songs."

Freire observes that oppressed people tend to parrot the words of the oppressor: they call themselves ignorant, and lazy, sick, unproductive, and inferior. They lack self-confidence and also distrust their fellow group members who, of course, are thought to share the same inferiority. Sussman (1976), a deaf psychologist, notes that an individual's self-concept is largely defined by how others view him or her. And he reports what are the finding of numerous studies: deaf people have negative self-concepts, pronounced feelings of inferiority, and low overall self-esteem.

Freire finds another characteristic of oppressed people to be "horizontal violence." Oppressed people tend to vent their frustrations and despair on their peers in an aggressive, often violent way. Black rioters have often burned down the homes and businesses of other Black people rather than the White people who are the source of their rage. Oppressed people usually feel unable to strike back at the oppressor, and instead strike out against their own people-- where it is more safe to do so.

Another characteristic of oppressed people is called a "slave consciousness" or "fatalistic attitude" (Freire, 1970, 1973). The oppressed person becomes docile and passive toward their oppressive situation, feeling "I can't do anything about it." The person simply adapts.

Another characteristic of oppressed people is their diffuse, magical belief in the power and invulnerability of the oppressor (Freire, 1970). The powerful oppressors never make mistakes in English. They have everything they want. They easily get jobs

and make money. In fact, life is easy for them.

Oppressed people believe deeply that they need the oppressors for their own survival (Freire, 1970). They are emotionally dependent on them. They need the oppressors to do things for them which they feel incapable of doing themselves. Thus, they experience a deep “fear of freedom” when confronted with the possibility for “liberation.” They also resist their own movement toward liberation because they fear it will lead to greater repression by the oppressor. Thus, one deaf administrator at Gallaudet College last year told me that it was best to accept silently the official 1984 Gallaudet interpreting policy which forbade the use of ASL because things might get worse if we said anything.

In summary, the following are said to be characteristics of oppressed peoples:

- ambivalence between either embracing the feature which makes them different as a positive and essential aspect of their identity (resulting in group solidarity) or degrading themselves and other group members because of the feature (resulting in self-hatred)

Another way to describe the ambivalence is as an existential duality in which the oppressed person both wants to break free from the oppressor and to become more like the oppressor.

- self-depreciation, parroting the negative evaluations of the oppressor; lack of self-confidence
- a basic distrust of oneself and one’s peers due to a felt inferiority
- horizontal violence
- passivity, adaptation, fatalism
- emotional dependence on the oppressor
- a fear of freedom (losing the dependence) or of backlash (worse repression)

What I have read (e.g., Higgins, 1980, Showe 1979; Sussman, 19676; Barrigan, 1983; Padden, 1980; Glickman, 1984) and what I have observed over the past ten years suggests to me that the preceding descriptions of oppressed people are parallel in many ways to the experience and attitudes of many deaf people. In fact, during the past two years, I have seen some deaf individuals and groups analyze themselves along these lines. This is not to say that the preceding analysis fully and accurately characterizes deaf people. However, the apparent parallels do warrant our serious attention, especially toward the ways they help us understand how deaf people express themselves and how they interact with hearing people.

### **Characteristics of oppressor people**

What behaviors and attitudes characterize members of the oppressor group?

The oppressor group is the dominant power group. As stated earlier, members of this group believe that their way of acting and being is the “best way,” the “appropriate way,” the “cultured” or “intelligent” way. The stigmatization of minority groups means that the ways in which they are different are viewed as inappropriate and inferior by the dominant group.

So a first characteristic of the oppressor groups is their pejorative view of the oppressed. They view these minority people (who they, of course, do not call “oppressed”) as inferior, not capable people, not trustworthy people, etc., etc.

Because the dominant group believes they are superior to the oppressed, they automatically assume that the oppressed want to change and to become like them. Hearing people often assume that deaf people don’t want to be deaf, and that they would do anything they could to change and become hearing people. Thus, these hearing people are shocked to see that many deaf adults don’t use their hearing aids. Similarly, hearing people often refuse to accept the possibility that deaf people would choose to remain deaf, even if a “miracle” operation could change them.

Furthermore, if deaf people reject efforts to make them more like hearing people, they are viewed as misguided children who cannot make proper decisions for themselves. This position was clearly articulated by a hearing doctor, Ménière, at the Paris school for deaf students (cited in Lane, 1984, p. 134):

The deaf believe that they are our equals in all respects.  
We should be generous and not destroy that illusion.  
But whatever they believe, deafness is an infirmity and  
we should repair it whether the person who has it is  
disturbed by it or not.

The egotism of the dominant, oppressor group leads them to insist on their own importance, exhibiting a “take charge” attitude (“I know what’s best for you, “ “I know what’s needed here”), and a desire for constant control (to make sure things work out “right” -- and that they stay in power!).

Another characteristic of the dominant, oppressor group is their paternalism toward the oppressed. “Those poor people need me; I’ll take care of them.” “I’m doing all these things to help them out.” However, in fact, oppressors want to maintain the dependence of the oppressed; it re-affirms their superiority and makes them feel good about themselves (Higgins, 1980). And, as Lane (in this volume) adds, the dependence of the oppressed maintains the jobs of the oppressors.

Along with the paternalism comes what’s called a strongly “possessive consciousness” (Freire, 1970). “These things are mine; they are under my control.” This underlying consciousness is heard on phrases like “My deaf people” or “My deaf students.”

A curious characteristic of oppressors is the desire for approval and even gratitude from the oppressed for their own behavior. We need them to tell us we’re okay, that we’re doing a good job, that we’re good people. Poor people should be grateful for the tidbits we give them (even though the rules of our system often keep them in poverty and us on top).

Finally, one other important characteristic of the dominant, oppressor group is their fearful and angry reaction to attempts by the oppressed to become free. They perceive the liberation of the oppressed as taking away their own (the oppressor's) freedom. When deaf people insist that teachers of deaf children should be skilled in ASL, hearing teachers become threatened and angry. They fear their loss of control, the control they maintain by using their own language instead of deaf people's. Liberation for the oppressed means a new sharing of power-- taking power away from the oppressors and sharing it more justly with the oppressed. The resultant loss of power feels oppressive to the oppressor (Freire, 1970).

### **Relevance to interpreting**

How do these characteristics of oppressed people and oppressor people help us understand the many tensions and conflicts that interpreters experience in their work?

The first obvious insight concerns the recognition that most interpreters are hearing people, and that they are automatically members of the powerful dominant group in the eyes of deaf people. So all of the ways that deaf people think and feel about oppressors influences the way deaf people deal with the hearing people that they are using the interpreter to communicate with. Similarly, interpreters, when they interact with deaf people, run a clear risk of being highly influenced by the way oppressors think and feel about oppressed people.

Let us look at some specific situations to see how these things can happen. (Please understand that we are now considering general trends. There are always exceptions to everything.)

How many of you interpreters regularly get explicit feedback on your interpreting performance from deaf people? (RID audience response: "Very, very few.") Why do you think deaf people are willing to sit without protest through an interpreted presentation that they clearly don't understand? Why don't deaf people ask for clarification when they don't understand?

Asking deaf people these questions reveals that they are used to not understanding, and that they blame themselves. Always the assumption is that the hearing speaker is smart and is being clear, but that it is the deaf persons' fault for not understanding, presumably because they are intellectually inferior. Often, the interpreter is at least partially at fault for the confusion, but deaf people still most often blame themselves. Why do they sit through it without protest? That is where the passivity and fatalism is seen-- "there's nothing to be done about it; we can't change or improve our condition. Besides, we don't want look even more stupid by drawing attention to our problems."

Many deaf people "code-switch" within a discourse or even within a sentence. That is, they switch back and forth between more ASL-like signing and more English-like signing. Why does this happen? Some deaf people say they are worried about looking dumb if they use ASL. Or they don't trust the interpreter's ability to understand them.



Many deaf people today feel ambivalent about ASL-- “Is it really a language? Really equal to English, or inferior? Can it handle all of the things I need to say in context? Yes, I’m more comfortable using ASL, but what are those other people thinking about me? Yes, I’m more comfortable using ASL, but I’m supposed to be using English.” Deaf people’s learned ambivalence about their language is a frequent source of confusion in the interpreting situation.

Or, how many of you interpreters feel that deaf people expect too much of you? You are supposed to be able to handle any and everything, no matter what time of day, how long the session is, or how mixed the linguistic preferences of the deaf group are. You are also supposed to understand everyone, deaf and hearing, to have perfect English, and make everything work out right. How many of you can relate to that somewhat exaggerated description?! (Audience response: pained laughter, many hands raised.)

These pressures you feel are part of what was meant earlier concerning oppressed people’s belief on the pervasive, magical powers of the oppressor group. You are not seen as vulnerable. You are the powerful. You can make things go the way you want them to.

These are just a few examples of common problems that can be better understood by considering the characteristic ways that oppressed people think and act. I am hoping that you will do the same sort of analysis with the many other problems that you experience as interpreters, and see how it may be helpful to you.

Now I’d like to turn the tables a bit to consider what some of the common behaviors of interpreters may be communicating to deaf people. What do these behaviors mean in the context of deaf people’s experience of oppression?

It’s fair to say that the majority of hearing people who work as “interpreters” are far from fluent in ASL and that most of them transliterate rather than interpret. What does it communicate to deaf people when “interpreters” don’t know and don’t use ASL-- even when that’s the preferred mode of communication for the deaf person? Is it telling them that ASL is not worth learning? Or that it is not really a language? Not a viable and respectable means of communication? Is it telling them that it is always deaf people’s responsibility to adapt their communication to fit hearing people’s, and in this case, interpreters’ preferences?

What does it communicate to deaf people when “interpreters” say, “Oh, I know ASL,” but then simply don’t use signs for English words such as “is,” “are,” and past tense “-ed”-- and feel debased by hearing people who treat their language so casually, and presume to know things that they don’t? Or worse, are deaf people made even more confused by these false comments of hearing people-- who are supposed to be the models of intelligence and power?

What does it communicate to deaf people when interpreters make up signs? (Would a native German-speaking interpreter make up a word in English when s/he didn’t know

an English equivalent to the German word?!) Does it tell them that “you deaf people don’t own your language? We powerful hearing people can change it any way we please”? Or, does it tell them that their language is impoverished and that deaf people are incapable of deriving vocabulary to meet their own needs?

What does it communicate to deaf people when interpreters teach signs to deaf people? Or worse, what does it communicate to deaf people when interpreters correct deaf people’s signs? Does it say that hearing people can take control over even this most basic part of deaf people’s identity-- their language? And that hearing people have the right to criticize how deaf people use their own language?

What does it communicate to deaf people when interpreters use all those artificially invented, initialized signs? Does it tell deaf people that their language isn’t good enough, that it needs to be improved-- i.e. to become more like English? (Imagine that some foreigner comes in and begins to change some of the vowels and consonants in your words to make them more like German. And you end up with words like “tsong” instead of “song.” How would you feel? But also imagine that you were raised to believe that Germans are superior people and that you should try to be like Germans. Now aren’t you confused when that foreigner comes in and attempts to change your language?)

What does it communicate to deaf people when an interpreter in a restaurant tells them admonishingly, “Lower your voice!”? Are interpreters responsible for the social behavior of deaf people? Do interpreters have the authority, like parents with children, to make deaf people behave according to the norms of hearing society?

As I reflect on all of these questions, I see that the theme of “interpreter control” occurs again and again. These examples also suggest the presence of paternalism and a pejorative view of deaf people shown in a lack of respect for their language and linguistic rights. Again, these are just a few of the conflict situations that can be analyzed in this way-- i.e., in light of oppressed/oppressor power struggles in the deaf community.

In closing, this paper has presented some hard realities quite candidly, and it may have angered some of you. I hope, no matter what kind of response you feel today, that you will consider these things in your heart. I hope you will continue to talk with deaf people and with other interpreters about these issues. I also hope that you will find this way of analyzing the interaction of deaf and hearing people in terms of the dynamics of oppression and power helpful both personally and professionally, as it has been for me. I continue to struggle with my own impulses and my understanding of these things.

### **Afterword**

Some thoughts on interpreting models

Perhaps we also need to take a second look at the basic interpreting model that many professionals now adhere to which views the interpreter as a machine-- one who simply transmits the messages of one party to the other and vice versa. Although the interpreter

may make “cultural adjustments” to accurately convey the messages of each party, still both parties are on their own; they must take responsibility for their interaction. The model assumes two “equals” who use the interpreter “machine” because they don’t share a common language.

Yet, if the previous discussion of oppressed peoples fits even only approximately the experience and attitudes of deaf people, then we can see that the deaf person and the hearing person are not approaching their interaction as equals. In fact, it is unrealistic and naive for the hearing interpreter to make such an assumption and proceed on that basis.

Furthermore, is it really appropriate (and humane) for interpreters to make a unilateral decision about how they will handle every event, based on a machine model? Isn’t that “more of the same”-- hearing people deciding on how the deaf person should act (this time telling them to “take charge”)?

Let me be quick to throw in my “two cents” and say that this analysis does not mean we should return to the “old days” of interpreter paternalism and implied superiority (“they need me”). We need more creative alternatives than the pendulum swing from interpreter paternalism to interpreter machine offers. We need a more humane model which is sensitive to the socio-political realities of the deaf community-- which neither exploits those realities (paternalism model) nor ignores them (machine model).

To me, in fact, the first step needed is a painstaking examination of the ways in which hearing interpreters’ behavior reinforces the old myths and keeps in place the oppression that causes the resultant attitudes/behaviors of deaf people.

Some may argue that until the oppressive paternalism is weeded out of the interpreting field, we had better keep the interpreter machine model, because it limits damage that the interpreter can do. Perhaps this is true. Little progress can be made in developing a more humane model until interpreters become trustworthy.

In the interim, perhaps we could establish at the local level “dialogue teams” composed of deaf and hearing consumers of varying perspectives and interpreters of varying backgrounds who could reflect on these issues at regular intervals, give each other feedback, raise questions, and jointly work out problems. Perhaps these dialogues would facilitate the development of a more humane model of interpreting, which could be continuously modified as the community changes.

### **Acknowledgements**

This paper much benefited from pre-RID conversations with several colleagues-- Betty Colonomos, M.J. Bienvenu, Dennis Cokely, and especially Bill Isham. All interpretations, of course, are my own.