

Deaf Interpreters Today: A Growing Profession

by Dan Langholtz

Historically, Deaf people have interpreted informally to clarify information for other Deaf people. Literate Deaf people have often been approached to assist with difficult-to-understand documents or in situations where there are language barriers. Deaf interpreters interpret for Deaf individuals with language or cognitive challenges. Deaf people have been brought in to work with hearing interpreters to provide optimal information access to Deaf individuals. However, only recently have they gained recognition and status as genuine professionals, working part or full time, earning wages as other professional certified hearing interpreters.

One of the areas Deaf interpreters are trained for is platform work where Deaf and hearing interpreters, using International Sign, work together as a team. Hearing interpreters feed the Deaf interpreters on stage, who relay to the audience. Deaf interpreters also work in many speciality areas as well as with foreign-born Deaf people, Deafblind, and Deaf people with limited vision. Deaf interpreters may use signs that are peculiar to a region or an ethnic or age group, or that have characteristics reflective of Deaf culture that are not familiar to hearing interpreters.

Growing recognition and use of Deaf interpreters has promoted the need for further refinement of the profession. In the United States, the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) was instrumental in developing a pool of trainers and a list of training resources leading, after successfully passing tests, to the awarding of a Certificate for Deaf Interpreters (CDI). A number of interpreting training programmes and local RID chapters also offer training opportunities. Programmes cover such subjects as interpreting processing, interpreting models, history and evolution of the interpreting profession, code of ethics, business practices, Deaf and hearing team work, and Deaf and hearing culture. Attendance at workshops and interpreting training programmes prepare Deaf people to pass both knowledge and performance tests and to obtain a CDI. There are now approximately 35 interpreters with a CDI, 77 holding temporary certificates, 70 in possession of old certificates, and 9 who are relay interpreters with legal training. Once certified, Deaf interpreters maintain their professional skills through professional development, including ongoing work on interpreting skills and reviewing ethical issues regularly.

Deaf people working as advocates for Deaf or Deafblind people may find themselves in situations in which they are doubling as interpreters. Blurring the roles can lead to serious misunderstandings or create conflict of interests. Advocates may or may not have been trained as Deaf interpreters and,

in any case, should not be carrying out an interpreting function, which will often be to the disadvantage of their clients. It is essential to keep the two roles distinct.

Another critical area for Deaf interpreters is dealing with cultural differences. There may be things that Deaf people are accustomed to that are not considered acceptable to hearing people, and vice versa. Some examples are money and personal matters, forms of blunt and indirect comments, and social etiquette. Deaf interpreters need to figure out ways to deliver the clear intent of a message without causing potential cultural conflicts.

RESISTANCE TO OR ACCEPTANCE OF DEAF INTERPRETERS

Deaf consumers may find it uncomfortable having two interpreters and may not be keen about the extra time lag. They may be concerned about a potential breach of confidentiality or question the capability of Deaf interpreters. In most cases, however, Deaf consumers are receptive to and appreciative of having Deaf interpreters present. It reduces the isolation of being the only Deaf person at a setting, which may contribute to the experience of cultural misunderstanding.

Hearing interpreters may question why they cannot do the job on their own, or be threatened by the skill of Deaf interpreters. The use of Deaf interpreters assures greater efficiency of language access and is truly more cost effective because Deaf consumers can express their rights and needs clearly and fairly.

For Deaf people who want to become interpreters, there are things one can do on one's own to try out Deaf interpreting tasks. At home, watch a variety of captioned programmes and sign to either an imaginary or real person. Try to interpret nonstop for 15-, 30-, and 60-minute increments. (Do not stop for commercials.) Look at a signing person (either real or on video), and type out the text on your computer. There is no need to be obsessed with perfect grammar or with typos, but try to get the knack of putting the text in understandable, readable language.

Deaf interpreters are invaluable assets to the expanding field of professional sign language interpreting. With support and recognition from Deaf people and professional interpreters, Deaf interpreters will increasingly be a significant part of enhancing equal access of Deaf people. **WFD**

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(With sincere thanks to David Rose for his excellent assistance with this article.)