

Deaf Translators on Television

Reconstructing the notion of 'interpreter'

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Abstract

In this paper I explore the nature of a culturally Deaf identity as opposed to a medical view of deafness, exploring notions of the 'Deaf' community as a colonised community and 'Deaf' as an ethnic identity. I then look at the language of the 'community' and changes in legislation about language use that have led to greater feelings of empowerment for the Deaf community. Further to this I explore different understandings of the political nature of translation and interpreting. This leads me into exploring the way in which Deaf people working in broadcast television news understand their role when rendering English into British Sign Language.

Keywords Deaf, ethnicity, interpreting, sign language, translation,

Introduction

My research examines Deaf and hearing translators and interpreters (T/Is) working to make news accessible to the Deaf community. The fields of translation and interpreting studies often examine culture bias in source and target languages, representation of minority voices and the authorship of the target language. With the relatively recent emergence of Deaf people working in their first language, interpreting the news and other television programmes, there has been much general debate about whether hearing interpreters should be working on television at all, or whether this should principally be the domain of Deaf people (Duncan, 1997).

It has also been suggested by some Deaf T/Is that as television is one of the few situations that facilitates Deaf people translating/interpreting, because of the autocue, this should be the sole domain of Deaf interpreters. Further to this debate is the political dimension, that as this provides access for the Deaf community it is *only* Deaf interpreters that can provide an appropriate, linguistically and culturally sensitive translation. With that in mind it is useful to

examine the issue of the identity of those within and involved with the British Deaf community.

The Deaf Community

In my research one of the data sets consists of interviews with Deaf interpreters from Deaf families with their first language (L1) BSL and their second language (L2) English. I have video footage of Deaf interpreters from Deaf families interpreting and of hearing interpreters from hearing families interpreting too (L1 English and L2 BSL). The Deaf informants would be considered core members of the Deaf community and the hearing informants would be considered at best peripheral to the community. I will now go on to discuss the Deaf community.

Deaf people who identify as being members of a linguistic and cultural community typically use a capital 'D' in the word Deaf to denote this identity rather than a lower case 'd'; the latter, deaf, denoting audiological status rather than community identity (Senghas & Monaghan, 2002). Membership of the Deaf community in the past has predominantly been due to being born Deaf or losing hearing at an early age so that no sense of loss is felt. Cultural identity was then forged by attending schools for the deaf in early life and Deaf clubs throughout the rest of life. As Ladd says: 'This traditional community ... consists of Deaf people who attended Deaf schools and met either in Deaf clubs or at other Deaf social activities' (2003: 44). The Deaf community has been defined by Baker and Padden as: 'compris[ing] those deaf and hard of hearing individuals who share a common language, common experiences and values, and a common way of interacting with each other, and with hearing people' (1978: 4). Membership is defined by: 'attitudinal deafness'. This occurs when a person identifies him/herself as a member of the deaf community, and other members accept that person as part of the community' (ibid).

As discussed by Ladd (2003: 42) this is strengthened by 90% endogamous marriage. 5% of Deaf people born deaf have Deaf parents and a further 5% have one parent who is Deaf. The extent to which these families have many generations is unknown but there are documented cases of one Deaf family having nine generationsⁱ of Deaf people in Britain (Taylor, 1998) and one of 12 generations of Deaf people in Australia.

These multi-generational Deaf people are seen as the core members of the Deaf community. They are the ones who have experienced life, at least within the home, as a Deaf place separate from a hearing mainstream world. As the guardians of sign languages, Deaf history and Deaf culture, there is an expectation that they will preserve and pass on Deaf ways of being in the world. By taking my Deaf T/Is from this group it enables me to explore what a Deaf translation might be like if it were not for the 'hearing' institutional barriers that the T/Is face in the news studio.

Another phenomena mentioned briefly by Ladd (2003: 42) is that of audilogically hearing children born to Deaf adults. As only 10% of deaf children are born to one or two Deaf parents then the remaining children that are born to Deaf adults are hearing. Even though they are hearing, some of these children will have a signed language as the first acquired language and will have grown up in the community with the associated community values. In terms of identity there are some who have argued that whilst these children are audilogically hearing they are culturally Deaf (Napier, 2002). These children can be considered at least *partial* members of the community (Ladd, 2003; Smith, 1996) and can be considered as Deaf (hearing).

Finally other individuals can become members of the Deaf community, at least partially, depending on whether they become deaf and learn sign language. Or if they are hearing people, learning sign language, working and/or socialising within the Deaf community. These can include linguists, teachers, hearing parents of Deaf children and interpreters.

Deaf as an Ethnicity

If we examine the definition of *Ethnic group* (Fenton, 2003: 23):

1. that the group is a kind of sub-set within a nation-state,
2. that the point of reference of difference is typically culture rather than physical appearance, and
3. often that the group referred to is 'other' (foreign, exotic, minority) to some majority who are presumed not to be 'ethnic'

When we view this in terms of membership of the community (Baker & Padden, 1978) then we can see that Deaf people who consider themselves members of the Deaf community do indeed have *a point of reference of difference* that is *cultural* and that this comes from being born deaf and experiencing the world in a visual way. Clearly for the 5 – 10% who are born into a Deaf family, they are not only born into that group but will also have a sense of historical identity that separates them from the majority, such that Deaf people become the *'other'* to hearing the majority who are presumed not to be *'ethnic'*. It is arguable that Deaf people do not construct themselves as a *sub-set within a nation-state* as there is a definite sense of a global Deaf community (Ladd, 2003). But this global community is constructed in much the same way as that of the commonalities that first nation peoples of North America feel in a common struggle against a bigger hegemony (Feldman, 2001). And as such the hegemony would construct Deaf British people as *a kind of sub-set within a nation-state*, rather than as part of a transnational community.

In much the same way that one of the aims of Women's Studies is to reclaim the history of women and their influence in the world, some of the most recent and influential books in Deaf Studies, (Fischer & Lane, 1993; Ladd, 2003; Lane, 1984a; Lane, Hoffmeister, & Bahan, 1996) aim to do just that too. Specifically, the aims of these publications are to give Deaf

people their history back and to de-medicalise the view of the Deaf community so that it moves away from an audiological standpoint to a cultural and linguistic one.

This still suggests that members of the Deaf community can fall into 4 different categories of ethnicity or at least are 4 different points along a continuum:

- those that are born into the community (either because they are born deaf or hearing in a Deaf family);
- those born into the community without a sense of history and attend Deaf schools where they gain a sense of historical identity (children born deaf in hearing families);
- those that become deaf at an early enough age to only remember experiencing the world as a deaf person and also attend a Deaf school to gain a historical identity;
- those that become deaf later in life but still early enough to learn the language fluently, and to socialise in the Deaf community and go to Deaf clubs and so gain a sense of cultural and historical identity as a Deaf person.

For the hearing children born into Deaf families there is a notion of mixed heritage and this mixed heritage differs from that experienced by deaf people born into hearing families and becoming Deaf later in life. The difference being between:

- having 2 ethnicities in the home and as a Deaf person
- having 2 ethnicities in life is that the former occurs simultaneously and the latter concurrently

But essentially the Deaf community accepts hard of hearing people as community members if they learn the language and follow the cultural rules. Whilst these members of the community may not be considered ethnically Deaf, there is a strong case in arguing that at least the first if not the first, and second cases above, are ethnically Deaf (regardless of audiological hearing ability). This ethnicity has been called 'Deafhood' by Ladd (1998; 2003) and one could consider one of the problems faced by the Deaf community is that deaf children are born as a diaspora (Lane, 2005), and later claim their heritage if they are exposed to the community. Most deaf children are born to hearing parents and come 'home' to the community either as infants by attending schools for the deaf or later in life.

Colonialism in the Deaf community

Ladd (2003) describes many examples of communities around the world, both historically and in the present day, where Deaf people are full participants in society. And yet Deaf people, on a daily basis, face tremendous oppression around the world today and in Britain. One of the aims of Deaf Studies is to imagine what life would be like if the world were Deaf and Deaf people faced no barriers to their achievements. Ladd (2003) explored societies where Deaf people were more liberated as a useful foundation for analysing the construction of identity within the British Deaf community.

Ladd (1984a) was the first in recent years to break open the history of education. Originally this education was one that not only tried to get these 'broken hearing people' to lip read and speak but also, in different areas, encouraged the use of the visual-manual language used by Deaf children. This 'golden age' was a time when Deaf people were involved as tutors and the teaching of Deaf children. The 'beautiful language' was taught and used and this, along with Deaf role models and literate Deaf people, is described as a thriving minority community.

In the past Deaf and hearing people were equally involved in teaching children in many schools. This changed significantly after a Deaf educator's conference in Milan in 1880 when there was a broad acceptance of 'oral' teaching methods in contrast to the use of signed languages (Lane et al., 1996). Children were then taught to speech read and use their voice, even though for deaf children this meant that they had to try to use a language that they could not perceive (Lane, 1984b). This also stopped the use of Deaf adults in the education of deaf children denying them access to their linguistic and cultural heritage (Ladd, 1998) and attempted to assimilate Deaf people into the wider mainstream non-Deaf world, paralleling the experience of the lost or stolen generations of aboriginal people in Australia.ⁱⁱ

Even as institutional education allowed Deaf people to come together and to form communities, it also created a structure that could enable the Deaf community to be controlled by hearing educators. Despite the best efforts of these hearing educators, the language and community survive, albeit in a defensive state of resistance against the colonisers, rather than freely flourishing. Recent legislative moves could be said to be facilitating a change and I will discuss legislation later in this paper.

As oralism spread, national Deaf associations were established (Ladd, 2003: 127). But power structures were already in place for hearing people to act as gatekeepers to the community. These gatekeepers - who were teachers of the Deaf and Missioners (who also managed Deaf social clubs) - spoke the language of the majority and exercised control over Deaf peoples' lives throughout the 20th century. This is still the case, albeit to a much lesser extent.

Whilst this is just a whistle stop tour of the colonisation of the Deaf community and the oppression of identity, culture, history and language, it is hoped that it begins to facilitate an understanding of why Deaf people may wish to claim space on television, as something they want to have some control in, rather than something that is controlled by others.

British Sign Language Recognition

There have been certain pieces of legislation that have recognised the existence of, and promoted the acceptance of, British Sign Language (BSL) in the UK. Firstly, the language was recognised in the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984. The act ensures that when the police were detaining deaf people who used sign language they should use interpreters. This is also now the case in courts and so we see within the legal framework some level of recognition of the language.

The Disability Discrimination Act 1995 brought about recognition of the need to provide information and services in an accessible way by making ‘reasonable adjustments’ to information, goods, and services. One of these reasonable adjustments again being the provision of information in BSL, or commissioning the services of an interpreter so that Deaf sign language users can access goods and services in an equitable way to other service users.

Although the Deaf community identify as a linguistic and cultural minority and not as disabled, this act has also contributed to greater public recognition of the Deaf community as a language minority. Finally, in 2003, the government officially recognised BSL as a language of the UK. With this recognition came some funds to ensure greater awareness of the Deaf community and sign language, although generally it is not clear what this recognition means. All of these changes in legislation provide a backdrop of empowerment for Deaf people.

Deaf Oral traditions

It is important to recognise that, unlike English, British Sign Language (BSL) is an unwritten language. Unwritten or ‘oral’ languages exhibit different features that influence the organisation of the discourse and how different parts of the text relate to one another. Ong uses a taxonomy to describe the ‘characteristics of orally based thought and expressions’ (1982: 36). He lists nine characteristics for oral (as in “unwritten”) cultures. ⁱⁱⁱ

Ong also describes how the use of a written system influences the thought processes of people. It may be that the discourse features that we see from Deaf T/Is, whose first language, BSL, has no writing system, will differ from that of hearing T/Is in the ways described by Ong of oral cultures.

Primary orality, such as oral histories and poetry, is different to the secondary orality of literate peoples, such as telephone calls and conversational storytelling. This enables Deaf T/Is to use their primary orality to best advantage when working from English to BSL in a way that is not available to hearing T/Is whose orality skills are secondary. This is arguably true even of Deaf (hearing) T/Is whose first language is BSL, because of having fluent spoken and written English where the orality is secondary and where, for example, the edit-ability of written English facilitates subordination.

The news stories are written and then read aloud so they are ostensibly written/literate texts that are delivered orally. This does not make the English texts examples of either primary or secondary oral texts, but rather edited, subordinated, succinct, literate texts. The agency that the Deaf T/Is exert is to change the written texts into oral texts that are understood by their intended audience as representing culturally Deaf texts rather than representations of hearing texts.

Translation and Interpreting theory

Interpreters have always been around and they are used when someone does not know someone else's language - the oldest recorded use of an interpreter was in 2500 BC in ancient Egypt under King Neferirka-Re (Pöchhacher and Shlesinger 2002). Here, interpreters were used in trade and to ensure that the barbarians that did not speak Egyptian obeyed the king. This is typical; interpreters and translators throughout the ages have been used by majority cultures to oppress, manipulate and control minority cultures and languages. Colonialism can

be facilitated by translators and interpreters in modern times in much the same way as translators and interpreters have been used in antiquity to exercise power (Bassnett & Trivedi, 1999).

Venuti (1998) places the onus on the translator to accept that every translation and interpretation is a political act and embodies the ideology of the translator. This must mean that the politics of the individual T/I influences the rendering of target language (TL) or language that the T/Is work into. This ideology is as much informed by the cultural identity of the T/Is as by their fluency in the TL.

Within this context it is important to note that in the Deaf community, hearing family members, priests, teachers, and social workers, have acted and still act as T/Is (Scott-Gibson, 1991). This highlights the power that these individuals and groups had over the Deaf community and can be broken down into three different types of power:

1. Those acting as T/Is have power by virtue of being in a position of power within the community.
2. Those acting as T/Is, including hearing family members, have power by virtue of being members of the mainstream hearing majority.
3. In their capacity as T/Is, they are able to exercise power in controlling the information that individual or the community receive, as told in the anecdotal stories of T/Is telling Deaf people they will, 'tell them later'.

However, Deaf people have also acted as translators in Deaf clubs since the 19th century; those who are better at reading English have always supported those who are not. These Deaf people provide an example of translators from the minority community rather than from the majority community. Interestingly, although these historic Deaf T/Is could have power over

other Deaf monolinguals in at least being able to be gatekeepers to information, this would go against notions of the historic Deaf community with a collective cultural identity (Ladd, 2003). The Deaf T/Is have given monolingual members of the community access to information that they would not otherwise have had access to because that was the skill they added to the collective melting pot. That is not to say that there have not been gatekeeper T/Is within the community and it would be interesting to look for evidence of this in further studies.

Professional sign language interpreters emerged in the early 1980s (Scott-Gibson, 1991). This was the first time that the role of interpreters was distinguished from that of social worker, or other majority culture authority figures. This was a potentially emancipatory move for Deaf people in that interpreters were expected to adhere to a Code of Ethics and were not involved in all aspects of Deaf people's lives, unlike missionaries and social workers (Ladd, 2003). This can also explain why metaphors of an interpreter being like a 'telephone' or 'conduit' were prevalent at that time (Roy, 1993).

This also brought more people from the majority culture into the community to work as interpreters. Unlike in other minority spoken language communities this meant that most of the interpreters were community outsiders (Alexander *et al*, 2004). In terms of power and control, the community had historically exercised control over who became an interpreter. Again anecdotally, Deaf (hearing) and hearing people who socialised in the community would be chosen to interpret different things. Those that were not chosen were not deemed to be appropriate or ready to interpret. In creating a separate group of people this has gradually eroded the control that Deaf people have over who is chosen to become an interpreter.

In terms of power, the shift now relies more heavily on the hearing interpreter becoming enculturated. This cultural sensitivity brings about the idea of an interpreter being bilingual and bicultural. The downfall of traditional routes for Deaf people choosing who are sanctioned to

be interpreters means it is mainstream institutions rather than the community that make this judgement (Scott-Gibson, 1991). The community only has power to decide who will interpret for them on a personal level, where they have some degree of agency in the decision making process, or in the administering of funds that pay for the interpreter's services.

The politics of translation

When discussing translation and interpreting it is important to bear in mind that whilst translation and interpreting scholars have often discussed the idea of an ideal translation or the idea of equivalence these are things that are aimed for but that can never be achieved.

Álvarez and Vidal state that:

Contemporary studies on translation are aware of the need to examine in depth the relationship between the production of knowledge in a given culture and its transmission, relocation and reinterpretation in the target culture. This obviously had to do with the production and ostentation of power and with the strategies used by this power in order to represent the other culture (1996: xx).

This is highly relevant to the situation of Deaf and hearing interpreters working on the news when considering issues of identity within the Deaf community in Britain. Not only is the relationship between the knowledge produced considered, but also the relationship of the translator to the culture producing the knowledge as can be seen by Temple and Young:

For people who do not speak the dominant language in a country, the idea that language is power is easy to understand. If you cannot give voice to your needs you become dependent on those who can speak the relevant language to speak for you (2004:164).

In the introduction I mentioned that there has been some debate in the Deaf community and especially amongst Deaf interpreting/translating professionals about whether hearing interpreters should be interpreting television. Often this is couched within a theme of hearing interpreters taking the jobs of Deaf people when there is plenty of work for hearing interpreters to do within wider society. This does not seem to be the only reason for Deaf people to appear on the screen.

Venuti (1998) and other authors discuss the idea of ensuring that the text is translated with a degree of foreignness, such that the ‘otherness’ of the source language is at least noted by the reader. This is predominantly because most of the translation activity in the world occurs from a minority language being translated into American English. To give you an example, Mason, cited in Venuti, discusses the skewing of a Spanish text in the English translation:

Thus, “antiguos mexicanos” (“ancient Mexicans”) is rendered as “Indians,” distinguishing them sharply from their Spanish colonizers; “sabios” (“wise men”) as “diviners,” opposing them to European rationalism; and “testimonias” (“testimonies”) as “written record,” subtly privileging literary over oral traditions. (Venuti, 1998:2)

It is clear to see that there could be political reasons for the skewing of text when working from one language to another. Similarly, native versus non-native competence in a language might best ensure that you render the meaning that you have understood from the source text. But only native competency in both languages and cultures might allow you greater accuracy, although nothing has meaning outside of context and we do not all understand the same things in the same ways, so this by no means solves the problem.

Deaf versus hearing interpreters

The situation that we find ourselves in with the interpreting of the news is slightly different from the situation described by Venuti (1998). Rather than interpreting from a minority language to a majority language, English news is interpreted into BSL with the interpreter appearing on the right hand corner of the screen. The Deaf community is a small community, interpreters are recognised and their community membership (and ethnicity) is noticed immediately. Having a Deaf person interpreting the news automatically acts as a role model for other Deaf people.

It can be seen as being politically advantageous to ensure that American (or British) monolingual readers of translated texts are aware that the events of which they are reading happens in a different local reality than their own. That is to say rather than the foreign becoming domesticated some difference is maintained (although this could lead to exoticism).

For the Deaf community that wants to preserve its cultural views and values, preserving mainstream majority values is seen as undesirable.

When asked about the ideal audience that the Deaf interpreters aimed for, one of my informants gives a representative quote in an interview with me:

Rebecca: the audience that I aim for is those that don't understand English at all ... it is better that they watch the information in BSL so that it is clear.

All of the interviews with Deaf interpreters and all of the Deaf interpreted language data I have are from those who would fall into the ethnic Deaf category. In interview they clearly express that levels of competency in language are different and that their ideal translation goals are to domesticate their target language for the target culture. In this situation, however, the Deaf interpreters are domesticating to the minority community, from core members of that community and creating a text that is broadcast on prime time regional and national television.

The Deaf interpreters have no power over which stories are chosen and little power over the length of time they are given to ensure that the translation is effective. The Deaf interpreters are aware that hearing people are watching the television and that they cannot offend the sensibilities of the hearing audience. This is well expressed by one of my informants talking about the first interpretation of the Queen's Christmas speech:

Kat: the Queen was very solemn and the Deaf person had lots of facial expression because it was BSL and it was slated really... it was the hearing audience that disapproved of it so who is right or wrong.

Yet even so this space is used so that Deaf people can reinforce their language, culture and values; viewers who understand the language are able to see a clear act of resistance against the wider world that increases the status of sign language and maintains community and ethnic values. Identity plays a clear role in this although it is not clear as yet what exactly it is.

Kat: I've seen some Deaf interpreters on TV and you can tell by watching that they are not native BSL users sometimes hearing people sign better than Deaf people sometimes it depends on the individual and how well they have mixed and acquired the language there are some Deaf interpreters that I'm not comfortable watching.

This shows that there appears to be an issue to do with language and also perhaps identity, although Rebecca perfectly represents the other informants' opinions on hearing interpreters; a view that I mentioned in the beginning:

Rebecca: hearing interpreters really shouldn't be on TV ... when a Deaf person can do the job.

Altogether this shows not only the complex nature of who is seen to be desirable as an interpreter on television; just to be Deaf is not the answer and there needs to be greater exploration into this area.

Conclusion

The Deaf community consists of those born into the community as well as those who come to the community at a later time. As a community, it has faced high levels of oppression and assimilatory politics, beginning with the colonisation of the education system by hearing educators at the expense of Deaf educators. Despite this, the community has survived as a linguistic and cultural community in the UK.

The language of the British Deaf community does not display features of written, but rather oral language. This is reinforced by the oral traditions of the community. As such, when working as a translator or interpreter, one of the challenges is to create an oral language text rather than mimic a written language style.

Deaf people who work on the television rendering the broadcast news from English to BSL focus on community values when translating the news. The situation ideally requires a Deaf person, i.e. a deaf person with a Deaf ethnicity. Even so, by appearing on the screen of mainstream television, the decisions and agency that the Deaf professionals are able to exert

are still limited by the perceptions of the non-Deaf mainstream audience. Any language decisions made by the Deaf T/Is that move towards creating a Deaf BSL space on television are still happening within a colonial context.

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Notes

i Personal communication with Sandra Smith, June 2000

ii <http://www.alphalink.com.au/~rez/Journey/index.htm> accessed June 2005

iii 1. Additive rather than subordinate, 2. Aggregative rather than analytic, 3. Redundant or 'copious', 4. Conservative or traditionalist, 5. Close to the human life world, 6. Agonistically toned, 7. Empathetic and participatory rather than objectively distanced, 8. Homeostatic, 9. Situational rather than abstract

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