

Relay Interpreting in the '90's

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We have both been involved in relay interpreting for many years, learning from our own mistakes, successes and observations. Tonight we would like to share some of our thoughts with you. We hope that as a group we can develop prototypes of interpreting in relay situations and of educating relay interpreters.

Historical Aspects

In order to understand our current position and clarify future direction, we have taken a look at the history of relay interpreting. We have consulted with a number of Deaf people, and have come to realize that Deaf people as interpreters is not a new concept. For instance, adult Deaf people recall teachers who would stand in front of a classroom, signing (or using speech only) in ways that some students couldn't understand. The Deaf students would interpret the material into ASL for their classmates. This is an example of delayed consecutive interpretation—an inadequate signer cannot be understood in the classroom; a bilingual Deaf person relays the information into ASL in the dorm. Deaf bilinguals were also used as translators, interpreting written English into ASL. Often Deaf leaders assumed these responsibilities within the community.

This puts interpreting within the Deaf community into an historical context. In 1972, the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf formally recognized D/deaf interpreters by establishing the Reverse

Skills Certificate (RSC). A number of RSC's were issued to D/deaf people, giving them authority to act as "reverse interpreters." Unfortunately the certificate was seldom used for that purpose. It was primarily used to allow D/deaf people to sit on evaluation teams. At that time, most of the RSC's were hard-of-hearing people who used English as their preferred way of communicating, and typically, they were not really involved in the Deaf community. Training was offered to hearing interpreters, but there were few workshops or classes for Deaf people to learn about the process of, what was then called, "reverse interpreting." The only training available, if at all, focused on how to evaluate interpreters.

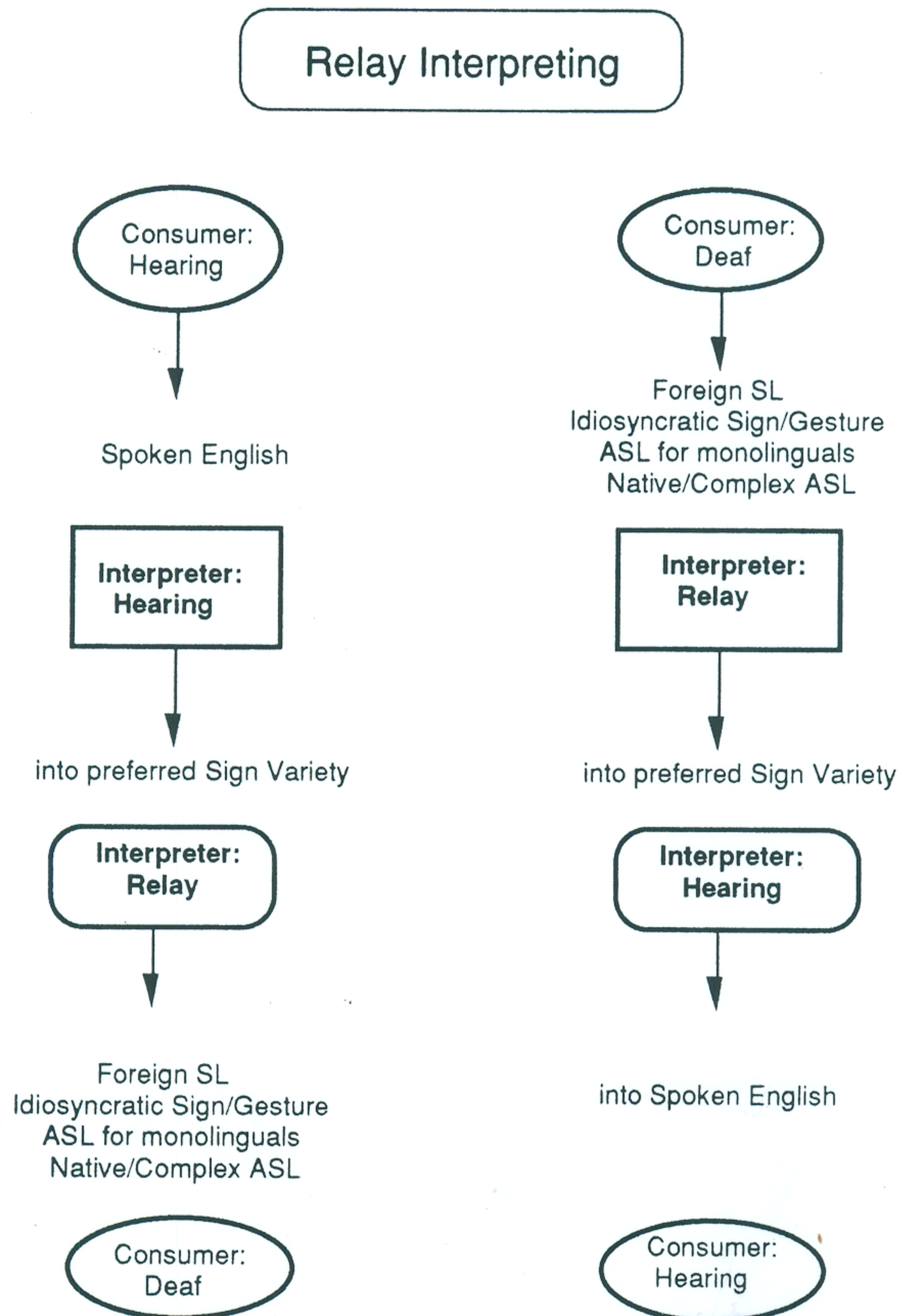
More recently, as legislation has mandated communication accessibility in legal and medical matters, there has been a greater demand for qualified Deaf interpreters. Slowly, people with RSC's started to enter the pool of working interpreters. But, the RID certification process was suspended in 1986, with the expectation that a new and more careful evaluation would standardize the level of quality in the interpreting field. New CI and CT certificates were soon in place.

In 1987, the Deaf Caucus of RID proposed that the next certification to be developed under the new evaluation system should be a Relay Interpreter certificate. In 1989, the RID membership moved and accepted this proposal. Due to financial limitations, the RI

evaluation has not been developed nor implemented. However, the field is beginning to realize the value of relay interpreting, and hopefully, it will soon become a common occurrence.

Relay Interpreting Process

Relay interpreting occurs when there is at least one hearing and one D/deaf consumer and an intermediary interpreter (hearing). The chart below indicates the range of possibilities.



Skills Necessary for the Relay Interpreter

• Linguistic Skills

It is crucial that the relay interpreter be highly proficient in ASL, both receptively and expressively. The interpreter must be comfortable conversing with all members of the D/deaf community—encompassing a variety of backgrounds, educational levels, regional dialects, and other factors. The relay interpreter must know how to accommodate the linguistic needs and preferences of the D/deaf consumer with ease. Some deaf people (alingual) who have not been exposed to any natural language have devised a limited vocabulary to express their thoughts—not a full language, but a “semi-language.” Other D/deaf people (semi-lingual) have learned some signs, but their language acquisition was so delayed, or the language input so scarce, that they are not able to express themselves freely, with the depth and precision of a natural language. A relay interpreter must develop some strategies for decoding a variety of communication methods which the consumer may use.

• Fluent Communicator

The relay interpreter must be able to work well and communicate effectively with the hearing interpreter and the hearing consumers involved in the situation. A relay interpreter should be familiar with hearing norms, cultural values, and conventional courtesies (such as leave-taking and introductions). S/he

should know some forms of English signing, because the D/deaf consumer may use a mixed variety of sign choices which the interpreter must be able to understand. Also, in some situations, the relay interpreter is not able to choose the hearing interpreter with whom they work, and it is imperative that s/he understands the message being signed. It would be helpful for the interpreter to have some degree of fluency in written English, although it is not essential.

• Cultural Sensitivity

It is important that the relay interpreter examine his/her own biases, whether they be cultural, political, racial, etc. Interpreters should be able to work comfortably with people of different cultures and beliefs, and must know when to decline assignments that may produce internal conflict which will interfere with the work.

• Comfortable in a Variety of Bilingual/Bicultural Settings

As stated previously, the relay interpreter (in America and parts of Canada) must be someone who has completely internalized ASL. S/he must know the rules of register, for both ASL and English, and have the ability to shift comfortably within the registers of the two languages. The interpreter should have experience with the various forms of discourse, both in ASL and English, and must know how to successfully accomplish a linguistic task in a variety of ways.

Skills Necessary for Instructors of Relay Interpreting

There are some basic competencies that an instructor of Relay Interpreting should possess. Obviously, due to the emerging nature of the field, it is difficult to determine conclusively, but looking at it from an historical perspective, we can make some educated predictions.

• Bilingual/Bicultural

The interpreter does not need to be a precisely balanced bilingual/bicultural, but they should have very strong skills in both areas. An instructor should be able to accommodate a variety of linguistic needs. They must be comfortable in various settings, working with an assortment of occupations and personalities; in short, they have to have a great deal of flexibility with both languages and cultures.

• Experience Working as a Relay Interpreter

The instructor should be a working interpreter, and should have had some experience working in relay situations. Perhaps this person has not had experience in all of the settings possible, but s/he should have a broad understanding of the problems that may arise and have some viable solutions.

• Model Instructor

It is important that the person be proficient, not only as a language and cultural model, but as an instructor as well. In the interpreting field, this crucial element is often overlooked. Historically, if a person could sign well, it was automatically assumed that s/he would be an excellent instructor. But, unfortunately this isn't always true, as many students

will attest. A person must have a teacher's intuition, as well as formal training in curriculum development, assessment, evaluation, etc. S/he must be able to articulate the interpreting process, giving diagnostic feedback to the student, and must be able to discuss a variety of issues and relate them to the interpreting task. In general, the person must have the drive necessary to be a creative teacher, always looking for better ways to explain the complex process of relay interpreting.

• Ability to Work with both Deaf and Hearing Students Effectively

The instructor needs to know how to accommodate his/her teaching strategies for Deaf as well as hearing students, in both separate and mixed settings. An instructor might be quite comfortable working with one group of students, but teaching the same topic to another group might be very difficult. You need to have the skills to work with both hearing and Deaf interpreters, making use of their strengths in the most effective way.

Teaching Relay Interpreting: The Curriculum

We've covered the basic qualities that are necessary for students and instructors. Now let's examine the essential components of a curriculum.

• Understanding Minority Group Dynamics

Intimate knowledge of the Deaf community is critical. Similarly, the relay interpreter must also know something about minority group dynamics within the community, because s/he will be

working between at least two cultures. Often, in relay situations, the D/deaf consumer will be the product of yet another minority group, which has had quite an influence in shaping his/her language, identity, world view, etc. The relay interpreter must be sensitive to these differences.

It is also important that s/he understand different sign language varieties, such as the language which Black Deaf people, foreign Deaf people, older Deaf people, or Deaf people from different regions and with different kinds of accents use.

Because many deaf children are now being deprived of any natural linguistic input through ASL role models, relay cases which involve alingual or semi-lingual deaf people are increasing. Not only must the relay interpreter understand the gestures or the unique communication system which the consumer uses, but s/he must also be able to relate well with the people who use these varieties.

• **Understanding Oppression**

The person must know something about oppression, and how this impacts on the situation. The relay interpreter, as a Deaf person, is a member of an oppressed minority. The consumer, as a member of perhaps an additional cultural minority, has experienced even greater oppression. The relay interpreter must have a variety of tools with which to gain the trust of the D/deaf consumer, with the ultimate goal to empower the D/deaf consumer.

• **Language Acquisition**

It is important to include a course on how people acquire language in general. Sometimes a relay interpreter will work with people who have no internalized

language, so we must also research common strategies which language-deprived people have developed for everyday communication.

• **Interpreting Process**

Many Deaf people have been exposed to different interpreting styles, but few have had the opportunity to actually experience interpreting themselves. Of course, it is important to include a theoretical discussion of the process of interpretation in the curriculum, but students tend to learn most effectively in a hands-on setting.

In "Relay Interpreting" workshops at The Bicultural Center, we make use of a videotape with several signed sentences. The first few are signed in English word order, with strong hearing cultural statements embedded into the sentences. The next few are signed in ASL, again, with very sticky issues which require cultural adjustments. At the beginning of the lesson, the Deaf students invariably complain that these English sentences are heavily laden culturally, and they're very difficult to interpret. After arduous debate, it is obvious that interpreting is not merely a process of decoding grammar, but it is a strong mental challenge which requires knowledge of two different languages and cultures. This activity demonstrates the complexity of interpreting much more clearly than a three-hour lecture of the process would convey. It is one thing to understand an idea intellectually, but until the students are given the challenge of actually confronting two different cultures, it is merely speculation.

During the training it is important to keep in mind that this is a really new experience for the Deaf student, since

they are used to looking at things from a consumer's point of view, and are now analyzing the task as an interpreter. Many Deaf students lack confidence in their own abilities, and are worried about doing a perfect job lest there be misunderstandings. For this reason, some time should be devoted at this point in the training to developing more self confidence.

• Team Interpreting

Many hearing freelance interpreters need to experiment working with other hearing interpreters in order to produce the most effective team for a given assignment. The same is true with relay interpreting. Both members of the relay team need to be introspective about how they're going to work well together. You cannot expect to have a successful team with somebody you just met that day, particularly in a relay situation. You have to be able to trust each other. It is helpful to come up with some criteria for finding a compatible interpreter, but first, we must know ourselves well enough to be able to select a good partner. You should consider your interpreting needs—how much support or independence you require while working, what kinds of strategies you use to make repairs in your interpretation, how your team member knows you require assistance, etc. Another issue with team interpreting relates to expectations. Does the relay interpreter expect the hearing interpreter to sign in English? As a relay interpreter, it is important to know which kind of input you prefer to get from the hearing interpreter, and discuss these important matters before the assignment.

Imperative to the curriculum is a discussion of Deaf-hearing control issues.

When you have a relay interpreter working with a hearing interpreter, who is in control, the Deaf interpreter or the hearing interpreter? While most interpreters would agree it should be a fairly equitable situation, if there is a third person involved, such as an attorney, how will the introductions be made, and who describes the logistics of the situation? Theoretically, the interpreters are equal, but how roles are carried out in reality often gives another impression.

If there's an important case involving two D/deaf people, should two relay interpreters be hired, just as there might be two hearing interpreters, each with a back up? Perhaps the relay interpreter should have a team member for the same reasons that hearing interpreters do. This is not an option at present, though it is an optimistic view of what the future may hold if we persist in our efforts toward quality teamwork.

Effective Techniques for Training

• Separate Training

Thorough understanding of the interpreting process really comes with the person's own experience as an interpreter. If you simply take a Deaf person off the street who's a native ASL-user, but does not understand the process of interpreting and the logistics, such as where to position people, how to manage the relay task effectively given the time constraints, how to stop for clarification, how to maintain eye contact while receiving information from the same channel, etc., then of course, you will not get a quality interpretation. With Deaf and hearing interpreters in a mixed classroom there's a real imbalance of power and knowledge at the beginning of the

training, since few Deaf people have had the opportunity to take interpreting classes and discuss theoretical issues of interpreting, while most of the hearing students will need to work on improving their second language and processing skills. So, at least for the entry-stage, a great deal of time is given to actual interpreting practice for the Deaf students, with separate activities for the hearing interpreters. Separate training is also important for discussions of oppression, since the Deaf and hearing students will be working on different issues.

- **Consecutive Interpreting**

When hearing students take interpreting courses they, unfortunately, are often taught to work simultaneously, rather than consecutively. But for relay interpreter training for both the hearing and Deaf students, we find it very effective to work with consecutive strategies—focusing on quality of product, developing fluency in working with teams, processing time, and so on. Later, the more complicated task of simultaneous interpreting can be attempted. At this point in the instruction, it's easy for students to become obsessed with the linguistics of the task, to the detriment of the message. It cannot be stressed enough that, throughout the activities, unless the message is being interpreted from one culture's perspective to another, the interpretation is incomplete.

Relay Strategies

- **Gestures**

A serious problem occurs when the person who requires relay interpretation has no formal language. In training, we

must come up with strategies for communicating in gestures and mime. In some situations, this is not a difficult task, but, particularly in legal matters where the consequences are severe and the ideas are not concrete, it's very hard to come up with successful ways to communicate. It's important to keep in mind that some D/deaf people who come from other countries, will be relying on a much different gestural system than what is commonly used in America.

- **Knowledge of Foreign Sign Languages**

If the D/deaf consumer is using foreign signs, that will give the relay interpreter a clue that there can be a basis for communication. The relay interpreter must learn how to quickly decipher the language being used, and repeat the vocabulary successfully to establish rapport and to build a mutual understanding.

It is important to be aware of certain handshapes which are inappropriate in other languages, even though they are used commonly in America. The interpreter should become familiar with some of the different ways to express common ideas in other Sign Languages. The sign for "DEAF," for example, is different in Europe, where many of the languages sign "DEAF" with two fingers on the ear. The American sign for "DEAF" actually means "HEARING" in British Sign Language. It is important to get a taste for the different Sign Languages of the world, so that the interpretation can be as accurate as possible. We need to broaden the perspectives of both the Deaf relay interpreter and the hearing interpreter.

• Giving and Receiving Feedback

We also need to work together to resolve the feelings of competitiveness that will arise. When a mistake is made in the process of interpreting, we need to focus on relieving the tension, rather than assigning blame. As always, feedback is the key. But, how Deaf people give feedback and how hearing people give feedback is often very different. Hearing interpreters tend to look for the meaning behind what was said, trying to assess the "agenda" hidden beneath the surface. Of course, we each have our own sensitivities, and tendencies to read messages into other people's communication; sometimes it's accurate, but often it's misplaced. There is a significant difference in cultural rules about this kind of information exchange. If trust can be established at an early stage, many unpleasant situations can be avoided.

We need to develop efficient ways for the students to give each other feedback throughout the training. First of all, if we're working in teams, with both Deaf and hearing interpreters, there are some sticky dynamics. If the Deaf interpreter is nervous, perhaps s/he might get some feedback such as, "It doesn't look like you're signing ASL." It's very difficult for a Deaf person to receive feedback like that from a hearing person. Because the Deaf person is receiving English input, the natural tendency is to start signing in English. So, knowing that something like this might occur, we should have some strategies to deal with it. When the interpreting assignment is finished, the two team interpreters need to get together and talk. Every relay situation is helpful as a learning tool, and if the problems are resolved immediately after the assignment is over, then the team will be better prepared in the future.

• Cross Cultural Sensitivity

So many factors determine the success of a relay situation. If the consumer is from another minority group, but primarily associates with white Deaf people, it is important information. If s/he identifies as a member of another minority group, are you, as relay interpreter, viewed as an oppressor too? You need to determine whether the person has had a limited education—or whether they even have a language with which to communicate. If the person is using gestures, the relay interpreter must quickly ascertain whether the consumer has just arrived from another country, or whether they have been living on the streets their whole life. There are countless cross-cultural issues which are involved, and all of this weighs heavily on the relay interpreter, who bears the responsibility of conveying messages accurately.

When Is a Relay Interpreter Necessary?

We have discussed the importance of building confidence for the Deaf relay interpreters, but we also need to recognize that it is difficult, at first, for hearing interpreters to admit that a relay interpreter is necessary. It's very difficult to relinquish control and request a relay team. Of course, it's going to require some explanation, as many hiring agents will no doubt react with suspicion. But, we need to educate the public, as well as ourselves, that requesting a relay team is not a sign of a "weak" interpreter, but rather a disciplined and ethical interpreter. Some situations call for the use of two qualified interpreters—it's as simple as that.

• When Required by Law

Because the American judicial system requires that all people understand their rights, the legal setting most commonly uses relay interpreters. Obviously, then, a relay interpreter must become familiar with appropriate courtroom decorum, standard terminology, the judge/attorney/client dynamics, etc. The same is true for medical situations. If the relay interpreter does not understand the message, the whole process must come to a halt; so, it is critical that the interpreter understands at least the rudimentary aspects of these settings to produce the best advantage. An interpreter in these settings must also be honest about his/her strengths and weaknesses. Perhaps you have the skills to work between ASL and English in legal and medical settings, but can the same message be conveyed if the consumer uses gestures to communicate? Legal dialogues often have little to do with concrete and material things (i.e. the Miranda Warning), and it is difficult to convey abstract concepts using gestures.

• Serious Matters

Other serious areas which require a relay interpreter include mental health, psychiatric, and drug/alcohol treatment programs. In these health-related areas, correct information between the consumer and the practitioner is crucial.

• Public Events

For years it has been standard practice to use both interpreters and transliterators for an event, whether it be a lecture, rally, performance, etc. A number of Deaf people in the audience have not always been able to follow the transliterators, and some interpreters have been equally unclear. An alternative to this would be to have a hearing

transliterator, in clear view of the relay interpreter, who would then take that transliteration, and provide an interpretation for the Deaf audience.

• When the Hearing Interpreter is not Qualified

As we all know, many interpreters enter either two or four year interpreter training programs, and upon graduation, they are not ready to actually interpret. Yet, there is an increasing demand for access to communication between D/deaf and hearing people. As a creative way to solve the problem of unskilled hearing interpreters, a relay interpreter could work together with an unqualified person, modelling the language, and maintaining a greater level of accuracy in communication.

Ethical Considerations

• The RID Code of Ethics

What does the Code of Ethics mean to the Deaf relay interpreter, and can it accommodate both a Deaf and a hearing cultural model? Perhaps the Code of Ethics for relay interpreting should be different, since the task requires much more flexibility, and each situation is entirely different from the previous one. At the same time, with relay interpreting, there is a constant check to make sure that feelings of advocacy do not conflict with the role of relay interpreter.

It seems that the interpreting field in general is extremely cautious about "walking over the line," but as working professionals, we need to take a stand. For instance, in the legal setting, if a number of deaf people come to a public hearing, is it appropriate for the relay interpreter to talk with them, or must

s/he maintain distance, providing an interpretation only? If there is a case involving one D/deaf person against another, is the relay interpreter not permitted to talk to the D/deaf people on the opposing side? In the case of "professional distance," to sign only what is spoken, without any kind of personal rapport is very offensive to a Deaf person—it is in conflict with accepted cultural norms and values. The interpreter behavior of the late seventies and early eighties which dictated that any conversation not initiated by a second party was "against" the Code of Ethics, seriously damaged the relationship between interpreters and Deaf people; hopefully, we can learn from our past mistakes.

We need to examine and emulate the "Deaf way" of handling awkward situations which are bound to occur. Perhaps there should be a different relay interpreter for both the plaintiff and defendant. This will require explanation for people who work in the legal system, particularly since this may be in conflict with standard practices.

• Advocacy

It is important, in this context, to discuss the role of an advocate—when it is appropriate for a relay interpreter to assume this responsibility, and where to draw the line. The relay interpreter must be sensitive to people with different experiences and must make cultural adjustments to the message to allow the person to make thoughtful decisions based on his/her understanding of the world. The relay interpreter must understand something about the life experiences of the D/deaf consumer, such as how this person learned his/her lan-

guage and acquired cultural input, with whom does s/he identify most closely, etc.

If the consumer does not realize it is his/her right to understand the Miranda warning upon arrest, since that information is culturally bound it certainly may be transmitted by the relay interpreter, even though it was not explicitly stated. (How many police dramas on television have shown cops giving the Miranda warning to suspects, shown cases dismissed because the Miranda warning was not given in a timely manner, etc?) A person's right to understand the Miranda warning is something subtly woven into hearing people's understanding of the legal system in America, yet if you are not part of the mainstream, there is an information deficit. This is something which a relay interpreter can correct with relative ease. Yet, if there is a more complicated inequity, then the interpreter must decide if it can be resolved within the realms of his/her assignment. It may be necessary to call upon yet another person to serve as an advocate for the consumer.

• Cultural Mediation

In serving as a cultural mediator, it is important to examine our own cultural biases, and make certain that nothing impedes the interpretation. Often, the relay interpreter will make the assumption that, as Deaf people, they share the same values and operate on the same level of strengths and weaknesses as the consumer, but that's not always the case. For example, perhaps you are interpreting in court during a custody hearing for a Deaf mother from another country, who has three children from different fathers. The court, of course, will view this kind of situation from a "white, hearing, American male perspective." The mother

is not following the rules of American cultural norms, but this critical point is never stated. The interpreter must try to convey the seriousness of the situation, and also interpret the unspoken message that "If you have any more children like this, we're going to take them away." It is quite possible that this is new information for the Deaf mother, whose culture does not require one to be married, and encourages childbirth, etc. There are many complex ideas and attitudes such as these which must be conveyed, and it is the process of making this kind of communication clear across cultural boundaries that is the real struggle.

• **Deaf/Blind Interpreting**

We haven't mentioned the possibility of relay interpreting for Deaf/Blind consumers, although it is a consideration. Of course, when you go from visual ASL to tactile ASL, there is a lot of adjustment which has to be made. The language might be the same, but many decisions must be made in terms of space, semantics and pacing. We do not automatically include the term "Deaf/Blind," in our description of relay interpreting, but of course there are some similarities in the process. Our tendency is to think of relay and Deaf/Blind interpreting as requiring separate skills, but that's something that's up for debate.

Relay Interpreting as a Business

• **Relay Interpreter as a Professional**

Another important issue has to do with the business of interpreting. There have been a number of cultural conflicts related to the interpreting profession, particularly in the way that hearing interpreters solicit business. The Deaf community places a high value on the

referral of interpreters from trusted friends. But, hearing interpreters typically display their business cards, often with the little interpreting symbol in the corner, to potential employers. This is one way that interpreters increase their visibility and maintain business contacts. Will Deaf relay interpreters be expected to hand out business cards in order to support themselves? That doesn't seem culturally appropriate, but what kind of message will be sent to the professionals when a hearing person gives out a business card, and the Deaf person doesn't? We need to iron out these cultural conflicts in business practices as well as the actual interpreting situation. We don't want the hearing person to seem to be in a superior position once again, and we want to be able to resolve these problems without being oppressive to the Deaf relay interpreter.

• **Logistics**

It is also important to discuss the positioning of interpreters. Should the relay interpreter be in front of the D/deaf person, with the hearing interpreter behind the D/deaf person, or to the side? And where should the interpreters/consumer be in relation to all of the other people in the situation? If the setting is in court with no jury, the positioning will be different than if it is a full jury. Relay interpreting in a medical situation, a lawyer's office, or in court, will require modifications, and perhaps a different kind of positioning altogether. Of course, we all know that even when there is only one interpreter, people get upset; now, suddenly, two interpreters descend upon the scene and it can really confuse people. The relay interpreter must be able to express his/her needs for clear visual access to both the hearing interpreter and the D/deaf consumer, and be

able to articulate this in a positive and assertive manner.

• **Validating the Role of Relay Interpreter**

For now, an area of discussion we must attend to is how we convince people to have a relay interpreter in the first place. It is commonly assumed that a certified interpreter should be able to communicate with all D/deaf people, and it requires a lot of explanation—not emotional discussion—but a carefully reasoned explanation about why it's important to have a relay interpreter in a certain situation.

For some reason, people tend to assume that an explanation is needed only for the hearing people, but D/deaf people also need to understand why a relay interpreter is necessary. Some D/deaf people are not used to the idea of having any interpreters at all, and they assume that one interpreter is enough. When a Deaf person also shows up, it's a new situation for the consumer who also must be educated as to the responsibilities of the relay interpreter.

Conclusion

Hopefully, we've planted a few seeds tonight. But, of course, just one short workshop is not enough. We need to continue to dialogue, and carefully analyze the process so that we can build a deeper understanding of the relay interpreting role. Particularly since relay interpreters are already in the workforce, we can't procrastinate on the issue of training. We don't want history to repeat itself. We need to have Relay Interpreter certification with people actually working as relay interpreters, and it needs to happen soon. So, as you go home and prepare interpreters to enter this dynamic field, we urge you to keep the Deaf relay interpreters in mind.

The founding of a place like The Bicultural Center has been our goal for many years, and when it finally became a reality in 1987, it was like opening a door. This conference has been enlightening and uplifting in the same way. It seems that together we are all unlocking doors, and opening them to a different world, with a more fruitful landscape. We recognize a peer relationship at CIT which is flowering, and we are excited about keeping this spirit of camaraderie alive in the future.