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From Benevolent Care-Taker to Ally: The Evolving Role of Sign Language Interpreters in the United States of America

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Introduction

Sign language interpreting was first recognized in the United States as a profession during the mid-1960s when the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID, Inc.) was first established.The purpose of the RID remains to define and perpetuate standards of competency and practice for sign language interpreters nationwide. As of 1998, the RID has over fifty five (55) chapters in forty-nine (49) states. These chapters, and the national organization, serve as the mechanism by which interpreters explore the evolving nature of the interpreting process and our role as practitioners. Perceptions regarding the role and responsibility of interpreters have changed significantly over the past thirty years, each change reflecting a growing intellectual maturity, as well as recognition of prevailing social and political factors (Smith and Witter-Merithew, 1991).

There are many social and political factors that influence the perception of the role and responsibilities of interpreters - such as disability laws protecting the interests of deaf people in the American society and trends in the education of deaf children. Some of these factors are based on the prevailing attitudes of the government and educators towards deaf people and their use of language, and are pathological in nature. A pathological view of deaf people is one which focus on the problems of deaf people and ways in which the implications of deafness can be reduced or eliminated (Lane, 1985, Smith, 1996.) In general, this view assumes deaf persons are limited in their capacity and need the assistance of hearing people to become normalized. It is a view which emphasizes the importance of spoken language skills and measures the success of deaf persons by the degree to which they can emulate the behaviors and abilities of their hearing counterparts. The more like "normal" people a deaf person can become, the more successful they are considered (Baker-Shenk, 1986.)

Still other social and political trends-such as the civil rights movement of Deaf Americans and the linguistic and anthropological research into American Sign Language (ASL) and the cultural norms of the Deaf Community - have resulted in a sociolinguistic view of deaf people. This view recognizes the advancements of deaf people as a distinct language and cultural community, and respects the solutions created by deaf persons for living deaf in a non-deaf society (Baker-Shenk, 1986.) These changing

and conflicting views of deaf people have helped to shape the way sign language interpreters approach the task of interpreting and perceive their role and responsibilities.

From Benevolent Care-Taker to Ally

Prior to the establishment of the RID, individuals functioning as interpreters for deaf people were primarily untrained volunteers with no guidelines to follow regarding appropriate behavior. This was during the period in the social history of America when there was great controversy regarding the education of deaf people, and the general society held many pejorative attitudes about deaf people. Deaf people were characterized as weaker, severely disabled, broken and inferior and in need of caretaking and support. The indigenous language of deaf people was not understood - and was characterized as an abbreviated or ungrammatical form of English. The volunteer interpreter was seen as a Benevolent Care-Taker who could bring deaf people into an understanding of society.

These beliefs about deaf people resulted in a model of interpretation that was paternalistic in nature. The relationship between interpreter and deaf person was not equal. Often, interpreters were directive with deaf persons, telling them what to do. This model of interpreting perpetuated the social oppression deaf persons in America were experiencing (Smith and Witter-Merithew, 1991.) However, there was a basic truth that emerged from this period in the history of interpreters in the United States. Deaf people were indeed being oppressed and there existed tremendous power imbalances between deaf Americans and hearing Americans. Interpreters were - and continue to be - in a unique position to understand and recognize the imbalance which exists and to create more equity.

With the establishment of the RID, there was a conscious effort to disassociate from the image of a benevolent care-taker and establish a professional identity based on standardized principles that guide most American professionals - confidentiality, integrity, objectivity, discretion, competence and accuracy. Although these principles are appropriate and necessary, the application of these principles in the early period of the RID was defined in a narrow, rigid, and punitive manner. Interpreters were characterized as “machines” or “conduits”, whose only role was to transmit information in an unobtrusive manner. The expectation was that deaf people must learn to function as hearing people and be held to the same standards as hearing people.Therefore, interpreters would communicate with deaf people by using signing in a way that followed English word order and meaning. It was believed that this was the only way deaf people would learn English (Quigley, 1972.)

It should be noted that the early leaders of the RID were deaf educators. As a result, the goals and methodologies prevalent in Deaf Education at that period of time influenced the theories about the role and responsibilities of interpreters (Cokely, 1980.) English-based signing systems were flourishing in Deaf Education at that time, and interpreters were encouraged to use these systems in an effort to teach deaf people English. The workforce was small and isolated, and became dependent on the leaders of the RID to define role and responsibilities. The narrow and rigid definition of role and responsibility of the Interpreter as Conduit was designed to protect the interests of deaf people by preventing the potential by interpreters to abuse the position of interpreters and return to the paternalistic approach of the benevolent care-taker. However, in reality, the narrow definition of role and responsibility did not work because the underlying expectation that deaf people function as if they were not deaf was unreasonable.

Interpreters felt great conflict between the way they were told to behave and the realities of the interpreting process. Frequently, interpreters would be confronted with situations where deaf or hearing consumers would look to them for solutions to misunderstandings, cultural conflicts, and logistical concerns. This caused great feelings of conflict for interpreters. They would sometimes resort

back to the care-taker model, but always feel conflicted and guilty. Consequently, interpreters would not discuss the conflicts openly for fear of being viewed as unprofessional or unethical. Additionally, deaf people often perceived interpreters as detached, cold, aloof, disinterested, or overly aligned with the hearing people who had long oppressed them (Baker-Shenk, 1985.) Over time this resulted in a breach of trust between interpreters and deaf people that is still being rebuilt today.

As the RID grew, and the number of interpreter practitioners increased, and interpreter education programs began to emerge, there came increased opportunities to discuss role and responsibilities and to define professional standards in more effective terms. In the mid-70's there was a shift in role definition that recognized the need for interpreters to more actively engage in creating successful communication events. This shift involved the recognition that interpreters have a tremendous impact on the communication process and should work with consumers to create a successful environment for communication to occur. This shift is referred to as the Interpreter As Facilitator model (Witter-Merithew, 1986.)

During this period, interpreters began to meet with consumers in advance of assignments to agree on positioning, turn-taking, special vocabulary and other communication process considerations. These pre-meetings were also used as an opportunity to develop rapport with consumers in an effort to create an atmosphere of comfort and more effective communication. Interpreters also began to give more attention to advance preparation, and other issues related to working conditions. In this model of the interpreter as a facilitator of communication, interpreters began to look for ways to handle the variations in language use which occur among deaf people.The result was a growing awareness that interpreters must adapt their use of language to fit the situation and the consumers involved. However, questions still existed about how to make appropriate adjustments to language and how much involvement an interpreter could have during the communication process. Overall, the majority of interpreters still used a system of signing which was based on English structure versus the natural, native language of deaf people, ASL.

Simultaneous with this shift in role definition, the 1970's and early 1980's were a time when linguists and anthropologists were researching American Sign Language and the culture of Deaf people. The Deaf Community was also involved in a major political movement to increase their access to society and education through the use of interpreters, telecommunications, and the academic recognition of American Sign Language. Deaf organizations like the National Association of the Deaf, and the World Federation of the Deaf, became engaged in major leadership roles to define public policy regarding deaf people. Additionally, deaf people began to redefine their view of themselves and to emerge with a growing appreciation for their deaf identity. At the core of this identity was the natural and indigenous language of deaf people, ASL, which had been oppressed by the general society through educational policy for many years (Lane, 1985.) Academic recognition of American Sign Language led to a more active political and social movement within the Deaf Community to have interpreters use the natural, native language of deaf people more fluently.

As these efforts were synthesized by the interpreting profession, the field of interpreting was faced with a great challenge and dilemma. As a group, we did not possess adequate competence in ASL to meet the changing expectations of the Deaf Community. Interpreter training programs were not long enough to provide adequate language instruction (Witter-Merithew, 1989.) For many years we had conformed to the standards of Deaf Education and used English - like signing during the interpreting process - a task we refer to as transliteration. The tradition of transliteration in the field of sign language interpreters in the United States was so strongly established that we still struggle today with

shifting our efforts to the mastery of ASL interpretation.

However, due to the pioneering efforts of individuals like Bienvenu, Colonomos, Cokely, Baker-Shenk, Smith, Neumann-Solow and others, the field of interpreting once again made a major shift in theory to a model referred to as the Bi-Bi Model of interpreting. In this model, which was first coined in 1983 (Witter-Merithew, 1987), the interpreter is seen as a mediator of language and culture - with an ethical responsibility to convey messages which retain the original semantic intent of the speaker. Achieving semantic equivalence requires recognition that a message is always influenced by speaker background, cultural orientation, identity and life experiences. Additionally, creating equivalence requires recognition of the audience's background, cultural orientation, identity and life experiences. The interpreter therefore must have bilingual and bicultural competence as a prerequisite to successful interpretation (Cokely, 1989.) Again, this was a significant departure for American interpreters, who had become accustomed transliteration. It took at least a decade for the work force to upgrade their language competence to adequately respond to the demands of deaf consumers. In some regions of the United States, this process continues today.

Interpreter training programs also made a shift in how interpreting was taught. More attention was given to the development of the cognitive skills necessary to effectively interpret simultaneously from one language into another language. Some programs added additional coursework, extending the amount of study required to graduate. Many programs began hiring qualified deaf persons to teach the language courses, as well as assist in the teaching of interpreting skills. Courses in Deaf Culture and Comparative Cultures were added to the curriculum. As more instructional materials have been developed, more of the leadership roles in language and culture instruction have shifted to deaf persons. Simultaneously, deaf Americans continue to redefine their identity and their political and social agenda for the Deaf Community. This process has led to a continuing adaptation of the role and responsibilities of interpreters.

Since the early 1990's, there has been a movement to define the role of interpreters from the perspective of an Allies Model. As our language and cultural competence has increased, we have engaged in collaboration with the Deaf Community to give more attention, at a philosophical level, to the social and political movement of deaf people to become self-actualized. Attention has been given to the ethical role of interpreters to contribute to the furthering of the deaf agenda. In the Allies Model, the interpreter makes a conscious effort to recognize power imbalances and strives to create greater balance in power. Additionally, as individuals with close personal and professional ties to the deaf community, Ally Interpreters make a public and conscious commitment to assist deaf people in furthering their agenda (Baker-Shenk, 1985).

Interpreter as Ally: A Closer Look

The term ally is defined as a supporter, an endorser, a contributor, and a confident. These terms all acknowledge the unique and important relationship that has long existed between deaf people and interpreters. In order to gain linguistic and cultural competence in the Deaf Community, interpreters must develop social and personal relationships with deaf people- as well as complete a formal course of study in interpretation. As a result of these personal relationships, interpreters gain insight into the daily challenges faced by deaf people. The model of Interpreter as Ally focuses on the recognition of oppression in our society and strives to create partnerships with deaf people that will reduce the power imbalances that exist. Again, this is a significant shift in theory from the earlier models of the role of the interpreter- which frequently were perceived by deaf people as punitive and oppressive.

The model of the Interpreter as Ally is based on an abiding respect for the language and cultural

experiences of deaf people in our society and a profound recognition of the historic oppression that has been perpetuated on deaf people. It also recognizes that interpreters, as facilitators of communication, have power and can use this power in a way that creates more equity between deaf and hearing people. It also means engaging in introspection and self-awareness - because this model requires our recognition that interpreters have also contributed to the oppression of deaf people through our language policies and role definition. Adherence to the role of the Interpreter as an Ally requires a desire to see the status of deaf people in society improved, and a commitment to contributing to the movement of the Deaf Community to be self-actualized (Baker-Shenk, 1985).

However, it should be noted that there is a need to distinguish between the Interpreter as Ally and the interpreter as the a crusader or champion. The goal of the Interpreter as Ally is to contribute to the goals of the Deaf Community in positive and supportive ways. It is not intended as a model of leadership, where interpreters "take control" of the deaf agenda and fight to gain rights for the Deaf Community. Rather, it focuses on understanding the nature of oppression, and how interpreters can work to eliminate oppression and power imbalances. The commitment to support the political and social movement created by the American Deaf Community comes from our growing awareness and appreciation of their many accomplishments and abilities. The focus is on the success and potential of deaf people versus their limitations and problems. So, it is essential that interpreters who work in the Ally Model have self-awareness and adequate bilingual-bicultural competence. Without self-awareness, linguistic, cultural, and interpreting competence, the Ally Model can quickly become the Benevolent Care-Taker Model (Baker-Shenk, 1985, 1986).

Interpreter As Ally: Case Studies

An illustration of the Ally Model in action is the infamous 1988 Deaf President. The students, with support from faculty and staff, petitioned the University to hire a deaf president. The board of directors of the University responded by hiring a hearing woman, with no prior experience in working with deaf persons. This lead to a protest, which closed down the University for nearly a week. The protest gained national and international attention from the news media and provided an opportunity of the deaf students to take their concerns to the American public through the television networks. However, the protest was a volunteer movement, based on a strong social and political position from within the Deaf Community. There was no funding to pay for public relations assistance, interpreters to help talk to the media, or other protest-related costs. In recognition of the movement, many highly skilled interpreters came to Gallaudet and volunteered their time and skills to assist the deaf student leaders in communicating with the news and representatives of the government. These volunteer interpreters worked long hours for the sole purpose of supporting the deaf students in furthering their political agenda. As interpreters were approached to speak to the media, they would quickly defer to the deaf student leaders - functioning solely as an ally-and empowering the deaf students to address their issues directly.This is an example of our growing respect for the deaf agenda, and our recognition that self-actualization is the natural result of social and political progress within the Deaf Community.

While there has been much progress in the civil rights movement of Deaf People, there are still many deaf individuals who have limited educational opportunities or are involved in educational programs that focus on teaching spoken language skills and amplification at the expense of academic content. And it is still common that deaf individuals have families who do not learn to communicate with them in meaningful ways and over protect them. The result is that deaf individuals often lack adequate language skills to be able to read and write successfully and/or they lack an awareness of society- they have been taught to depend on hearing persons to direct their lives. They also lack awareness of how to advocate for themselves to ensure that they receive adequate services.These deaf individuals present

a unique challenge for interpreters who work in the Ally Model.

Consider, for example, the case of Robert, a fifty-five year old deaf man who did not complete school and works in a factory as a laborer. He lives in a small apartment and rides the bus to and from work everyday. His life revolves around his work, and a small group of deaf friends he associates with on a regular basis. Robert needed surgery on his leg, due to an injury he got on another job. He went with an interpreter to the surgeon to discuss plans for a surgery. The doctor examined Robert, described the surgery, gave Robert some medication to take the evening before the surgery, and a list of two or three things he wanted Robert to follow prior to the surgery- such as not eating anything after 6 PM, and keeping his leg elevated for 12 hours prior to the surgery. When Robert and the interpreter left the office - Robert asked the interpreter what the medicine is for and what the list of instructions is about. The interpreter realized that Robert did not understand the doctors directions and asked Robert if he wants to return to the doctor or if there is someone who helps care for him. Robert says no to both questions and states that he just wants the interpreter to explain everything again. The interpreter acknowledges that the information can be confusing and recommends that they try to speak to the doctor further or ask a nurse for clarification. Robert and the interpreter return to the doctors office and Robert gets a fuller explanation of the medication and the instructions.The interpreter is also able to inform the doctor that Robert has difficulty with reading. As a result, the doctor and the interpreter work with Robert to put the instructions in picture form. Robert feels much better and assures the doctor that he is now able to follow the directions. When he got home he put the picture directions on his refrigerator and at the appointed time followed the directions as required. By acknowledging that Robert's concern regarding the medicine and directions was valid and assisting Robert in getting the needed clarification from the doctor, the interpreter empowered Robert to get what he needed.

The next case study involves a deaf person in the legal context. Tanya- a nineteen year old deaf woman who did not complete high school and came from a poor family who kept her very sheltered and did not seek help when Tanya began having emotional outbursts.

Tanya was arrested for the murder of her cousin's infant during one evening while her sister was supposed to be baby-sitting. A boy came to the house to visit her sister and she went outside leaving the infant with Tanya. When the infant became upset, Tanya was unable to cope. Her sister did not return and Tanya became increasingly upset until she murdered the infant.

When she was arrested the police failed to get an interpreter to explain her legal rights. Instead, they used a police officer who had taken one or two sign language classes. Tanya - who wanted to be cooperative and was feeling very afraid - gave a full confession. However, she had the impression that if she cooperated the police would take care of her - they were acting very friendly. Tanya did not understand the legal implications of what she had done. Later, the government appointed an attorney to represent her who hired a highly skilled interpreter. The police attorney planned to use Tanya's written confession as proof during the court trial, although the written confession was difficult to read and had statements which could be interpreted in several different ways. Tanya's attorney was unaware of laws that require the police to hire qualified interpreters for police interrogation. Also, the attorney was unaware of the difficulties with reading and written language forms that are common for deaf people. The interpreter was able to provide the attorney with resource information about laws protecting the basic civil rights of deaf people, as well as experts in the field of deafness who could work with the attorney to measure Tanya's mental stability, discuss her educational limitations, and help prepare an adequate defense for Tanya.

The interpreter served as an important resource person for the lawyer. The goal was not to have Tanya released - but rather to make sure that she was provided the same rights as any other person would be.The attorney would not have known where to go to get appropriate resources without the interpreter's assistance.

A major issue interpreters often deal with is the fact that hearing persons providing services do not have adequate information about deaf people. This is the case in the next case study that relates to a deaf person, Mark, in a mental health situation. Mark had been experiencing a lot of depression and anxiety. His employer sent him to a clinic that provides counseling services. The therapist who worked with Mark had no prior experience with deaf people. An interpreter was scheduled. Mark discussed his feelings of isolation, his frustrations with his family who could not communicate with him, his dissatisfaction regarding his job and lack of involvement. The therapist interpreted all of these remarks as signs of self-pity and felt that Mark was immature and using his deafness to gain attention. She encouraged Mark to take the initiative to become more involved and to take responsibility for creating a more positive life. Mark felt the therapist did not understand the deaf experience, but did not possess the ability to counter the remarks of the therapist with any additional insight. Before the next appointment, the interpreter was able to talk to the therapist and provided a broader context for the deaf experience. She was able to refer the therapist to several individuals with specialized experience in working with deaf people and several authors who have written about the psychology of deafness and the implications of oppression. The therapist was able to get the background information needed, which resulted in the therapist referring Mark to a person more qualified to work with his special needs. Again, the interpreter functioned as an ally and used their position to foster greater access and equality for the deaf person.

A final example of the Interpreter as an Ally Model can be seen in the increased use of deaf interpreters. A deaf interpreter is a deaf person who has been trained as an interpreter to work with a hearing person to provide a more fluent and accurate interpretation of messages between ASL to English and English to ASL. The deaf interpreter functions as the primary interpreter - who interacts with the deaf client. The hearing interpreter functions as the interpreter for the deaf interpreter- conveying English messages into ASL. The deaf interpreter further analyzes the message in order to convey a more contextualized message for the deaf client. This process works very well when interpreting for deaf persons with limited education and language, or in situations where the content is highly technical and complex -such as conference interpreting. The use of deaf interpreters occurs primarily when a hearing interpreter informs the government or hearing client that the use of a deaf interpreter is necessary in order to ensure understanding and accuracy. This requires hearing interpreters to acknowledge our limitations with the language and culture of deaf people and to be willing to share interpreting assignments with deaf people. This is yet another way in which Ally Interpreters share power and support the role of deaf people in empowering themselves and other deaf people.

Interpreter as Ally: Boundary Issues and Considerations

It is important to distinguish between the theory and the practice of the model of Interpreter as Ally. The degree to which the interpreter applies many of the concepts discussed in this paper, depends on many factors. First and foremost, who are the deaf people involved as clients of the interpreting service? Some deaf persons in America are fluent in the use of English- due to the age at which they became deaf or to the educational opportunities they were provided. These individuals are familiar with the norms of the general society and prefer interpretation which is based in the use of English. When an interpreter is truly an ally, they respect the diversity of language use in the Deaf

Community, as adjust their way of interpreting to match the expectations or needs of the client. Conversely, there are many deaf people who are bilingual- they are fluent in both English and ASL - for example, those deaf people born into deaf families. These individuals may know English - but prefer ASL as a natural, native language which allows them more comfort and ease while communicating. The interpreter who is an ally respects the right of deaf clients to have choice. The primary difference between the Ally Interpreter and the other models of interpreting addressed here, is the attitude they hold about who deaf people are and what their status in society is and should be. The attitude of an Ally interpreter is based in a sociolinguistic view of deaf people, versus the pathological view of deaf people. Other factors to be considered are the goals of the clients involved, the purpose of the interaction, the topic being addressed, the level of familiarity the clients have with one another, and the type of interaction being interpreted.

It is also important to note that the interpreters who successfully work in the model of interpreter as Ally are those interpreters with a high degree of language competence, bilingual competence, and interpreting experience. The degree of competence required exceeds the amount of time available in the interpreter education programs in America. Additionally, the salaries paid to interpreters remains low. This becomes a deterrent to individuals who must invest time and money to gain the education and experience required for this high degree of competence. However, our field has demonstrated a commitment to continuing education and we are continuing to make progress in upgrading the skills of the interpreting workforce.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has discussed the general shifts in theories about the role and responsibilities of interpreters in America, with particular attention to the Model of the Interpreter as Ally. These shifts have been the result of many factors -such as legislative trends regarding services to deaf people and the social and political movement/civil rights movement of deaf people in America. The current theories regarding the Interpreter as Ally were illustrated throughout the use of several case studies. However, it is important to note that controversy regarding this Model still exists within the interpreting field and efforts continue to provide information, education, and collaboration with deaf people that will enable us complete our transition to a model of interpreting which reflects respect, value, and appreciation for the experience of deaf people in our society. We continue to learn and are still in progress. As the needs of deaf people continue to evolve, so will our views of our role and responsibilities.

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