



National Consortium of Interpreter Education Centers

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The Interpreter: Machine, Advocate, or Ally?

by **Charlotte Baker-Shenk**
with valuable experiences and insights of
Ron Coffey, Sandra Gish, Risa Shaw, and Chuck Snyder

This presentation focuses on the realities of “power.” My abstract promised that I would talk about power in deaf-hearing relationships and how that relates to various roles of interpreters. It also said this presentation would be a mixture of prophetic critique, confession, and unresolved questions. I am quite sure I will keep my promise about the unresolved questions, and I continue to be a true believer in the value of personal confession. You, of course, will be the judges of how prophetic is the critique.

Several graduate students in the Teaching Interpreting Program at Western Maryland College helped me prepare for this presentation: Ron Coffey is a second year student; Sandra Gish, Risa Shaw and Chuck Snyder are all proud graduates of the world’s only graduate program for teachers of interpretation (!). I have much benefited from very stimulating conversation with these folks and have included some of their insights in this presentation. They will be sharing examples from their own experience at the end of this presentation as well as sharing their own analysis.

Part I: Power and the “Machine” Model

This presentation makes two very basic points:

1. that there is no “neutral” position with regards to power. Despite whatever your interpreter education/training program or mentor told you, you **do** have power and you use it all the time, for better or for worse, and
2. that you/we need to learn to recognize our power and use it responsibly.

What is power? Power simply means “the ability to act.” You have power when you can make decisions and implement or act on those decisions.

There are various tools for obtaining power: money, education, physical attractiveness, knowing the “right people,” having personal charisma, being really good at something, etc.

Simply being born into the dominant/power “class” automatically gives you power, regardless of your personal abilities or achievements. In crass terms: white, hearing, wealthy, heterosexual males wield a lot of power.

Many, many people do not experience themselves as having power, as having an ability to act- to decide what they need and then get it. Many people do not have the power to obtain enough food to stay alive. Thousands of people die daily of starvation and related diseases. I imagine many of you feel you have little power. Perhaps you wish you were more skilled in ASL, but you don’t know how to improve your skills. Perhaps you feel stuck in an abusive or unhealthy relationship at home. Maybe you are an educational interpreter and you feel helpless, caught between the needs of a Deaf kid and the demands of the teacher or insensitive school policies.

Power, the ability to act, is something you may have in one situation and not in another. I can act on my desire to give this presentation because I have power- but it took me one full year to get the city to come cut down the dead tree that was threatening to fall on my house! And how come I keep feeling this dying need for a better balance of work, play, and family time in my life, for reducing the stress in my life, but I keep being overloaded and stressed out?!

OK. Why am I going into all this? Because most of you here are hearing people. Because I’m going to say that hearing people have a lot of power and that interpreters have a lot of power. And I want you to be able to hear me, and not start thinking about all the power you don’t have! Yes, it’s true that all of us often feel powerless at the individual level. And there are aspects to being an interpreter that put you in tough situations where abusive folks can make your job very difficult. That is true.

What else is true?

- That Deaf people have been systematically deprived of power by hearing people who either thought they were acting in the interests of Deaf people, or by hearing people who simply exploited Deaf people for their own benefit.
- That most Deaf people have not had the power to communicate freely with their families, to receive a quality education in a language fully accessible to them, to experience the kind of respect for their culture and language that many of us grew up with (unless, of course, you are African-American, or an immigrant, etc.). Most Deaf people have not even had a voice in determining the policies and practices of institutions supposedly serving them.

It is also true:

- That Deaf people know we are hearing- by birth, we are members of the class that has hurt them.
- That Deaf people, in certain situations, are relying on us, using us, to get what they want- information from a doctor, access to a public lecture, the opportunity to ask a question in a classroom or state an opinion at a board meeting, whatever.

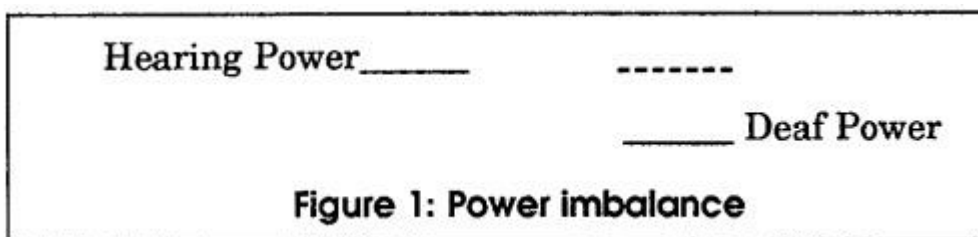
In many situations, we stand between the Deaf person and what they want. That gives us great power. In most cases, we are the only ones there who have access to both languages and cultures. And that also gives us great power.

We know that the rules for interaction differ cross-culturally, and we are making decisions all the time about which rules to follow. For example, depending on how we handle it, we can even decide who gets to talk and when. Suppose you are interpreting between a Deaf person and a hearing person. Both begin to speak at the same time. Depending on what you do, begin speaking or begin signing, you can control who gets to “talk.” You can control interruptions, if and when someone can successfully jump into a stream of talk.

Of course, depending on our skills, we also can strongly influence whether or not someone's “message” is received by the other. One common complaint of Deaf people is that most hearing interpreters have poor voicing skills, so the Deaf person ends up sounding idiotic or unintelligible. The non-signing hearing people don't know it is the interpreter who is responsible. This, of course, results on taking power away from the Deaf person, inhibiting their ability to act to get what they want. Another common situation is when interpreters don't understand the message of the doctor or the lecturer (or perhaps, additionally, the interpreters have poor ASL skills) and so they simply code it into some kind of semi-intelligible signs in English word order. The Deaf person doesn't understand what's going on, but feels confused about whether he/she is at fault for not understanding, or of the speaker is not clear, or if it's the interpreter.

The Interpreter has a lot of Power

In a very real sense, Deaf people are always in a “one down” positions every time they interact with hearing people. Historically, hearing folks have been the powerful ones who have tried to control them and make them function according to their rules. Most hearing people don't even know, much less try to respect, the rules of Deaf society. Most, without self-awareness, automatically assume the Deaf person will act in ways appropriate to hearing norms and hearing interactional rules. In the vast majority of situations, when a Deaf person and a hearing person come together to interact, they do not meet each other with equal power. There's a power imbalance.



One of the historic interpreting models that more modern programs have reacted against has been called the “helper” model. In this model, interpreters recognized to some degree the

disadvantaged position of Deaf people and acted to intervene on their behalf. However, they intervened by taking control and making many decisions for Deaf people, rather than enabling Deaf people to gain access to the needed information so they could make decisions for themselves.

In response, the RID Code of Ethics (or how it has been interpreted) and most of our interpreter education programs have taught us basically that we should not be a player, that we should not exert power, that we should be “invisible.” (You know the typical example: the hearing person asks the interpreter, “Where are you from?” and the interpreter signs “Where are you from?” without responding, leaving it to the Deaf person to clean up the mess.) I call this the “machine” model of interpreting. And I want to say clearly that this model is terribly naive. It is based on a false assumption that the interpreter can somehow avoid power, avoid taking a stand, and avoid influencing the outcome of the interaction.

Let me clarify my use of the term “machine” model. I first used this term at the 1985 RID Convention (Baker-Shenk 1986:70-71). Since then, it has been used in a different way, specifically referring to the linguistic process of word-for-sign or sign-for-word, machine-like transliteration. However, I am using this term to describe the interpreter’s role. I believe that even persons functioning as bilingual/bicultural mediators can, ethically, function as machines. This machine model clearly reveals the basic tendencies of people in power (the dominant class) both to deny the reality of their power and to deny that power is a part of what’s going on in **every** situation. As African-American educator, Lisa Delpit, writes, “Those with power are frequently least aware of- or least willing to acknowledge- its existence.” Conversely, she notes, “Those with less power are often most aware of its existence (1988: 282).” We need to open our eyes to the realities of the power differentials around us, to recognize, as Chuck Snyder delightfully remarked, “power is not a four-letter word,” and to learn creative and responsible ways for us to use our power.

Not only is the machine model based on a false assumption of equal power, but this model also teaches us to intentionally ignore the historic and continuing power differences between Deaf and hearing people when we act as an interpreter. It tells us to act as if the Deaf and hearing persons were in equal footing, equally able to exercise power in that situation. It also- and here’s the real tragedy- it also ensures that we will maintain the status quo. In other words, by acting as if Deaf and hearing interactants were on equal footing and by not making conscious choices to help correct the imbalance of power, we help the hearing interactant maintain his/her greater power and help maintain the disempowerment of the Deaf interactant. We help perpetuate an unjust system.

Sound too rough? Let’s look at this example:

Example: There’s a doctor, Deaf patient, and interpreter in the doctor's office. Some important tests have been done on the patient. The doctor says, “Here, you can just read

the report on your tests” and gives the papers to the patient. The Deaf man takes the papers, looks at them briefly, and subsequently asks a few questions about what he should do next (which the interpreter duly interprets) and then leaves.

The interpreter knows the Deaf man has minimal English skills and, in all likelihood, did not understand what the report was telling him about the state of his own body. The interpreter also knows that, historically, Deaf people (because of an oppressive educational system,) have been made to feel inferior in relation to their English skills and hence, have often not wanted to reveal their level of English competence to hearing people.

The doctor is ignorant about all this, doesn't know that English is a “second language” for this man and that English has historically been a cruel guillotine over Deaf people's heads. He simply assumes English competence.

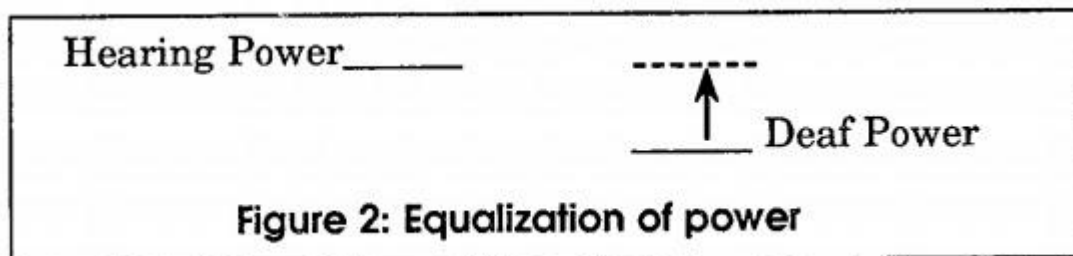
The interpreter, despite having a clear sense that this Deaf man did not get the information he needed (which, of course, the doctor is unaware of), does not act on her knowledge. According to the machine model, the interpreter “simply did her job”; she accurately conveyed the linguistic messages of each party to the other. I would argue that she participated in the disempowerment of this man. She facilitated an injustice.

Some of you may want to argue that the interpreter is not responsible to see that justice is done. As they say in court situations, “That's the system's responsibility”; it's the doctor's, the Deaf person's. The interpreter is **part of** the system. The interpreter in the doctor's office is part of the system. There is no neutral “outside” position. You are part of the system. And you are either part of the problem or part of the solution.

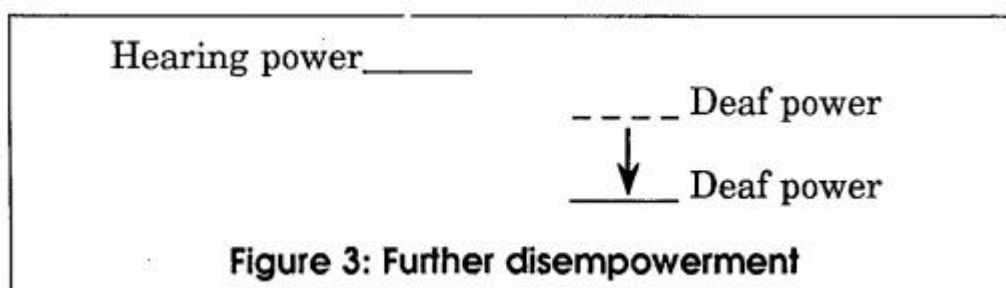
Most of us have been taught or told, as interpreters, to not get involved in such messy situations and to “just do our job.” again, I think this is a reaction against the paternalistic and controlling “helper” model. But can interpreting in the context of an oppressed minority be reduced to simply “linguistic/cultural mediation” without ethical decision-making? Why is it called “stepping out of role” when the interpreter uses knowledge that often he or she alone has access to in order to not be complicit in further injustice against Deaf people?

As philosopher Jacques Maritain (quoted by Saul Alinsky in *Rules for Radicals*) says “The fear of soiling ourselves by entering the context of history is not virtue, but a way of escaping virtue.”

I believe that we help maintain an unjust system when we act as if the rules were just and when we don't use our own power to help equalize the power relations between peoples.



Unfortunately, not only do we maintain the power imbalance, but sometimes, we even further disempower the Deaf person. For example, this frequently happens in voicing situations—when the interpreter poorly voices for the Deaf person but hides that fact from the hearing people as well as the Deaf person.



Furthermore, not only are we helping maintain an unjust system that hurts Deaf people, but we are also hurting ourselves. It is in our own self-interest to use our power to help bring about a more just, more mutually accessible situation. I have a bumper sticker on my car that reads, “No one is free when others are oppressed.” There are many reasons why this is true. Even simply at an emotional level, at the level of my psychological well-being, when there is an injustice going on and I simply let it happen without doing anything to stop it, a part of me dies. In words that may be familiar to some of you, instead of “choosing life,” I am letting myself become deadened. That hurts me. It dehumanizes me.

Part II: Power and the Temptations of the “Converted”

Now suppose you do decide to recognize and use your power to help equalize the power relation between Deaf and hearing people. What happens here? As Sandra Gish enthusiastically blurted out in a recent conversation, “Communication is better! You feel better!” Yes, that is true a hurrah for you! Yet, again some nasty pitfalls...

Looking for historical examples, there have always been members of the dominant class who decided to support the cause of the oppressed group. Remember the white fellow in the movie Gandhi who used his power of the press to help the Indian movement gain worldwide attention?

The struggle of oppressed peoples can indeed benefit from the power of what Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, calls the “converted” ones. Nevertheless these members of the dominant class experience some tough temptations while working with members of the oppressed group. Dominant group people are used to having and using power. They are more comfortable with leadership roles, with being the ones who set the agenda (who tell people where to stand and how the interaction should take place...).

In his classic text *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire says,

Some of the dominant class join the oppressed in their struggle for liberation. Theirs is a fundamental role and has been so throughout the history of this struggle. However, as they move to the side of the exploited, they almost always bring with them the marks of their origin (as another translation says it- they are “reminiscent of their roots.”). Their prejudices include a lack of confidence in the (oppressed) people’s ability to think, to want, and to know. So they run the risk of falling into a type of generosity as harmful as that of the oppressors... Though they truly desire to transform the unjust order, they believe that **they** must be the executors of the transformation. They talk about the people but they do not trust them; and trusting the people is the indispensable precondition for revolutionary change (1970: 46-47).

There were white folks who went south during the civil rights movement to march with and share their money to fund the organizing of black folks. However, as Jamila Kizuwanda (then named Patricia Peery). wrote in the December 1989 issue of *TBC News*, “Sometimes white people had to be reminded, “Hey, we can do that for ourselves! We are in this inferior position **not** because we are inferior! We are inferior because you are standing on our backs! Get out of our way!”

Let me offer a personal example of how this can happen. I am very familiar with the role of the “converted” in the struggle of Deaf people for liberation. For several years, I thought this meant functioning as an “advocate,” one who listens to the concerns of the oppressed group and then advocates/speaks for them in the halls of power.

Let me go back sixteen or seventeen years, My first contacts with the deaf community were as a research linguist. I didn’t know anything about the experiences of Deaf people. Several Deaf, native ASL signers became my teachers and mentors, both teaching me about ASL and about their own experiences. As I became aware of the oppression, I basically responded with “Hey, this is terrible! Don’t those hearing people know what they’re doing?!” (and afterward) “I’m gonna help fix this problem!”

So I wrote lots of books, gave many workshops around the country and taught courses for students, faculty and staff at Gallaudet College.

I became the expert. This, of course, was great for my ego! I was the good guy/gal on the white horse. I was using my power to share needed information and to speak out against injustice. I was doing good- and in many ways, looking back, I still think that was true. Deaf people had asked me to write those books and publicly talk about those topics. They told me, “Those hearing people (teachers, parents, VR counselors, etc.) won’t listen to us, but they’ll listen to you.” So Deaf people were getting a part of their message across by using me.

Sometimes, however, I got into situations where I was asked to speak on topics beyond my knowledge. In fact, I think this happened a lot. People love an expert. I loved being one. Only I’m not an expert on many things. I’m certainly not an expert on many things. I’m certainly not an expert on the feelings, experiences, and the values of Deaf people. I know what Deaf people have told me, but that’s all. And there’s a lot they haven’t told me; there are things I will never really understand.

So I kept feeling this nagging awareness of my own ignorance. Yet, I kept assuming decision-making positions. Yes, I did always insist on working with a Deaf colleague who would show the ASL examples or give the part of the presentation on Deaf culture. Yes I usually was the one who decided what was needed to be presented and in what order- even when the audience was majority Deaf! Hmm, and I vaguely remember some times when my Deaf colleague would suggest an alternate procedure that I was unfamiliar with or didn’t understand. As such I would reject the suggestions. Perhaps these were examples of what Kizuwanda calls “standing on our backs”?! You see, although I would try to get my Deaf colleague to not code-switch, to consistently use ASL, and to stand up for her rights if something oppressive happened... I was still calling the shots, keeping the bulk of the power.

I thought I was helping to free/liberate Deaf people. In retrospect, it’s funny, but in some ways, I was also trying to “control them into freedom!” “If you do this, this, and this, you’ll get there!”

Now I know that no one can liberate or empower another. What we can do is- first, get our foot off our heads, and second, use our power to help open doors, help provide access to certain experiences through which they, Deaf people, can liberate and empower themselves.

To be fair to myself, I should say that I have overdrawn and caricatured my story a bit. But I have done so to make the point that, as Freire cautions us, the converted/we are always “reminiscent of our roots.” We are continually tempted to return to our positions of greater power, greater control- even at the very moment we are trying to do the right thing, the just thing. And if you choose, as I am arguing in this presentations, to recognize the reality of your own power and use it to help equalize power relations, you’ll also need to become very self-conscious- constantly monitoring yourself to see if and when you are overstepping and asserting control. As I have learned, you’ll also need the candid feedback of trusted Deaf friends and colleagues to help you stay on course.

These quotes from Freire are helpful reminders:

- Transformation is only valid if it carried out with the people, not for them (p. 54).
- It is only the oppressed who, by freeing themselves, can free their oppressors (p. 42).

Leaving my personal story and returning to the main task...

As you know, there is an emerging new self awareness and sense of power in the deaf community. Linguistic and socio-cultural research, begun in the 1960's and 1970's, has borne fruit, leading to a new linguistic/cultural awareness on the part of many Deaf people. A few years ago, the Deaf President Now (DPN) movement at Gallaudet broke even more of the chains. Now, some of the Deaf people are beginning to demand their rightful roles as leaders of their own people, as the experts, as the ones who make the decisions about "what's best for Deaf people." (The present tense conflict between NAD and RID over who should be in charge of the evaluation of interpreters is obviously a by-product of this changing socio-political reality.)

This change in roles of Deaf people naturally means a change in roles for hearing people, for us "do-gooders." Instead of being the expert/advocate who takes charge and tells others what needs to change and how, now it is clear that the most empowering role of the hearing person is that of "ally." As Kizuwanda says, "An ally is one who supports the goals of the community and accepts leadership[from that oppressed group (ibid.)." It means candidly acknowledging the limitations of our own knowledge and experience in relation to Deaf people, and also trusting Deaf people to assume decision-making roles.

There are many benefits obtained from this change in the power equation. The most obvious are the advantages to Deaf people. For example, they gain an opportunity to use all the wealth of experiences they have as Deaf people to structure programs that better meet their own needs. (Perhaps Deaf education will finally genuinely become "education!") Very importantly, Deaf people will derive the emotional and psychological benefits of becoming self-determining and begin to shed the terrible disabling legacy of oppression.

There are also very positive benefits to the hearing group, and, clearly, to interpreters. As Deaf people become experts, we gain access to more information, enabling better performance on our part which, of course, leads to greater job satisfaction. Equalization of power also means we don't have to "live and lie" and experience that self-deadening acquiescence to an unjust system. It also means that we become a team member, and ally, working with rather than "over against" Deaf people. We feel better about ourselves and better about Deaf people.

Let me explain this last point. What I have seen over the past years is that many hearing people (interpreters, teachers, whatever) basically deal with the tremendous stress of living close to this unjust system and staying mad at Deaf people. By drawing lines of distance away from Deaf people to help protect themselves from the pain and their own complicity in it. Of

course, that doesn't really work. The reality is that oppression hurts us all and only justice brings healing.

Part III: Power and the “ally” interpreter

As an interpreter, what does it mean, concretely, to assume the role of “ally”? How does this change what we do, in contrast to the more prevalent machine model of interpreting? Remember that the Code of Ethics says that:

Just as interpreters/transliterators may not omit anything that is said, they may not add anything that is not said. They may not add anything to the situation even when they are asked to do so by other parties getting involved... the interpreters/transliterators only functions is to facilitate communication. He/she shall not become personally involved because in so doing, he or she accepts some responsibility for the outcome, which does not rightly belong to interpreter/transliterator. (#3: Guidelines)

Let's examine some examples from interpreters who have been struggling to learn how to function as allies, to use their power to help equalize the power relations between Deaf and hearing people.

First, how did you feel about Ron Coffey's helping Roz Rosen walk up on the stage on Tuesday morning [at the 1991 RID Convention]? Was he “stepping out of role?” Certainly, he was doing more than strictly “facilitating communication.” Remember how Betty Colonomos and Laurie Swabey helped Seleskovitch properly adjust her microphone? Perhaps some of you wondered about that? These are easier examples of moving away from a rigid interpretation of the Code of Ethics.

How about what Ron did during the Tuesday morning walk-through of changes in our convention handbook concerning which motions we were supposed to prioritize?

Ron, what happened while you were functioning as the English-to-ASL interpreter on stage?

Ron Coffey: *The walk-through of the workbook was conducted within a very limited amount of time, rushing through the whole process of trying to get people to insert those pages. I was standing up there internally dealing with what I should do, knowing “this is not working out. This is not being effective.” At that point in time I was on the stage and I was going from English to ASL. Some people would say that's my only role. There were two interpreters who were going from ASL in English. However, their backs were to the audience. And there were responses from, the audience. I made the decision that those responses needed to be vocalized because they were intended to be. It wasn't a private conversation going on that I picked up in the audience, it was, “This process in not working out; we're going too fast. Slow down! We need help here!” I voiced those comments several times. I felt that helped the situation some. I didn't leave the situation feeling as awful as I have in some other situations.*

Risa, you told me about an educational situation involving an slide show. Could you explain what happened and why?

Risa Shaw: *When I think of a slide show, I first think of the nightmare of the logistics. In this situation, however, all of that was taken care of- the lighting was fine, the set up was fine, the people were very cooperative, there wasn't anybody who was saying, "Oh, you have to sit over there," or "You can't have a light because it will bother the light on the screen." None of that. The problem was that there was a narrative (including songs) that continued fairly constantly throughout the slide show. And, of course, Deaf people (anybody) can only see one thing at a time. I knew that I could stand there and sign everything, and I would look great to the hearing people or whoever didn't know anything about interpreting. Yet I was going to leave that situation feeling terrible because I would know that either the Deaf folks got what I was signing and not the slides, or they saw the slides and missed the narrative.*

So what I ended up doing (pre-conference) was talking with the person who was presenting the slide show and talking with Deaf people about different options. What we came up with was to present a shared script to the Deaf people. The presenter and I have gone through what it was she was trying to get across and how the slides and the narrative related to that. She also chunked things for me. Then at the beginning of each portion, I did an interpretation that was full in terms of what the meaning was and abbreviated in terms of what the timing was, and I explained and interpreted what the slides meant according to the text. And then they actually turned the light off and all watched that portion of the slide show, and then they turned the lights back on for the next information chunk.

Risa, Did you feel like you were adhering to the code of Ethics or stretching it or what?

Risa Shaw: *I think I had some of the same feelings that Ron conveyed... There are going to be all these people thinking that I'm leaving things out, that I'm not doing a good job. At the same time, when I looked at what the task was and the definition of what we do, I felt like did a fine job. So, I feel like I was responsibly following the Code of Ethics.*

Some might argue that Risa "added to" or "omitted" something from the situation. In my view, the slide show situation put the Deaf student at a greater disadvantage. Risa used her power to help equalize the power relation, to lessen the disadvantage.

The next example is perhaps more controversial; more of you might argue that, in this situation, the interpreter is clearly not complying with the Code of Ethics.

Sandra, you told me about a situation in which a child was being prepped for surgery. Could you explain what happened?

Sandra Gish: *Preface: As I've gone through this self-analysis, one of the things I hold onto as a yardstick, a guide for my behavior, is trying to think of myself as a French/German*

interpreter.. How would that analogy work in this situation? I think that some of the things that Charlotte has been talking about have to come from an absolute, honest, gut-level belief and trust in consumers, both Deaf and hearing, knowing that nobody needs your “help.” You know there’s a “good help” like stage and microphone... and then there’s that icky-four-letter-word “help.” I honestly believe that neither Deaf nor hearing people need my “help” to do anything, just like French and German people don’t need the “help” of an interpreter to get through life. So I try to use that analogy, imagining I am interpreting between a French and a German culture and the way things are done in Germany and that I would need to bring that knowledge to the interpretation so the French person would understand what’s going on. So with that preface...

*I was in a situation in which I had done a lot of interpreting for a family who had a chronically ill, mentally retarded child. So I knew the Deaf consumers involved very very well. This adolescent was about to go into surgery. Much of the prior interpretation work had to do with all the procedures that some sensitive hospitals do now in terms of getting children and patients with special needs ready for surgery and practicing with anesthesia mask; they do some fun things and they show pictures and this sort of thing... we did all this. Then a nurse came and brought us into another room- the mother, the adolescent, a doctor, and myself. I was interpreting between the mother and the doctor; the doctor was explaining the procedure in which they would take the adolescent in for the anesthesia. Interestingly, the doctor started to use all of this passive voice. Now you know the purpose of passive voice in English is to obscure true meaning. (It is no coincidence that something like seventy percent of our newspaper is written in passive voice!) And the doctor was saying things like “The patient **will be taken** to another room.” “Anesthesia **will be administered.**” It was very obscure.*

*Now I have considerable knowledge about this hospital and about medical procedures that I was bringing to the situation. And I felt like I needed to get at the **meaning**- not the words, but the meaning. As a part of my interpretation, I turned to the woman and said, “I don’t know what’s going on here; this is obscure. But parents often go in with their children for the anesthesia.” and the Deaf mother right away indicated she “got it” with a nod. The doctor continued talking. At a pause, the mother said, “I would like to go with my son in for the anesthesia,” which she did.*

*How did I feel about it? At the time, I got those interpreter feelings that we all have: “This is right.” “This is wrong.” My gut was telling me this is **right**. I have information about how the system works that belongs in this interpretation because it has to do with meaning. This is **wrong** because for the past fifteen years people have been telling me what I did was not right. In retrospect I feel very okay with the situation. In fact, afterwards I discussed the whole thing with the mother. (I am also real supportive of talking with Deaf people about our conflicts and what’s going on.) She helped me feel very okay about my decision.*

Question from audience: Was any feedback given to the physician? For his further

information?

Sandra Gish: *Like everyone else, I'm very confused about the education role. I did not say to the physician, "I found you to be obscure." In fact, my immediate attention was focused on going in with the mother and her son for the next procedure, and then that physician was gone. I don't know. I was gaining meaning from this person. I don't know that I needed to talk with him. And that certainly is open for discussion.*

Questions from the audience: What if you hadn't had that knowledge about medical procedures? What if all you knew was that you couldn't take general obscurity and put it into sign language? Would you have then said, "I don't understand what you mean by taking the patient"? You know how that often happens in English; English is very general, very obscure.

Sandra Gish: *I really appreciated the other night when Seleskovitch said that the sign of a good interpreter is to stop and ask questions. If I ever feel that I don't have an understanding of meaning, I always stop and ask so that I get meaning and then I can interpret. I think an interesting part of your question is what if I didn't have that knowledge. Well, if I didn't have that knowledge, then I couldn't have operated in the same way. On the other side of that, for many years we've been pretending we don't have knowledge and we've been denying the knowledge that we have. This other side of the question has somehow troubled me more. And please understand, I'm still going through this process myself. It's not like I have the answer to this; this is just where my thoughts lie today.*

Ron Coffey: *I agree that we've been denying the fact that we have knowledge. We're finally beginning to recognize that we do have that knowledge and now are wondering what do we do with it. Are we sharing it with Deaf people? There's something important here about reciprocity within the community. And I don't think we've been doing that enough. Also, what Sandra said about the idea of helping and imagining ourselves in a French/German context I think we need to eternally explore how we really think about Deaf people. What we say may not really be what we're showing through examples. It is not to say, "Throw out the whole Code of Ethics." That is not our point at all. It is important to have a code, and there are a lot of good things in this code, but it needs maturing. It needs to reflect the kinds of awareness that we were just talking about here.*

Now let's try to analyze what are some strategies that ally interpreters can use to help equalize power in interpreting situations? We have had some initial conversations about this and can share some ideas, but this is really new turf. This is a question that deserves careful attention and study.

Strategies for equalizing power in context of interpreting

Chuck, you mentioned a few strategies you use in the beginning of each situation. What are those?

Chuck Snyder: *These are very basic and simple ones. First when you walk into a room and there's a Deaf consumer and a hearing consumer, address the deaf consumer first. Second, when we have questions about logistics such as where everyone is going to sit, we often tend to work that out with the hearing person or just decide that ourselves. Instead, ask the Deaf person to make the decisions about the logistical situation.*

- Acknowledge Deaf person first
- Ask logistics questions to Deaf person(s)

Sandra Gish: *It's also important to realize the power that very subtle body movements have. Consider whether you are standing nearer to the hearing person and making this two-on-one visual situation. Or are you standing nearer to the Deaf person? Which way is your body turned? Are you facing straight on to the hearing person so it looks as though you're interacting with the hearing person? Or are you shifting so that there is a slight physical barrier between you and the hearing person, and you're therefore throwing focus to the Deaf speaker? Do you defer in that direction, even crossing your legs in that direction? People are very sensitive to these kinds of things. We also need to make sure that it's clear that the interaction is between **those** two people, and it's the Deaf person who's being heard when the voice is coming out, not me.*

Charlotte mentioned that we have the power to determine who will speak first. One of the issues that comes up is interruptions. What we have historically done in our "converted" attempt to recognize a Deaf person who wants to speak is, the moment that the Deaf person's hand is raised, we blurt out something like "Excuse me!" The hearing people, who are working under their own norms, are usually shocked when this happens. Interpreters are supposed to know the conversational regulators and culturally appropriate moments in both cultures concerning when and how to interrupt. We can empower or allow empowerment to happen if, when a Deaf person indicates that they have something to say, negotiate that, agreeing that in the appropriate moment, whether it is to purposefully interrupt or to take a turn at the next pause, that you will do that. In fact, I have negotiated with clients to the point that they just very quickly sign to me, "I want to say something." And they know that in the next appropriate moment, I will vocally take the floor.

I'm also trying to do more and more meeting with Deaf consumers before interpreted interactions. Again, this relates to power. All these years, we have felt fine about talking to hearing people, about lighting, seating, all that stuff, but we haven't been talking to Deaf people about what's going down. I've been trying to do a lot more meeting with Deaf people beforehand to negotiate some of these things so that when the meeting starts, the Deaf person and I have equal information, and the Deaf person and the hearing participants have equal information. I also try to meet with Deaf and hearing consumers at the same time beforehand. At these meetings, I will often ask clarifying questions to the hearing person- which is really sharing my knowledge and information with the Deaf person. I find that particularly helpful for Deaf people who have not been asked to take their power, really have the foot on the neck and

may not be aware of the fact that we are attempting to become allies and behave in that way. So I may say to the hearing person, “Now, it is my understanding that there will be six people at this meeting and I understand that four of them are hearing and two are Deaf. I understand that the moderator will have the agenda...” And what I’m doing is actually sharing information all the way around and playing by borderline rules in order to do it. Its just another of many, many strategies.

- Stand/sit in body position that gives power to Deaf person(s).
- Use culturally appropriate turn-taking behaviors (e.g. ways to interrupt).
- Share prior knowledge you have about how the system works (the context and expectations about what will happen).

Perhaps many of you have also been trying to adapt your own behavior in response to your gut sense of what’s right, to try to do what we’re calling “equalize power relations,” although you probably have not been consciously using that term. Are there other strategies that you’ve been using to try to encourage that change in power?

From audience: Another way you can equalize power is to bring a relay interpreter. Often there’s one Deaf person and two hearing people (one of whom is the interpreter), and we Deaf people feel oppressed by that. If there is a relay interpreter, then it’s two n two, and we feel a little more equality.

- Use relay interpreters, thus adding another Deaf person to the interaction

From audience: I had this conversation with a Deaf person and what they told me was to dress appropriately for the situation. For example, if the interpreter comes in with fancy, business-like attire, and the Deaf person is a student in jeans or whatever they feel inferior.

- Dress in relation to Deaf person’s comfort level.

From audience: Often times as interpreters we feel pressured in terms of the place of communication and feel we need to hurry, hurry, hurry, which subtly communicates, “I don’t have time for you to get comfortable; I don’t have time for you to really understand what’s going on; we have to get done with this.” If we can keep our own internal clock or thermostat to have a more relaxed pace, then that’s going to send the message that, at least for the interpreter, communication is more important than getting finished.

- Use a comfortable, relaxed pace.

From audience: I think that historically we’ve addressed the hearing consumer’s needs because we share the same culture, and they often direct lots of questions to the interpreter, like “Where did you learn sign language?” and “How did you become an interpreter?” etc. Some interpreters even use the time during the doctor’s appointment to talk about themselves. However, there is a lot of cultural information that the Deaf person themselves can answer. I think that one strategy for the equalization of power includes a lot of redirected of those hearing

questions to the Deaf person (instead of usurping the Deaf person's power). Deaf people are very capable of answering a lot of that, but often the opportunity is not provided.

- Redirect questions to the Deaf person (instead of answered by the interpreter).

From audience: Interpreters often want to talk to other interpreters about a recent situation- how to improve what they did and so on. I think they need to include the Deaf person in that kind of post-session. The Deaf person may have more knowledge and information to share with the interpreter. And then the more the interpreters know, the more power they can bring to the Deaf person as well.

From audience: Adding to what KJ just said- KJ was talking about giving feedback during a post-session evaluation. Pre-session dialogue is important too. In my experience, often the Deaf person is there but can't find the interpreter, so they just let someone know they're around. It feels like it's a time clock situation for the interpreter who shows up only when needed and then takes off. So there's no prep time; there's no negotiation of style of language communication, any of that. The interpreters seem to look like it's just a job and the Deaf person is just client: but the pre-session time is essential, too.

- Solicit feedback from Deaf person in post-session review as well as pre-session guidance.

From audience: Thinking about power and how the interpreter has a lot of control in a situation, we also need to remember that most of us are not native users of ASL. I think we often have the opportunity to shape how we will work. Instead of doing simultaneous interpreting, we can often do consecutive- which makes us able to do a better job. The hearing people usually have no idea how interpretation works anyway, and they easily accept the consecutive format.

- Use consecutive interpreting (instead of simultaneous) when available, enabling better performance.

(The audience had more strategies to suggest, but time ran out.)

To be very honest, for most of us, this is breaking new ground and feels very risky (though life-giving!). There are no pat answers about how to proceed. Frankly, the ally role quickly gets very messy because:

- Not all Deaf people are in the same place in history, in terms of their own experience of empowerment. Different Deaf people want and need different things. Some still assume very dependent roles; some are very autonomous; many are in the middle. The way you handle one situation may be different from the way you handle the same situation with a different Deaf person.
- There is no longer a clear definition of when the interpreter is stepping too far over the line. Where is the line now? Many interpreters will experience this as a loss of

security, when the “standard” becomes internal instead of external (like a “code” or IPP course rules).

- There are also obvious risks in behaving differently. Colleagues will judge your actions and may not be aware of all the factors influencing your decisions in a given situation.
- Do present-day interpreters have the maturity and understanding to do this kind of ethical, decision-making well?? Of course not! Where could we have learned this? What we've been learning is to ignore that there's even a problem! We need to start teaching/facilitating the development of this kind of ethical, decision-making “skill.”

Some of you may be secretly mentally screaming, “But this is not ‘interpreting’; this is ‘activism’!” Again, my view is that there simply isn't a neutral position in an unjust system. That is the false **American** myth. You are part of the problem, or part of the solution. If you choose to “opt out,” not act, then you help perpetuate the injustice; you are part of the problem. By doing nothing, you do something.

And frankly, My gut tells me that this is what lies behind Marie Philip and other Deaf speakers' criticism of our “professionalism.” We have been trying to distance ourselves from the pain of the prevalent unjust system under the guise of professionalism. We have been trying to keep ourselves from getting “soiled.”

I agree we need to rid ourselves of paternalism and our egoism. We also need to use our power in constructive ways, in ways that recognize the reality of injustice and work to truly achieve that “equality of access” we talk about in our, RID's, budding goal statement.

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