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Relational Autonomy and Decision Latitude of ASL-English Interpreters: Implications for Interpreter Education

Anna Witter-Merithew, Leilani Johnson
DO IT Center/MARIE Center
University of Northern Colorado

Brenda Nicodemus
Laboratory for Language and Cognitive Neuroscience
San Diego State University

Abstract

Relational autonomy is a paradigm with implications for interpreter educators to guide the decision-making of student-interpreters. In this paper, we assert that developing awareness of the various manifestations of autonomous decision-making can impact the way novice interpreters view and analyze their professional decisions. This paper introduces a conceptual framework for relational autonomy and provides an associated set of curricular considerations.

Introduction to Relational Autonomy

Professional maturity involves the ability to work autonomously and collaboratively within a well-defined framework of ethical standards. *Professional autonomy* is a condition that results from a deep conceptualization of the professional acts and practices of practitioners and the agreement of a profession's members to behave and act in a manner that is similar to each other (Kasher, 2005). However, adhering to such a paradigm has proved challenging in the field of ASL-English interpreting. At present, many interpreters equate professional autonomy as with the freedom to behave as a 'free agent', making decisions without consideration of the systems and people in the environment. Interpreter autonomy is in reality *relational* as a result of the inherent social structures upon which it depends for its existence, including a unique bond to the Deaf Community, patterns of practice evolving out of collective work experiences, legislative mandates that create the demand for and requirement to provide interpreting services, and the systems that generate payment for interpreting services. This concept, known as *relational autonomy*, is an authentic response to the power imbalances and importance of the relationships

that exist within professional interactions (Lee, 2007; Sandstrom, 2007; Seago, 2006; MacDonald, 2002).

When professional maturity is viewed through the lens of relational autonomy there is recognition that

...autonomy is socially constructed; that is, the capacity and opportunity for autonomous action is dependent upon our particular social relationships and power structures in which professional practice is embedded. It requires that one's professional relationships with particular individuals and institutions be constituted in such a way as to give one genuine opportunities for informed and transparent decision-making (MacDonald, 2002, 197).

In this view, effective autonomy is achieved when the social conditions that support it are in place and give the practitioner—and consumers—the confidence to take charge of choices. This perspective of autonomy is consistent with a schema of work analysis that examines the demands that are present in an interpreted event and the controls that can be employed by an interpreter as part of their decision latitude (Dean and Pollard, 2004; 2006). Such a schema includes more than just linguistic and cultural considerations—it also addresses system-based considerations such as environment, as well as interpersonal and intrapersonal factors.

Decision Latitude and Relational Autonomy

Appreciating relational autonomy requires an understanding of the conditions that foster informed and transparent decision-making by interpreters and the other individuals involved in the communication interaction—as well as those conditions that restrict it. In this respect, relational autonomy has both *internal* elements (i.e., how the interpreter perceives his/her role and work; how the participants views themselves), and *external* elements (i.e., how the work of interpreters is perceived by others; how each participant is perceived by others).

As an illustration of an external element, interpreters in court proceedings are perceived as officers of the court and therefore have a great deal of decision latitude in working within the system, as well as the accompanying duty to serve the interests of the court. Interpreters can request to approach the bench to discuss issues impacting the interpretation, request correction to

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the court record, seek assistance of other practitioners and/or experts, and perform a variety of other practices that constitute the unique patterns of practice of legal interpreters. The court considers these practitioners experts and expects them to possess a thorough knowledge of the legal system, legal procedure, legal terminology, standards of practice, and a high degree of competence and reliability in their interpreting performance. Further, the court expects interpreters to report any barriers to effective performance or consumer understanding, and to collaborate with judiciary officials in resolving issues that may arise. These expectations and procedures create the social conditions that support the internal elements associated with a practitioner's application of decision latitude and represent an example of effective relational autonomy.

These same social conditions do not exist in all settings in which signed language interpreters perform service. Take for example providing interpreting in the Video Relay Services (VRS) industry. VRS is a video telecommunication service that allows Deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals to communicate with hearing people via a signed language interpreter using video telephones in real-time. This service is heavily regulated by both the U.S. Federal Communications Commission and company policies. Interpreters are expected to maintain a high level of call volume and to connect callers with limited or no inquiry as to the nature or purpose of the call, or to introduce the premise of an interpreted call to those unfamiliar with the service or interpreted interactions. These conditions restrict the decision latitude of interpreters and can leave practitioners deeply conflicted as they work outside of traditional professional norms. We argue that this variation in professional standing and the degree of freedom to exercise decision latitude has significant implications for the work of interpreters, how they are trained, and their readiness to function autonomously (Witter-Merithew & Johnson, 2004; Dean & Pollard, 2004; 2006; Brunson, 2008).

It is important to emphasize the difference between functional autonomy (the work) and relational autonomy (decision latitude within the context of professional relationships). In an interpreter-centric approach, the interpreter is at the center of the interaction and acts and behaves according to individual needs. This is reflective of *functional autonomy* where the work is central in the mind of the interpreter. Conversely, in a system-centric approach, the interpreter recognizes the importance of the expectations of the system and achieving the goals of the participants within

that system. This is achieved by having the ability to understand and appreciate the interaction from the world-view of the participants engaged in the system and to apply decision latitude accordingly. This is reflective of *relational autonomy* where the work is seen as a collaborative process between all the individuals within the communication event.

Professional Interactions: High Autonomy versus Low Autonomy Characteristics

How does the manner in which a practitioner expresses their autonomy contribute to the development of professional relationships and autonomy? To address this we consider the concept of Low Autonomous Professions (LAP) and High Autonomous Professions (HAP) characterized by Schleppegrell (2004). In this paradigm, LAP behaviors within a professional interaction are characterized by a sense of powerlessness, navigating based on self (i.e., what is my goal in this interaction?), and an inability to understand why and how things are happening (i.e., can only recognize what is happening from an interpreter-centric view). In contrast, HAP behaviors within an interaction are characterized by recognizing what is occurring on multiple levels—what, why, and how—and asserting the power to make appropriate decisions that will benefit the interaction (i.e., considering the goals of the participants using a system-centric view).

Several authors have discussed the consequences associated with LAP behaviors evidenced in the work of ASL-English interpreters (Kanda, 1988; Witter-Merithew, 1996; Cokely, 2000; Dean & Pollard, 2004; 2006; Stewart & Witter-Merithew, 2006). Although there are unquestionably individual interpreters who function with HAP behaviors, particularly in settings where the system-based professionals are members of High Autonomous Professions (e.g., lawyers, doctors, therapists), we assert that the demonstration of HAP behaviors is not the norm among interpreters. This is particularly evident when practitioners work within systems where the system-based professionals have LAP status (e.g., public school teachers).

The interplay between the standing of the system-based professionals with whom interpreters work, and the standing of interpreters in society-at-large, creates a unique condition for how interpreter autonomy is expressed. The lack of academic standards and requirements for ASL-English interpreters entering the profession prior to 2008 further contribute to LAP. Generally, the broader base of literature about professions indicates that specialists are expected to apply

HAP actions and behaviors, thus demonstrating high degrees of relational autonomy (Lee, 2007; Seago, 2006; Kasher, 2005).

The degree of autonomy exercised by the other participants involved in an interpreted interaction can further contribute to the decision latitude of interpreters. This is a key contribution to the social conditions under which the interpreter works and makes decisions. Westlund (2009) emphasizes that to be autonomous, “a person must have a significant range of viable options and retain authority over her social circumstances” (p. 29)—a condition that is elusive for many Deaf people. For example, a Deaf person with linguistic, social, academic, and/or cognitive deficits is likely to exercise low autonomy, while the professional providing service to the Deaf person (e.g., doctor, therapist, social worker) may exercise a high level of autonomy. This may result in the interpreter feeling compelled to assert a greater degree of involvement in the interaction to balance the power differential.

Ideally, the more balanced the autonomy expressed by participants, the more likely the interpreter is to exercise conservative choices in her decision latitude. Conversely, the less balanced the autonomy expressed by participants, particularly by Deaf consumers, the more likely the interpreter is to exercise liberal choices in her decision latitude. In order for an interpreter to effectively monitor and apply decision latitude, she too must have a significant range of viable options and be able to retain authority over her work. When the range of viable options diminishes due to insufficient training, lack of experience, or reduced authority over one’s work as a result of system-bound barriers, the quality of decision latitude suffers. Further, if the interpreter doesn’t possess a sufficient degree of personal autonomy, she will fail to act ethically in the face of professional demands that require application of HAP behaviors.

The practice of relational autonomy requires a high degree of professional maturity that develops over time under the guidance and supervision of master practitioners (Lee, 2007; Seago, 2006; MacDonald, 2002; Cheetham and Chivers, 2001). And, herein lies a key point—*if our factual understanding of the preconditions for autonomous action is flawed, so will be our ethical reaction to that autonomy* (MacDonald, 2002 emphasis added). Relational autonomy assumes the decision-making of professionals is in accordance with professional standards of practice. One of

the preconditions is professional maturity—which can only be forged over time and through supervised practice that fosters the development of discretion. Without this maturity, practitioners can fall into a state of default autonomy where they become isolated, make uninformed decisions, experience low job satisfaction and burnout, and cause harm. Or they may demonstrate antagonistic autonomy where a pattern of resistance and hostility in behavior and decision-making inhibits or reduces effective collaboration with others (Dean and Pollard, 2001, 2004; Witter-Merithew & Johnson, 2004). Until the field of interpreter education can create the appropriate pre-conditions that support autonomous practice—such as graduate outcomes that include mastery of entry-to-practice competencies (Witter-Merithew & Johnson, 2005) and a system of supervised induction—it is unlikely newly entering practitioners will achieve a consistent standard of ethical practice.

Further, interpreters who are unable to foster and sustain the preconditions necessary for autonomous action—such as adopting a system-centric versus an interpreter-centric view of their work—will not be successful in forging the collaborative relationships needed with other participants in the interaction. As a result, they may quickly find themselves operating outside the boundaries of ethical standards. This is particularly true in high-risk settings when the work of interpreters is held to a higher standard of scrutiny and/or liability.

Curricular Assumptions that Foster HAP Behaviors and Relational Autonomy

Through the lens of relational autonomy, professional actions and behaviors, and the resulting patterns of practice, may be more fully understood and considered in defining curricular assumptions that impact the ability of educational programs to design and develop curricula that sufficiently prepares graduates for the workplace. Entering practitioners should possess the ability to function within a framework of relational autonomy, with an appreciation of a system-centric view of their work, and demonstrate professional maturity typically associated with HAP behaviors. To this end, the following curricular assumptions are offered.

- *Interpreting is a practice profession.* This term acknowledges that profession-based traditions and practices inform how interpreting work is performed. Practice and tradition

are linked to schools of thought or theories and are drawn from the scholarship of a field (Ayling & Constanzo, 1994). More specifically, professional practices are ways of structuring and organizing the things one must do as part of the work, or ways in which something is done as part of professional practice.

- *In practice professions, ways of doing things are conceived by practitioners over time through a process of application of theory drawn from the profession's scholarship. As more scholarship and research emerge, practices evolve, improve, and change (Chong, et. al, 2000). This is how practices move from standard, to best and ultimately to defined effective practices.*
- *When a practice profession approach is applied to the teaching and learning of practice-based competencies, it results in practice-based learning. Practice-based learning involves understanding that arises out of, or is focused on, working practice in a chosen profession. Such learning would include courses and learning activities linked to formal work placements—those which require the application of academic ideas in an authentic work setting and which build on experience gained in a work setting (Nicolini, Gherardi & Yanow, 2003; Fabb & Marshall, 1994; Fleming, 1993).*
- *Functioning as a practice professional requires a high level of critical thinking and the ability to effectively collaborate with others. Critical thinking and opportunities for transparent and collaborated decision-making must be infused in the scope and sequence of interpreter education.*
- *Functioning as a practice professional requires the application of High Autonomy Profession behaviors. The behaviors are characterized by recognizing what is occurring on multiple levels—what, why and how—and the power to make appropriate decisions that will benefit the interaction (i.e., considering the goals of the participants using a system-centric view). Achieving this level of higher order thinking involves critical thinking, reflection and other elements of meta-cognition.*

- *Functioning as a practice professional requires the ability to function within a system-centric view of the work.* A system-centric view of interpreting centers on an understanding of the social conditions—including the professional relationships forged with consumers—that will foster informed and transparent decision-making by interpreters (as well as those conditions which restrict it) and the capacity to adapt decision latitude accordingly.
- *The Demand Control Schema (DC-S) is a particularly useful tool in engaging practitioners in actively exploring the complexities of the work through a variety of lenses—including the thought-worlds of participants in the communication event.* The schema provides a framework for critical reasoning and decision-making, through the use of reflective and analytical approaches to practice. The DC-S also heightens meta-consciousness—guiding student-interpreters toward conscious awareness of the unconscious or sub-conscious abilities that influence their work. This meta-consciousness fosters adaptation and augmentation of interpreting performance (Fleming, 1993; Leung, 2002).
- *Reflection is about maximizing deep approaches to learning and minimizing surface ones* (Fleming, 1993). Reflection is the primary way of getting students to realize that learning is about drawing on life experiences, not just something that takes place in a classroom. It enables students to think about *what* and *how* they learn and to understand that this impacts how well they do in their field of study (Leung, 2002).
- *The entry-to-practice competencies form the graduate outcomes that should be achieved from an interpreter education program* (Witter-Merithew & Johnson, 2005). Five domains and 34 competencies have been defined by a broad base of experts and stakeholders as the requisite foundation for competent generalist practice. Further, these competencies are recognized as the fundamentals that graduates need to be both work and certification-ready.

Curricular Elements that Promote Acquisition of HAP Behaviors

Sergiovanni (2001) emphasizes that professionals need to create “knowledge in use” as they practice—trying to follow established scripts doesn’t promote the breadth and depth of discretion needed to be an effective and autonomous practitioner within a practice profession. This perspective effectively captures the essence of relational autonomy by encouraging a systems-based approach to informed, critical, and reflective decision-making as a mechanism for ongoing self-assessment and growth. However, student capacity for applying decision latitude effectively involves a range of skills—including ‘finding voice’, critical thinking, collaboration, and problem-solving. What follows are a selection of curricular elements that support the development of these skills and can lead to the development of HAP behaviors while fostering a deeper appreciation of relational autonomy.

- *Case Study Analysis.* The purpose of using case study analysis is to gain a deeper understanding of the specific issues and problems related to interpreting. According to Nieto (1992), effective case studies are characterized as *particularistic* (focusing on one person or social unit), *descriptive* (offering a rich description of context and factors impacting events), *heuristic* (illuminating understanding and facilitates the discovery of new meanings, and *inductive* (fostering generalizations and hypotheses from an examination of the data). These criteria make it evident that simple one or two line statements about a scenario are not sufficient to create dynamic exploration of issues or the development of discernment.

If the cases represent actual or real-world situations interpreters confront, then each case increases a student’s understanding of the issues, factors, and range of controls and solutions that impact day-to-day work of practitioners. To this end, students should be encouraged to harvest cases through discussion with working practitioners. Practicing interview techniques that support their ability to ask insightful questions when talking with practitioners will help students garner the quality of information necessary to gain the greatest benefit from these case studies. This approach has the added benefit of offering a springboard into fostering basic research skills in students.

Another source of case studies is a commercially available workbook, *The Dimensions of Ethical Decision-Making: a Guided Exploration for Interpreters* (Stewart & Witter-Merithew, 2006). This workbook contains 37 case studies that include general dilemmas facing society, cultural dilemmas that interpreters and consumers typically confront, and ethical dilemmas faced by practitioners. All case studies are developed in accordance with the criteria discussed by Nieto (1992) that are addressed above. As well, in several instances, case studies are examined in detail and possible decisions offered and assessed. The workbook uses a scaffolding approach to increase the complexity of case analysis, reducing the amount of guided support offered so that students incrementally develop the analytical skills necessary to think more critically.

Case study analysis fits well into many courses—particularly those that are focused on ethical decision-making and theory and practice of interpreting. They also fit well into classes that focus on specific settings or working with specific populations where students are examining the patterns of practice and the application of decision-making to specific interpreting contexts. The key is that cases are based in the real experiences of working practitioners and are sufficiently complex as to require deep thinking about issues, options and implications for practice.

- *Observation-Supervision.* The concepts of case conferencing and observation-supervision have been previously introduced in our field (Dean, Pollard & English, 2004; Knight & Wilford, 2005) and play an important role in fostering reflective practice and critical thinking and analysis. For the purpose of this article, these functions, among others, are grouped under the curricular element of observation-supervision, which is defined as the systematic monitoring and evaluation of student/novice performance in the actual world of work by a master practitioner and/or teacher. As well, it is envisioned as an element that extends beyond the program and is part of the entry-to-practice transitioning into part of the induction process.

The supervisory function can occur in different formats (e.g., individual, triadic, group, or team supervision) and with different supervisors (e.g., faculty, site, or peer supervisors).

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Across formats and supervisors, supervision is accomplished using one or more methods to access the content and process of interpreting. Among the most common methods are student self-report (e.g., verbal exchanges, written notes, and case presentations), observation (live or videotaped), team interpreting, role-playing and modeling. These strategies are common to the pedagogy of interpreting. It is their systematic incorporation as part of a comprehensive induction strategy that differs.

Ideally, supervised induction extends beyond program boundaries and provides for effective entry-into-practice for a minimum period of one year—possibly longer depending on the needs of the student. Supervised induction into the field of interpreting is based on the following four assumptions about interpreting.

1. Interpreting is a complex activity requiring decisions that need careful analysis.
2. Development of discretion needed for autonomous practice requires a period of supervised induction that typically extends beyond what transpires within an interpreter preparation program.
3. Interpreters are responsible and competent professionals who wish to improve if support is offered in a collegial way.
4. The purpose of supervised induction is to assist interpreters in deepening their understanding of patterns of practice associated with interpreting and the pre-conditions necessary for effective and transparent decision-making.

Supervised induction should be approached as a deliberate and thoughtful element of the instructional process and entry-into-practice in that it:

- Is goal-oriented.
- Assumes a long-term collaborative working relationship between teacher(s), students, and practicing peers.
- Requires a high degree of mutual trust, as reflected in understanding, support, and commitment to growth.
- Is systematic, although it requires a flexible and continuously changing methodology—particularly when it is no longer grade-based as is the case while students are enrolled in college coursework.

- Assumes the individual providing supervision and students/entering practitioners share a common framework for the analysis of the interpreting process, learning, and productive human interaction. The latter is essential to understanding the importance of collaboration for relational autonomy.

Infusion of supervised induction into curriculum and transition plans can be achieved through multiple strategies, including: a) the observation of professionals at work without the inclusion of interpreters, b) the observation of interpreters in action, c) supervision discussions about the observations, d) application of observation during field work with supervision discussions with peers and supervisors, e) the inclusion of observation-supervision principles in all skills and theory classes, and f) post-graduation supervision as part of a community of practice. The key is that all strategies are employed as part of a whole system of induction and there is collaboration with all stakeholders to create a sustainable infra-structure to support it.

- *Conflict-Resolution Activities.* Conflicts have considerable value when they are managed constructively (Deutsch, 1973; Johnson & Johnson, 1994; Johnson & Johnson, 1995a). Desirable outcomes of constructively managed conflict include:
 - greater quantity and quality of achievement, complex reasoning, and creative problem solving;
 - higher quality decision-making;
 - healthier cognitive, social, and psychological development by being better able to deal with stress and cope with unforeseen adversities;
 - increased motivation and energy to take action;
 - higher quality relationships with colleagues and co-workers (this can extend to work with consumers of interpreting services);
 - a greater sense of caring, commitment, joint identity, and cohesiveness with an emphasis on increased liking, respect, and trust;
 - heightened awareness that a problem exists that needs to be solved; and
 - increased incentive to change.

There are three particular strategies that can be employed to teach conflict resolution—each of which is very valuable for creating an appreciation of relational autonomy. Teachers can a) create a cooperative context, b) use academic controversy in the classroom, and c) teach students to be peacemakers. The constructive resolution of conflict requires those involved to recognize that the long-term relationship is more important than the result of any short-term conflict. In order for the long-term mutual interest to be recognized and valued, individuals have to perceive their interdependence and be invested in each other's well-being (Johnson, Johnson & Holubec, 1993). Use of cooperative learning procedures both in the classroom and for assignments creates the cooperative context needed to learn the social interactions skills that contribute to resolving conflicts. This is an important skill for interpreters to master as part of the human relation skills necessary for effectiveness as a practitioner.

Further, Johnson & Johnson (1995c) discuss the use of academic controversy in the classroom. The procedure involves members of a cooperative group researching and preparing different positions, making a persuasive presentation of their researched position, refuting the opposing position while rebutting attacks on their own position, viewing the issue from a variety of perspectives, and synthesizing the opposing positions into one mutually agreed upon position. Doing this exercise maximizes perspective and complex reasoning—both of which are central to a systems-based orientation to interpreting. Performing the activity of academic controversy regularly allows students to practice conflict resolution skills daily.

Another activity described by Johnson and Johnson (1995b) is that of teaching students to be peacemakers. Through learning how to negotiate and mediate students gain experience in resolving interpersonal conflicts constructively and provides tools for regulating one's own behavior. In learning to negotiate, students must be able to communicate honestly what they want and how they feel, explain interests as well as positions, take the opposing perspective, create a number of possible agreements that maximize joint outcomes and work together to reach agreements on one of the options. This approach provides an excellent way to expand the range of controls available to a student, and these controls can quickly be expanded to application during interpreting.

Another specific activity is practicing mediation. In this learning activity, students create a mediation program—one that models the RID’s Ethical Standards System mediation process to the greatest degree possible. Students rotate leadership roles and guide discussions about actual ethical dilemmas that surface among all students during practicum and internship events. These activities allow students to become familiar with the ethical standards which exist for the field of interpreting, the nuances involved in applying the standards to the daily work of interpreters, the criteria that is used for assessing the effectiveness in application of the standards (e.g., the NIC interview rubric and the NAD-RID Code of Professional Conduct guidelines), and the range of decisions that fall within ethical practice, including exploration of where decisions fall along a liberal to conservative continuum. Such processes also help to identify when decisions are not within the scope of professional practice and are therefore not acceptable, which forges discretion.

Conclusion

Relational autonomy is a paradigm with crucial implications for guiding the decision-making of interpreters. Activities associated with curricular assumptions foster the ability of programs to help students more deeply conceptualize the professional acts and practices associated with interpreting and to more effectively behave in a manner that is consistent with ethical standards of practice. Further the activities serve to forge reliable discretion, recognize the interdependence of individuals involved in an interpreted interaction, and promote high degrees of collaboration. In turn, these behaviors foster the social conditions that favor effective decision latitude of practitioners. These curricular standards center on the view of interpreting as a practice profession in which educators should promote a system-centric view of the work. This will require a shift from the prevailing interpreter-centric view of our work. This shift can be facilitated by the use of teaching practices that promote problem solving, reflection, expansion of world-view, encourage appreciation of differing perspectives, foster identification of issues, and increase the range of viable controls. Effective application of these teaching practices will contribute to the ability of practitioners to sustain their decision latitude through competent professional autonomy.

About the Authors

Anna Witter-Merithew, M.Ed., is the Assistant Director for the UNC-DO IT Center. She is responsible for the instructional programs, including a baccalaureate degree program in ASL-English Interpretation and several specialty certificate programs. She serves as a member of the National Consortium of Interpreter Education Center's Effective Practices Team and is the Team Leader for the Legal Interpreting Workgroup. Anna earned a Master's degree in Education from Athabasca University with emphasis in instructional design and distance learning. She holds various certificates awarded by the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf. Anna served as the lead for the MARIE project on specialization.

Leilani Johnson, Ed.D., is the director of the Distance Opportunities for Interpreter Training Center at the University of Northern Colorado. The Center administers an ASL-English Interpretation bachelor's degree program and several professional certificate programs that are delivered via distance technologies to interpreting students throughout the United States. Leilani has solicited and managed more than \$12M from federal grants and partnership contracts since establishing the Center's work in 1993. Leilani has a master's degree in adult education, emphasis in teaching ASL-English Interpretation, and a doctorate in Instructional Technology and Distance Education. She has held RID certification since 1983.

Brenda Nicodemus, Ph.D., is a Research Scientist at the Laboratory for Language and Cognitive Neuroscience at San Diego State University where she investigates the linguistic and cognitive processes of signed language interpreters. She has worked professionally as an interpreter since 1989 and holds the CI, CT, NIC-A certifications from the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf and holds a doctorate in Educational Linguistics from the University of New Mexico. Brenda has taught interpreting and linguistics at various postsecondary institutions. Her publications include *Prosodic Markers and Utterance Boundaries in American Sign Language Interpreting* (Gallaudet University Press, 2009).

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