

VIEWS



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Interpreting Culturally Sensitive Information in VRS Settings

Mary Henry Lightfoot, CI and CT, Maryland

Video relay service (VRS), after seven years of use, is becoming a mature form of virtual communication. Interpreters now interpret for deaf and hearing consumers from many different parts of the country, from rural and urban areas, and from many different cultural groups. We are attempting to open the dialogue about specific cultural features of language, effectiveness of interpreting and strategies for enhancing the interpreting of cultural components of language. With VRS becoming a mature industry, we as interpreting professionals need to explore ways to better serve consumers, including consumers of color, using the service.

This spring, a session was held at the Deaf People of Color Conference which allowed deaf consumers of color, as well as interpreters, to talk about cultural features of language, attitudes toward interpretation of information and approaches to the task. In addition, a survey regarding interpretation of cultural features of language was sent via e-mail, as well as disseminated as to participants at the Deaf People of Color Conference. Both deaf consumers and interpreters were the target audiences.

Deaf People of Color Conference

The Deaf People of Color Conference, held March 29 - April 1, was a groundbreaking conference "directed by and held for Deaf people of all ethnic/racial backgrounds: African-American, Latino, Asian, and (Native) American Indian, biracial, multiracial."

There were two full days of workshops about cultures of Deaf people of color as well as a day long leadership preconference workshop. Approximately 200 participants attended the conference.

Included with the workshops was a session regarding interpreting: *Video Relay Service Interpreting: Tools for Effective Dialogue with Culturally Sensitive Content*. The workshop explored cultural competency issues with VRS interpreting. Participants discussed intercultural and intracultural situations through a series of questions and scenarios. In addition, video clips were featured with Deaf people of color, interpreters and experts talking about viewpoints of interpreting culturally sensitive information.

Rich discussions led to tools that we, as interpreters, can use when working with deaf consumers of color in VRS settings.

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Developments in the Area of VRS and 9 -1-1

Donna Platt and Richard Ray

With today's expanding technology, people have various options for communication methods. People who are deaf, deaf-blind and hard of hearing and individuals with a speech disability are following along with these trends and are rapidly migrating from traditional TTY to more advanced telecommunications methods, both for peer-to-peer communications and for relay services. These newer Internet-based modalities include, but are not limited to, internet relay, wireless relay, video relay service (VRS) and Internet-based captioned telephone.

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Coalition for Accessible Technology Launched!

Karen Peltz Strauss,
Legal Consultant to CSD

Interpreters are getting their COATs on for equal access!

A brand new coalition of disability organizations called the Coalition of Organizations for Accessible Technology (COAT) has just been created to push for federal legislation that will ensure full access by people with disabilities to evolving high speed broadband and other Internet protocol (IP) technologies. Launched this past March, COAT already con-

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Topic of the Month:

Technology, Distance and
Video Interpreting

From Telephone to Dial Tone: A Look at Video Interpreting

Julia C. Weisenberg, M.A., CI and CT, New York and Emmanuel Garcia, CI, New York

The rhetoric of advertising has often led the average consumer to falsely believe that communication technologies are made available to everyone, but in fact, there exists the 'information poor' and the 'information rich.' (Mansell 1986; Gandy 1993) We know that Deaf people historically have not had an equivalent experience from communication technology. However, the use of web cam phone calls and video interpreting services has so evidently turned that around for the Deaf community, slowly reducing the barriers of their professional and personal lives. Every technological innovation brings with it change and inquiry from its users as to how these changes will effect them in the years to come.

The purpose of this article is to generate thought and discussion among interpreters regarding the effects of video interpreting and the political implications of this apparent industrial revolution on the interpreting field.

Interpreters Are Unique Bilinguals

Interpreters have piqued the interest of sociolinguists because of our bilingual abilities in two strikingly different languages, American Sign Language (ASL) (visual and multidimensional) and English (oral and linear). We are an excellent source of study for language contact phenomena precisely because the nature of our work requires us to be in contact situations that elicit language-mixing behaviors. The language mixing that we do contrasts from that of spoken language bilinguals in several ways. Foremost, we are deciding when mixing is needed in a message, whereas in the field of bilingualism, mixing has been traditionally thought of as a speaker-controlled phenomenon. (Weisenberg 2003) The message itself is not generated by us but by the two speakers for whom we are contracted; we are merely a conduit for this message but assume the added responsibility of determining speaker intent, foregrounding information and other linguistic tasks.

It is well known that Deaf people use more English-based varieties when interacting with the mainstream. (Markowicz and Woodward 1975; Lucas and Valli 1989) Knowing when or when not to use ASL is a natural expected behavior in Deaf culture, but likewise, it is an expected behavior of interpreters.

Interpreters use cross-linguistic strategies like lexicalized mouthing, phonetically-intact English mouthing and finger-spelling because speech and gesture can be produced simultaneously in a type of 'layering.' (Weisenberg 2003; Davis 2003)

So, if we now take unique bilingual interpreters and put

them in a computer-mediated context and transmit their images to remote areas, we can anticipate very interesting effects that would not occur in a face-to-face interpreting. What if the equipment's image transmission was not perfect? What if the users were unfamiliar with the jargon used? What if the world of automation was associated with the dominant language? And what if this new communication process was controlled by an entity who knew little about what interpreters do? These are questions that arise from video interpreting. The next step is to examine some of the observations.

The Swing of the Pendulum

We are in the midst of an industrial revolution in interpreting. Video interpretation is undoubtedly here to stay. We need to

embrace it and enjoy what it has to offer interpreters and the Deaf community as well as its contribution to exploring the depths of human communication. However, it is crucial that in our excitement we do not jump in blindly. Here, we believe, history has a lesson to teach us.

In the world's industrial revolutions, the ones who suffered the most were the artisans, those who were literally crafting and manufacturing products by hand. Then we moved to mechanization in which factories could increase manufacturing rates by using cheap labor. When the artisans were driven out, they became factory workers and fell into routinization and unimaginative assembly line work.

We can draw parallels to video interpreting. We have interpreters, who possess a creative talent for mediating communication and who have traditionally worked in face-to-face situations, moving from the community to machine-based work. Interpreters facilitate calls following specific routines based on the software and equipment for specified periods of time.

Initially there was concern that video relay businesses would scoop up interpreters, leaving a shortage in the community. There was a focus on the ergonomics of video interpreting equipment and demands of the task. Interpreters began questioning the effects of video interpreting on the traditional models they were accustomed to as they discovered how very different it was from community interpreting. Due to the fact that virtual space is more malleable than the physical environment, electronic environments can be designed to allow tracking and storing of information and usage patterns (Samarajiva 1996).

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Video interpreting companies are reimbursed the costs associated for the amount of connected minutes between deaf callers and the parties they are contacting through the Interstate TRS Fund. It is reasonable to assume employee productivity translates to profit for the service provider. An interpreter's productivity level can potentially be retrieved and stored in a way it has never been before in community interpreting. Any potential long term effects routinization might have on interpreter and deaf relations as well as our profession's model is unknown at this time. Therefore, it is crucial that we be open to dialogue about issues as they arise.

Interpreters have adopted many models in our profession. Of particular interest is the Machine (Conduit) Model (1970-1975). In this model, the interpreter assumed less responsibility over the communicative task; we functioned, as the label had it, as a 'telephone.' Because of the quantity over quality mentality, we were viewed by Deaf people as 'rigid and inflexible.' (Humphries & Alcorn 2002)

The Federal Communication Commission's (FCC) influence over video relay include the following: (1) it is charged with determining the rate that ensures appropriate compensation to VRS providers and (2) it imposes a model on us of functional equivalence¹. When a deaf person connects to a video interpreter, it should be a comparable experience to that of hearing people picking up the phone and getting a dial tone. The obvious paradox is that the FCC's description causes an application of an old framework to this new communicative space and potentially brings with it all the behaviors we worked so hard to change: rigidity, conduit mentality, more weight given to quantity of words than meta-linguistic factors like cultural identity, intent of speakers, and the most important of all, English viewed as superior to ASL.

We know that interpreters already exhibit language mixing in face-to-face

interpreting. Now, put them in a context with a resurrected model that says we are once again telephones, and it should be no surprise that we are witnessing a lot of borrowing and mouthing. Before the advent of video interpreting, the automated world of "press one if you know your party's extension" was lesser known to the Deaf community. The automated world was dominated by hearing people and the English language. Now, video interpreters are having their images transmitted nationwide and internationally, spreading the language of these recordings with some interesting linguistic effects.

Language change

English does not make use of space the way ASL does, and distinctions in video communication are harder to make, which could explain why deaf users or interpreters might choose more English features in their signing. (Keating & Mirus 2003) Another explanation is that consumers of video-interpreting are eager to expedite their calls. Like any system, there can be delays, so when an interpreter finally appears, it may be that deaf callers want to get their message across quickly, and they are willing to sacrifice language features to do that. (Weisenberg 2007)

Interpreters' use of a conduit model and automated systems expose deaf callers to alternative forms of signing, including forms co-produced with English mouthing and that follow English syntax. Video interpreters and deaf callers are using new jargon, selecting common signs to achieve equivalency. For example: LIVE+ PERSON or LIVE REPRESENT (a real person, not automated system); HEADSET (operator, video interpreter); X, E-X-T, EXAGGERATE (phone extension) and A+COUNT (account). Older technological signs are even brought back to explain new ones: AUDIOTAPE (answering machine or automated system) and CALL-TO [as in TTY] for making a video-call. (Weisenberg & Garcia 2005) Just as cell phone text messaging has introduced Short Message Service (SMS) language of 'TTYL' and 'Gr8, thx, Hw r u?,' inter-

preters witness WHERE YOU A-T? (Where are you?); E-R-I-C TO K-I-M (This is Eric calling for Kim); or PHONE AUDIOTAPE HIT ZERO (When you get the recording, hit zero).

Video interpreting causes other adjustments. We utilize desktop tools like the television remote, paper and objects like the camera itself. English-based signing, fingerspelling and English mouthing are also observed. Wh-word/Y-N question facial gestures can be dropped. Hands can be brought closer to the webcam for clarity. Sign location and speed changes. There is increased repetition and checking for understanding. Language mixing is prevalent (D-I-D, THIS IS---), increased fingerspelling and adjustment of references (ME, YOU, HIM). Are we referring to the person's image on screen, in the webcam or in reality, for example, behind the person? (Keating & Mirus 2003) The technology has allowed for an efficiency and speed of communication that is so important to deaf callers that they are willing to drastically change their language in order to achieve it, and interpreters are influencing this process by virtue of the policies we must follow, the limitations of the equipment and our own bilingual strategies.

Conclusion

We traditionally think of speakers consciously deciding when to language mix based on factors like identity, context or because a concept is expressed better in one language than another (Grosjean 1982). But in video interpreting, interpreters are making language choices based on (1) policies of virtual space - a government entity mandates them to function as a "dial-tone"(2) equipment constraints - interpreters are adjusting their language because the message must be transmitted through an imperfect medium.

We must consider the research potential of video interpreting and of interpreters themselves, who are now more than ever not invisible but may even have an active hand in accelerating language change. With every technological advancement comes effects, and video

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interpreting is no exception. We should look to history to guide us objectively as we explore this new way of communication. ■

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¹ FEDERAL COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION 47 CFR Part 64, [CC Docket No. 98-67, CG Docket No. 03-123; DA 05-141] and <http://www.nad.org/site/pp.asp?c=foINKQMBF&b=104291>.

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