Interpreting: An Introduction

Nancy Frishberg

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Revised Edition, 1990

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Illustrations Designed by Marian Eaton

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All photographs are by Pentafore Photo Group, except Figures 9-7 and 9-8, by Nancy Frishberg.

Preface

The 1990 revised edition has expanded the sections on educational, legal and medical interpreting, and has brought the text up-to-date on the RID evaluation process. RID Publications wishes to thank Nancy Frishberg and the members of the Revision Committee: Marty Barnum, CSC-MN; Gail Bedessem, CSC-IL; Gay Belliveau, CSC, Prov: SC:L-NJ; Charleen Brewer, CSC-NM; Jan Kanda, President, RID, CSC-CA; Kellie L. Mills, CSC, Prov: SC:L-MA; and Donna Reiter Brandwein, Chair, CSC-IL. Although working under impossibly tight deadlines, they were able to produce work of high quality using their expertise and experience so that all who read this book will benefit. The RID home office staff, especially Debbie Prevost, NTS coordinator, and Sylvia Straub, executive director, has been indispensible.

Contents

Introduction

This book is about interpreting between people who do not share the same language. The two primary audiences are expected to be students of interpreting, and working interpreters, both novice and experienced. The book is not designed in the way that one might expect an introductory textbook to be designed. An introductory textbook generally includes study questions or suggested assignments at the end of each chapter. Perhaps it will be better to consider this book as a reference manual. While reading this book—or any other single book for that matter—will not turn an interested and hardworking student into an interpreter, it can offer a framework for understanding the field of interpreting. Interpreting requires both a base of knowledge and a body of experience. This book is designed to begin to provide that base of knowledge. Instructors in interpreter education programs will find it necessary to supplement the reading here: observations of working interpreters, practical exercises to simulate the complex array of tasks an interpreter takes on, additional reading, and discussions of accepted practice in the locale where the interpreters will be working. Nor does this book pretend to have all of the

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answers to the working interpreter's questions; it can only attempt to put those questions in perspective. Working interpreters will benefit from discussing questions raised in this book with colleagues and co-workers inside interpreting and in related fields. And, while we have not said it yet, we anticipate the largest audience to be interpreters who translate between hearing and deaf people, sign language interpreters.

This volume's goals are more modest than other publications for sign language interpreters, in that it focuses specifically on interpreters or those studying to become interpreters. The relationships with clients (both deaf and hearing) of interpretation services will be dealt with in several sections, but from the perspective of the interpreter. Insofar as interpreters are the ones who educate the public about interpreting, much of the material will be relevant to tasks beyond the immediate work situation, including client relations, working conditions, logistics, and advocacy for interpreting. Only the final chapter on "Practical Considerations" is written toward the audience of non-interpreters, those hiring or preparing to accommodate interpreters and mixed groups of hearing and hearing-impaired people.

At the same time, this volume is more ambitious than previous ones, since it makes general statements about interpreters and interpretation wherever possible. Sign language interpreters are becoming more aware of similarities between themselves and spoken language interpreters. While twenty years ago the goals of interpreting with deaf people related to certain circumscribed spheres of action, such as rehabilitation, medical and legal emergencies, and the occasional phone call, nowadays changes in public laws and public attitudes have increased the integration of deaf citizens into the worlds of business and professional life, recreation and arts, education and all aspects of social service. The increased opportunities for deaf people have expanded the dimensions of the interpreter's work as well. This book, then, attempts to identify the parallels between spoken language interpretation and interpretation with deaf people (whether presented in signed or other visual forms). We will be reminded of differences which cannot be ignored, as well.

International conference interpreting is the most well-studied, highest status and most strictly codified subfield within spoken language interpreting. Therefore, international conference interpreting is one model we can refer to frequently. At the same time, we recognize that conference interpreters function within constraints that community interpreters cannot assume. Conference interpreters can expect to prepare for an assignment by reading the specific documents which will be discussed at the treaty negotiation, technical meeting, or policy briefing. International conferences generally are conducted within formal procedures of etiquette and diplomacy among people of similar educational and social backgrounds. Spoken language interpreters are just now beginning to be educated for work in medical settings, the courts, union negotiations, and a variety of other mundane settings that interpreters with deaf people know intimately. The inability to anticipate the content of a particular assignment implies the difficulty of knowing how or what to prepare. For interpreters in the community, spontaneity is often the

hallmark of each assignment, and expecting the unexpected the interpreter's motto. Therefore, taking a new look at sign language interpreting will give breadth to the field of interpretation.

Interpreting involves competence in at least two languages, an understanding of the dynamics of human interaction in two quite different modalities (for the signing interpreter), an appreciation of social and cultural differences, the ability to concentrate and maintain one's attention, a good deal of tact, judgment, stamina, and above all a sense of humor.

Interpreting between deaf and hearing people can be thought of as a process or as an event. The process of interpreting involves several steps which we can separate out for the purpose of analyzing the task. In actual performance, these steps are accomplished nearly instantaneously, often with no discernible break from one part of the process to another. The interpreter must perceive and understand a message in one language, extract the meaning of the message from the words, intonational features, gestural behavior, pausing, and any other cuing mechanisms, and reformulate that meaning into the language of the listener. The interpreter must also monitor his or her own output to check that all the intended information comes out in the intelligible form as intended. So, for example, the grammar of the original message is in most cases of no interest to the person receiving the interpreted message; it may be of use for the interpreter later in the exchange and therefore such details are probably saved in memory for at least a few minutes. The process sketched above is primarily of interest to the interpreter (and perhaps to the cognitive scientists who study human language processing), but of less importance to the sender and receiver of the message. The participants can only evaluate the interpreted events according to whether their purposes in communicating were accomplished.

Eleven chapters follow this introduction. The first outlines the history of both spoken language interpreting and sign language interpreting. Special attention is given here to formal recognition of interpreting as a profession through legislation, certification or professional organizations. The next chapter is devoted to defining terms. As with any area of specialization, interpreting uses its own terminology to talk about the practices, the people and the problems. Sign language interpreters will find the special vocabulary used among spoken language specialists sufficiently general for our purposes as well. The terms introduced here are language-neutral wherever possible.

What skills and competencies do we expect interpreters to have? Are our expectations realistic? The chapter on skills and competencies gives some overview of the attributes of accomplished interpreters. These skills are not limited to language manipulation, but include the application of knowledge of interpersonal relations, small or large group behavior and cross-cultural communication. The description of research about interpreting and translation will elucidate what is known about interpreting both from the laboratory and from field observations. The research reviewed here includes work in experimental and survey methods, as well as proposals for future investigations of interpretation and interpreters.

It has been said that half of the job of the interpreter is translation; the rest is logistics: finding the assignment, getting to the right place, arranging the participants for everyone's maximum benefit, getting paid for one's work. Of central importance here are the issues relating to ethical practice and appropriate etiquette on the personal level. At the community level are concerns about the marketplace and the expected or required working conditions. The interpreter's inclusion indicates a willingness on the part of the people involved to admit their lack of communication or language skills, and their openness to trusting a third person to fill that lack. Interpreters, especially community interpreters, often come to the profession with admirable attitudes about performing a needed social service. Realistic understanding about some of the dynamics that shape local markets, and about how to conduct oneself as a business person can lead to positive work experiences in interpreting. A single chapter gives some perspectives on education and evaluation. These topics are addressed from the point of view of sign language interpreters in particular, with little or no emphasis on spoken language practitioners.

One long chapter orients the reader to some of the more frequent or visible interpreting assignments. The choice of which settings to focus on depended on a combination of factors. The author's own experience as a working interpreter and thus familiarity with these settings naturally shaped part of the decision. The availability of additional written resources on the settings was also an important element in the selection of the eight focused settings. The current legal requirements spelling out the rights of disabled people to access in employment, education, health care, government and legal institutions motivated the choices as well.

The chapter on special communication techniques lumps together several additional aspects of the interpreter's skills. Interpreters may find clients with communication needs unlike those described previously. To mention just one example, deaf people with serious visual difficulties may require different communication techniques. Alternatively, the circumstances of the work situation may require additional skills. For example, where the communication takes place over the telephone rather than face-to-face, the interpreter will need additional preparation. The final chapter, as mentioned above, gathers together the practical issues relating both to logistics and to language. In this section we prepare for diverse conditions in the optimal manner.

Interspersed within the text are anecdotal reports from the author and other working interpreters which are intended to be instructive, as well as entertaining. Instructors can easily supplement these anecdotes from their own experience. The bibliography includes many familiar items for those who have been involved in the field of sign language interpreting. However, readers will also find a number of less familiar sources from beyond the immediate realm of sign language and deafness. Students and working interpreters are invited to browse this bibliography for additional references to those cited directly in the text.

As we said above, books alone cannot teach the skills and sensibilities of professional interpreting. Formal classes with instructors

guiding the curriculum and the activities can supplement books. Supervised internships also contribute to an interpreter's development. In addition, let us include the peer support and sharing of professional concerns that can come from joining professional associations of interpreters.

Local organizations provide the most immediate source of support for individuals, and offer an active setting for testing ideas, working through difficulties and in general sharing professional issues. Because interpreters often work alone, they may lack a sense of what is usual and customary treatment on the job, and what is an unusual experience. Discussions in local forums can give some perspective. Local organizations also can support continuing professional education.

State associations are crucial in providing leadership in setting policies and laws affecting interpreters and therefore in the development of the interpreting job market. State-level decisions might include the determination of Department of Social Service statewide fees, legislative measures dictating how and when interpreters will be employed in legal and administrative settings, and whether to license interpreters. Interpreters who have banded together and who can present a unified, organized proposal will be taken seriously by state government agencies and elected officials. This implies that interpreters need to be talking to each other to come to resolution on each issue as it comes before the government personnel.

At the national level, interpreters have much to do in creating the kind of responsive professional organizations we want. Nationally standardized evaluation of interpreters has been and will continue to be a high priority. Communication among the various state and local organizations is a must. A national organization can be active in promoting public awareness of and reliance on professional interpreters. These few specifics only touch the surface of the benefits we can gain from supporting our professional associations.