Be aware!
Power and responsibility in the field of sign language interpreting

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Edited by
Beppie van den Bogaerde
Liivi Hollman
Marinella Salami

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Table of contents

Foreword by Marinella Salami, efsli president  4
Foreword by Beppie van den Bogaerde, editor  6
Power and Responsibility in interpreting situations: The views of Austrian Deaf customers  10
Patricia Brück

(Deaf) Interpreters on television: Challenging power and responsibility  25
Maartje de Meulder and Isabelle Heyerick

Power management – what sign language interpreters can learn?  35
Zane Hema

Interpreting Decisions and Power: Legal Discourse or Legal Discord  45
Debra Russell and Risa Shaw

Identity Issues in Sign Language Interpreting  59
Flora Savvidou

Issues of power and responsibilities in sign language interpreting within sign language users’ communities  74
Patricia Shares Hermann

The Power of the profession, taken for granted?  86
Ingeborg Skaten

Abstracts  96

About the contributors  99
5. In conclusion

There was much value in discussing these two studies, but due to limitations of time there is a need for on-going discussions if not at the European level, then within the context of each country. The two studies provide a valuable framework for on-going discussions. Perhaps discussions could start with two following questions:

- If interpreters see accuracy in their work as paramount but at times prioritise rapport building between the patient and the doctor and themselves, what does that mean in understanding the role of the interpreter in reality?
- Merlino & Favaron conclude that interpreters manage power to achieve a favourable outcome, while Major says interpreters are Powerful Agents in terms of facilitating good rapport between the patient and the healthcare professional and the interpreter. Could there be outcomes which are overtly in favour of the interpreter and if so, what would these look like and what precautions are needed to avoid this?

References


focus of the research was to investigate interpreter decision-making related to their work and how these interpreters see the concept of power impacting their work. We explored choices made about determining qualifications for assignments, working conditions, working in teams, preparation, and mode of interpretation (consecutive and simultaneous), as well as how participants understand the concepts of power and how the interpreter understands and exercises power in legal interpreting situations. In addition, we explored how working in Deaf and non-deaf teams affects the power dynamics and how these Deaf/non-deaf teams are perceived by legal system personnel.

For the purposes of this study we examined two types of power: the inherent power relationships within the legal system, and the power dynamics within a legal interaction or exchange that involves an interpreter. Within the legal system, for example, the court or prosecutor is in a position of power over a defendant. Within an interpreted interaction, an interpreter may have increased power by virtue of their role, because the participants are relying on mediated communication. When gathering data in the study, we did not provide a definition of “power” for participants; rather we allowed them to describe it in their own ways.

The findings reveal distinct and varied approaches to dealing with power issues and also show that interpreters are aware of their decisions and resulting actions affecting the power dynamics in legal settings. Three major themes emerged in this study: the interpreters’ sense of agency; how the interpreters conceptualize the task of interpreting; and how they view the impact of specialized training on their work. The findings also highlighted some of the effective practices experienced interpreters use in order to deal with power issues. What also emerged was evidence of the importance of well-trained Deaf/non-deaf interpreter teams that trust each other to not bring their own power imbalances into the work. While the data is from Canada and the U.S., and is restricted to interpreters dealing with English/ASL, the findings can be compared with other papers presented at the efsli 2012 conference, including the work of Brück, De Meulder & Heyerick, Savvalidou (all found in this volume).

2. Methodology

In this study we were specifically interested in the legal system, which includes court, police interactions, social work interviews, school meetings, lawyer interviews, and other situations that have a legal component. Using a qualitative and ethnographic approach (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992), we selected participants through purposeful sampling to allow for “information-rich cases whose study will illuminate the questions under study” (Patton, 2002: 231). Participants were invited via electronic mail, and were provided with a description of the research project. They then completed a brief on-line survey and were invited to participate in subsequent focus groups. We recruited participants who were nationally known and credentialed Deaf and non-deaf, and CODA interpreters who had over 15 years of experience working in legal settings in Canada and the U.S.

The goal of this qualitative study is to explore the following two questions:

- What decisions do interpreters make that contribute positively or negatively to the power relationships within an interpreted legal interaction and what elements influence their decision-making?
- How do very experienced legal interpreters see the concept of power impacting their work?

The on-line survey had 16 respondents (100% of those invited), which included seven Deaf and nine hearing participants, 50% who grew up in a D/deaf family, 12 females and four males. Data on participant

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1 The space constraints of this paper do not allow for a literature review. See Russell and Shaw (in progress) for an in depth discussion of the literature framing this study.

2 A term used in North America to refer to hearing children of Deaf adults, i.e., native ASL users.
demographics showed the majority of participants had over 20 years of interpreting experience, and over 15 years of interpreting in legal settings.

Fifteen (15) of the 16 respondents agreed to participate in focus groups. We conducted these focus groups using remote video conferencing. Due to timing, 12 people actually attempted to participate in one of three focus groups. However, because of technical difficulties, only nine people were able to participate in the focus groups. Focus group participant demographics included two Deaf and two hearing Canadians, one Deaf and four hearing people from the United States, three non-Caucasian participants, three who grew up in Deaf families, and five who grew up using ASL. The focus groups were conducted in ASL, using the same eight open-ended questions to guide each focus group. Data was recorded through software programs and Quicktime movies were made of each focus group.

The principal researchers and two nationally certified interpreters coded the data using ELAN, drawing on grounded theory approaches to analyse the data. Analysis of qualitative data is a cyclical and reflexive activity requiring data-led, systematic analysis (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). This methodology is used to “discover important patterns, themes, and interrelationships [which] begins by exploring, then confirming [ , and] is guided by analytical principles rather than rules” (Patton, 2002:41).

3. Findings

Three major thematic categories emerged from the data analysis: interpreters’ sense of agency, conceptualization of the task of interpreting, and training. Each of the categories and their subthemes are defined and described below. A number of the themes and subthemes intersect, which we discuss below.

The participants provided numerous examples that demonstrated that when interpreters are aware of their own power and privilege, as interpreters and as individuals, they can chose to make professional decisions that may impact the power dynamics in interactions in appropriate or positive ways. Alternatively, interpreters may misuse their professional and/or personal power. The decisions made are significantly influenced by the power of the legal system, and the roles that participants in that system perform.

3.1 Power and Privilege and a Sense of Agency

Awareness of one’s professional and personal power and privilege is a self-reflective exercise that centres on one’s sense of agency. The sense of agency construct refers to the subjective awareness that one is initiating, executing, and controlling one’s own actions in the world. It reflects a sense of the interpreter being able to exhibit ownership and responsibility as it pertains to their individual decisions and actions in the interpreted interaction.

In this study, the participants’ descriptions of their perspectives and actions indicated how a sense of agency or lack of agency allows them to conduct themselves with ease, or experience significant challenges. The sub-themes associated with this category include:

- Awareness of choices
- Recognizing the impact of decisions
- Establishing positive relationships
- Assertiveness
- Being willing to change interpreting practices.

The following quotes in italics from participants reflect an awareness of their own power and privilege in interactions, demonstrate a sense of agency about the interpreting work in terms of forming positive relationships, and recognizing the impact of the interpreter’s decision-making:

Over the years I have worked with many people [lawyers, judges, legal personnel] to educate them about interpreting and what is needed.
How I present myself to the legal personnel shapes everything. In contrast, other participants showed a lack of agency, which also impacts interpretation in a legal setting. For example, the following quotes demonstrate a sense of helplessness to impact the legal system in terms of hiring practices:

Sometimes you can’t do any preparation. No one gives you information. There are no documents. The police and the lawyers just keep putting you off. Sometimes the lawyer is willing to take a few minutes with you, but often not.

There are times when I have no say over what a court will or won’t do. There’s nothing I can do.

3.2 Conceptualizing the Task of Interpreting

Interpreting is a highly complex, cognitively demanding activity (Pochhammer, 2004; Seleskovitch, 1978; Wadensjö, 1998). Conceptualization of the task refers to one’s understanding of the cognitive and practical elements required to produce an accurate interpretation. These elements include:

- Understanding the goals of the participants in the interaction;
- Employing appropriate cognitive processes to produce an interpretation that respects those goals;
- Producing an accurate, linguistically and culturally appropriate interpretation product.

The interpretation must reflect and incorporate the context in which the interaction is occurring. The context of the event will shape the linguistic and interpretation decisions made by the interpreter. Understanding interpreting as a meaning-based activity that presumes participants are working together to create meaning (Wilcox & Shaffer, 2005) implies that the interpreter’s task is much more than word-for-word equivalency and form-based transcoding.

Throughout the focus groups, the interpreters emphasized the importance of a variety of factors that contribute to more or less effective interpretations: for example, determining whether they are qualified for a given assignment, requiring a specific and qualified team, needing preparation time with participants and materials, taking time to conduct preparation, and determining the mode of interpretation that will allow for the work to be accurate and effective. All of these can be understood as elements of the task of interpreting. The participants discussed the importance of establishing working conditions that allow for their choices and decisions that will shape their ability to interpret effectively.

However, the data showed the interpreters had varied perspectives on how and to what level they are able to achieve these working conditions. From our preliminary analysis of the data, we believe these variations correlate to differences in training, conceptualizing the task of interpreting, and exhibiting agency. For example, an interpreter without appropriate training may accept an assignment without knowing and approving the team composition. This is influenced by how an interpreter see a team working and whether they see that all members of the team are responsible for the entire interpretation, regardless of the roles at any given time (actively producing the interpretation or being the monitor and support interpreter). In turn, the training and understanding of the task impacts the interpreters’ sense of agency, or lack thereof.

The following quotes from participants speak to the sub-themes of preparation, specific job requirements of the legal interaction, practices and strategies that support professional and successful team interpreting and effective overall interpretation:

An essential part of doing this work is taking the time that is needed, and not letting myself be rushed. That time is to meet with the parties involved, meet with the other interpreters, and prepare with what resources that exist of that assignment. Respecting the integrity of the work is taking the time that it needs.
One determining factor is who I will be working (teaming) with. We have to be able to work together, or we can’t do the job. This includes being able to give and receive feedback from one another, as well as what type of training we have.

Both of these comments represent interpreters demonstrating confidence, taking responsibility for their own work, and creating working contexts that support successful interpretation in light of how they understand the task of interpreting as a whole. The non-deaf participants also revealed a heightened awareness of balancing professional power in a team by sharing power with their Deaf colleagues, and using strategies that have the potential to shift legal system perceptions of Deaf people. As one participant said:

I am easily intimidated [in a police situation] so I ask the Certified Deaf Interpreter to take the lead. This decision gives the Deaf interpreter the power and also serves to educate the police officers who can then see the Deaf interpreter as equal. This is a conscious decision of mine.

Interpreters recognize that there are professional standards to be observed, and prioritize their interpreting needs, as is shown in the following quotes:

You have to be able to stand your ground. When you [the hearing interpreter] realize that you cannot go forward without a Deaf interpreter working with you, you have to ensure that one is brought in.

It is important to interpret consecutively because that is best practice, but it is also important to use Consecutive Interpreting (CI) because it is the way to be accurate.

In contrast, another participant reflected a view that knowing the community and courts may absolve one of her/his responsibility to actively prepare for each specific job.

I’ve worked in my community for 20 years and I know the courts and the people and though sometimes I am surprised, most of the time I know what will happen [and I do not need to prepare].

The following quote stresses the importance of constantly being aware of one’s beliefs and views about the work, the consumers for whom we provide service, and the need to adjust practices based on new experiences or information.

I worked a case with a well-educated Deaf person who had a Master’s degree from Gallaudet University and who requested a Certified Deaf Interpreter CDI for the court proceedings. [...] My first response was that there had been a mistake and I told the judge it was not my practice to interpret for someone like this. I realize how inappropriate I was to assume I could make the decision for this Deaf person. [...] She said that she wanted a CDI because she wanted full access to the proceedings in her first language, ASL, and she did not want to have to deal with the code-switching the hearing interpreters would produce. I learned a valuable lesson that anyone can benefit from the services of a CDI. And that changed my way of thinking and my practices.

The data also showed a reflection of the power dynamics between some Deaf and non-deaf interpreters, and the misuse of power on the part of the non-deaf interpreters.

The hearing interpreter is the first person assigned, and then I [Deaf interpreter] might get assigned to the job. The hearing interpreter often says they are fine and don’t need me there. But they don’t necessarily have the ability to assess their own skills for the job. [...] The hearing interpreter will get to the job and realize they do need me. Then I get a last minute call. Deaf interpreters are an afterthought.

When I arrived at court, and I was there intentionally early, the 4 hearing interpreters were already in a meeting with the lawyers. Neither I nor the other Deaf interpreter on the case were invited to join the meeting or brought up to speed on what was being discussed. [...] We were
completely left out of the process [because of the hearing interpreters’ actions].

3.3 Training

The third broad category that emerged in the data was that of training. Participants discussed the training they had and the need for more, both continuous and specific, in order to do the work in this specialized area of interpreting legal discourse and working in legal settings. The sub-themes in this category include:

- Meaning based interpreting
- Specialized knowledge/practice
- Team practices
- Views of consumers
- Educate consumers

The following quotes represent the need for training that addresses how interpreters conceptualize the task of interpreting and how that impacts the interpreted interactions. These quotes focus on team practices and the misuse of power:

I told the hearing interpreter I needed clarification on something. She refused to get clarification. Then I looked to the second hearing interpreter on the team and she also refused. They both said ‘no’ they wouldn’t get the clarification. I could not believe they said “no”. On top of that, everyone in the courtroom was waiting on the interpretation. [...] Do I have no say in the interpreting work?

I would like to see agencies implement policies to hire a Deaf/hearing team for all legal jobs. That way they would avoid having hearing interpreters who don’t have an accurate assessment of their work, which would avoid [the hearing interpreter making] errors. This all goes back to who has the power to decide who is hired [the agency and/or the hearing interpreter].

The data reveals some contrasting views between Deaf & non-deaf interpreters, specifically related to teamwork and how their views on the task of interpreting differ:

We need to get information from the attorneys and the Deaf person. But I hate when the hearing interpreter oversteps and asks the Deaf person for personal information. You have to know what to ask and not ask, and how to let the Deaf person give what information they want to give.

Hearing interpreters have told me they don’t need a DI, and yet those hearing interpreters don’t have the judgment to know when a DI is needed. I’ve been in situations where a DI is needed, but the hearing interpreter doesn’t see it.

Deaf interpreters see power dynamics in everything we do – the hearing interpreters sometimes get it, but often don’t. Do they understand their own privilege as a dominant society member?

The data showed that interpreters could identify decisions that reflected an awareness of system power and how their own knowledge can be used to create working conditions that support effective interpreting practices.

If you understand the system and how power operates in the legal system, then you can navigate through the system to get what you need.

I know that I can ask that a case get moved on the docket if I have to be somewhere else. It is use of my power that I prefer not to use, but do use sometimes. It’s nice of them to make an exception for me, but I think the Deaf person has a right to have the opportunity to fully experience the court proceedings.

As indicated earlier, the focus group participants are from two countries that have had different paths to training. This resulted in some differences that seem to relate to a lack of agency and lack of training in the area of legal interpreting. For example:
I have withdrawn from a case when the interpreting team is not working out. I didn’t like what is happening, so I just walked out.

The courts decide who is qualified, so if you are on the list, that is it.

3.4 Intersection: System Power + Power and Privilege

The data revealed examples that highlight the intersections among concepts of power, privilege and interpreters’ sense of agency, conceptualization of the task of interpreting, and training. These intersections cut across the power dynamics of concepts of systemic power, power in the legal system, and one’s own personal and/or professional power and privilege.

The following quote poignantly represents one example of the intersection of system power and power and privilege:

People have their pre-conceived notions of who I am when I enter the room, regardless of the fact that I am entering in a professional role. Because of that, I go into interpreting situations in a less than powerful position. I am black and because of how other people see me, hold the same power that other professionals hold. [...] So, I must present myself each time, as a consummate professional.

4. Discussion

The participants in this study demonstrated an awareness of power dynamics and of how the constructs of power affect us as individual interpreters, as well as how we as interpreters affect the power dynamic in an interpreted exchange through our conscious and unconscious decisions. The data provided numerous examples of individual or internal factors related to power, in the categories of sense of agency, conceptualization of the task and training. We also uncovered factors that either related to the individual interpreter or a group of interpreters and external contexts that impact the balancing of power and the misuse of power. Finally, there were themes that demonstrate the impact of the greater society in which we live and the institutions with which we interact, that also have a significant influence on the decisions interpreters make and resulting interpreting work. Across all of these themes, we see that building respectful and professional relationships among all participants supports effective interpreting and effective decision-making, in the immediate and subsequent interactions.

The data set represents the cyclical and recursive nature of making effective decisions that address the power dynamics in the interpreted interactions, and we sense this framework could serve as the possible basis of training, supervision, and mentorship for interpreters in general and training for working in legal specialization. From the data the foundation of effective decisions seems to start with a strong understanding of power and privilege at two levels: societal and personal. From one’s personal awareness of power and privilege, one can develop a sense of agency and understanding of power and privilege in interactions. This then is applied to how the interpreter understands what it means to provide effective and accurate interpretation in any context. Ultimately, this is influenced by her interpreter training as a generalist, and subsequent specialized training for interpreting in legal settings.

By the end of the research conversations participants identified significant need for continuing conversation among colleagues, similar to what happened in the focus groups.

5. Next Steps

We will continue to analyse the data, and may conduct further focus groups in order to explore these findings with other groups of experienced interpreters working in legal settings. We will begin to adapt and incorporate the findings into education of interpreters. We believe that training that brings awareness of power and privilege, and explicitly
addresses dynamics in interpreted interactions support effective interpreting practice.³

References


³ The researchers wish to thank the study participants – we are grateful for your time, energy and desire to improve interpreting work. Thank you also to research assistants Jennifer Cranston and LeWana Clark, Gallaudet University PhD students, and to Sharon Gervasoni for editing.

Identity Issues in Sign language Interpreting
The Power and Responsibility of Representing the Identities of Others

Flora Savvalidou
Greek Sign Language Interpreter
Greece

Keywords: Identities, Identity Theory Model, Sign Language Interpreters

Abstract
This paper investigates the issues of identities representation in an interpreted situation, using the theoretical framework of the Identity Theory model (Burke & Stets, 2009). Based on a survey that explored the relationship between sign language interpreters' anxiety and their self-talk, it identifies the power and responsibility that this representation entails, and suggests the need of awareness on identity issues for all the professionals involved in the sign language interpreting field, interpreters and their teachers alike. In order to illustrate more vividly the relationship between the interpreters' identity/ies and their power and responsibility, actual quotes from sign language interpreters, as expressed in a research study, will be used.

1. Introduction

Identity Theory was introduced by Burke and Stets (2009); it is a theoretical framework within which identity is conceptualized as a set of meanings attached to the self that serves as a standard or reference that guides behaviour in situations (Stets & Biga, 2003). Based on their model, a research was conducted trying to explore the relationship between self-talk and identity processes in role performance anxiety as experienced by sign language interpreters. This was made possible through the examination of the interpreters' self-talk (the thoughts they have before, during or after their assignments). The research was