

Research

Deaf translators from within the Deaf Community

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Deaf interpreters

Have you noticed that there are now more and more Deaf people working as interpreters in the Deaf Community? What is their job and what skills do they have? Is this a new thing or have Deaf people always supported each other in the past? Where have these translators/interpreters come from? Patrick Boudreault, a Deaf interpreter who has worked between LSQ (Langue des signes québécoise) and ASL (American Sign Language) in Canada notes that: 'there is a new trend around the world for the Deaf interpreter service provider to be an integral part of Deaf life' (2005). Yet this expertise is not fully understood.

Christopher Stone's PhD thesis from the University of Bristol, 'Towards a Deaf Translation Norm' compared Deaf people and hearing people working as translators on TV news programmes. He found that there were differences between the ways Deaf and hearing people worked. This PhD research has looked at how Deaf people do translation. This information may be useful because hearing interpreters (especially in training courses) may benefit from knowing what skills Deaf translators have.

Inside the Deaf Club

It is known that sign language using Deaf people have traditionally exchanged skills and abilities amongst themselves supporting each other as a collective community. For example, often in the Deaf club, Deaf people who were cobblers, carpenters, tailors, etc. would do small jobs for other Deaf people, and people skilled in other trades would return the favour (Ladd 2003). This skills exchange was not limited to manual trades and also included written English skills. Deaf people with greater fluency in English have also acted as translators in Deaf clubs since the 19th century (Stone 2006). These Deaf people provide an example of translators from the minority community rather than from the majority community. In Australia these people have sometimes been called 'ghost writers' by the Australian Deaf community.

The interviews

We interviewed four Deaf people in Australia, two in Melbourne and two in Sydney. Their ages ranged from mid 50s to mid 80s and two had Deaf parents. Two were also trilinguals: (Australian Sign Language, Australian Irish Sign Language and English). We interviewed them using semi-structured interviews and we wanted a Deaf 'space' to be created in the interviews. The interviewer (Robert Adam - an Australian Deaf person with Deaf parents) was an insider who had also done this translation in the Deaf Community. We asked them questions about: their experiences, their motivations, what they did, who benefited and who were other Deaf people doing the same translation work.

Our findings

We will discuss two of the themes which emerged: cultural dynamics and liaison interpreting. There were other themes but for this article we will focus on these two.

Cultural dynamics

We asked the four Deaf people where these Deaf translators (or 'ghost writers') came from. We found that often they started in the Deaf Club, although one started doing translation activities and English support for classmates in school. Another came from a Deaf family and did translation/interpreting within the family (between hearing/Deaf members and Australian Sign Language/Australian Irish Sign Language using members of the family). This shows that Deaf translators have come from within the Deaf Community.

We found that Deaf people were more comfortable with asking other Deaf people to do written translation. They usually asked for this help with correspondence (for example to employers, the bank, taxation office, etc.). One ghost writer said that it was important for translations to be in proper English and that Deaf ghost writers must use their knowledge of Deaf and hearing people to benefit Deaf people. Ghost writers who learnt sign language as a second language also did this to return the debt to the Deaf Community for sharing their language and culture.

Liaison interpreting

We found that Deaf translators did tasks in both Deaf and mainstream settings. One ghost writer was able to hear and understand spoken English and so some of the domains including platform interpreting at Deaf sporting events. Mainstream domains were mainly one-to-one environments, especially doctor appointments, meetings with lawyers and loan applications. There were also some sports training courses and tribunals. We found that the ghost writers worked between a range of language forms, including written English, lip-reading, spoken/mouthed English, DeafBlind manual as well as interpreting between Australian Irish Sign Language and Australian Sign Language.

The next step:

There are other themes in the interviews that we would like to look more closely at. For example, we are interested in why Deaf people asked ghost writers to do this work, and not others, and we also want to know what makes a good ghost writer. We will do this by looking at the first four interviews again and then we would like to go back to the same four Deaf people and ask them more questions, as well as interview a few other Deaf people in Australia. After that we would also like to interview Deaf people in Britain who have done the same kind of translation work, and compare the two countries.

References:

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If you would like to find out more about this project, contact any one of the authors below:

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