

## Whose interpreter is she<sup>1</sup> anyway?

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### Introduction

This article explains the development of sign language interpreting within England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Our journey of development is similar to other European and some North American countries. The aim is to analyse how the Deaf community was previously involved in the selection of interpreters, and to see whether examples of this can still be found. The article will also look at the change from a Deaf community-led interpreting service to governmental and non-governmental interpreting provision. Finally, I will look beyond the UK to look at other models of engaging the Deaf community. These models show how interpreting services can be more Deaf-led and to ensure that interpreters work for both the hearing and the Deaf-community without a mainstream/hearing cultural bias.

### Interpreters in the community

Traditionally interpreters have been either Deaf or hearing were chosen by the Deaf community (Corfmat, 1990; Stone, 2006). Suitable hearing children with Deaf parents (commonly known as CODAs) and hearing people who socialised in the community would be chosen to interpret. This happened in different settings, e.g. a Deaf person asking a hearing or Deaf person if they would come with them to the doctors. Those who were not chosen were not considered to be appropriate (and might never be so) or not ready to interpret yet. These would have included church workers, family and friends of Deaf people and the Deaf community (Scott-Gibson, 1991). And as these people were a part of the Deaf community they could be responsible to the Deaf community. Direct contact with family and friends create informal networks of monitoring and support.

With the establishment of the Deaf Welfare Examination Board (DWEB) in 1928 (Simpson, 2007) a more formal system came about. Traditionally interpreters might still have been asked to interpret in some situations, but those with the DWEB qualification did most of the interpreting. The DWEB training included supervised in-service training based in Deaf missions/centres/clubs. The Board's Certificate and Diploma examinations, for missionary/welfare officers to the deaf, included examining candidates in sign language interpreting. This earlier training involved mixing and interacting with Deaf people. Their skills were learnt in a work environment,

This earlier provision required the trainee missionary/welfare officers to spend much of their time in the company of, and interpreting for, deaf people with a consequential emphasis on good communication/interpreting skills (Simpson, 1991: 217).

Whilst there were problems with hearing people controlling many aspects of the lives of Deaf people they often developed a native 'accent'. These hearing people understood the language and lives of Deaf people. Deaf people also understood them, their language and their interpretations.

With the establishment of interpreter training and assessment in this country, the sign language interpreting 'profession' expanded (Ladd, 2003). More and more hearing people with no Deaf family became interpreters. This professionalisation has also meant a change from voluntarily to paid work (Preston, 1996). Unlike other minority (spoken) language communities (Alexander, Edwards, & Bogusia, 2004), this means that most of the interpreters are outsiders to the community.

### UK Developments of Interpreter Standards

Professional sign language interpreters emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Brien, Brown, & Collins, 2002; Scott-Gibson, 1991). This was the first time that the role of interpreters was

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<sup>1</sup> I have used the female pronoun because approximately 80% of the sign language interpreters in the UK.

<sup>2</sup> Kind thanks to ASLI ([www.asli.org.uk](http://www.asli.org.uk)) who have supported my attendance to WASLI as their representative.

distinguished from that of social worker, or other authority figures. According to Simpson (1991: 215),

Demise of the DWEB was brought about by implementation of the Younghusband Report and the Seebohm Report which, by the early 1970s initiated a rapid transition to generic full-time training and qualifications, with many of the specialist missions and their workers being brought into the generic social service departments.

Interpreters were then expected to adhere to a Code of Ethics. They were not involved in all aspects of Deaf people's lives, unlike missionaries and social workers. This could be seen as giving more power to Deaf people.

The British Deaf Association (BDA) then applied for funding for a project from the government Department for Health and Social Services (DHSS). The Council for the Advancement of Communication with Deaf People (CACDP) was established in December 1980 (Simpson, 2007). After the end of this project. CACDP became independent of the BDA and became the national awarding body for British Sign Language (BSL) and Deafblind manual qualifications. Before this point most of the sign language classes had been based within Deaf clubs and Deaf churches. CACDP worked hard to make sure that classes were now based in tertiary education colleges. Although classes were more widely available for adult learners they had less and less contact with the Deaf community.

The first CACDP exam (Stage 3 [Advanced] BSL) was for interpreters of known ability. They took the exam in 1982. It tested fluency of BSL, some translation skills and some interpreting into spoken English. Successful interpreters were then admitted onto the register of sign language interpreters as Registered Qualified Sign Language Interpreters (RQSLI). The exam changed in 1988. The interpreting part was removed from the Stage 3 and a new interpreter exam was introduced. Interpreters had to take that language exam (Stage 3) before taking a course and then the interpreting exam. This exam tested translation (BSL to written English); ethical behaviour (interview in BSL with Deaf and hearing professionals); interpreting one-way (BSL to English and English to BSL) from video clips; and interpreting two-way (dialogue interpreting by role-play). If successful the interpreters became members of the register of sign language interpreters.

By 1989 CACDP began negotiations with a government body, the National Council for Vocational Qualifications. Later on national consultations on the national occupational standards for interpreting (spoken and signed) also happened. This ended with a new style of assessment. Interpreters had to submit a portfolio of evidence. This included evidence of signing with Deaf people for the language units and interpreting in the community for the interpreting units. Those who pass the assessment are eligible to register on the CACDP register and are now called Members of the Register of Sign Language Interpreters (MRSLI)<sup>3</sup>. The national consultations (in 1995 and 2006) included universities, interpreting organisations, training providers and community groups. It is doubtful that the voices of Deaf people was heard above the contributions from the more powerful institutions. The standards are not written from a Deaf-centred perspective. The standards are supposed to be appropriate for all interpreters (spoken and signed).

### **Institutionalisation of training, assessment and registration**

After DWEB and the establishment of the CACDP system we have seen the gradual development of BSL and interpreter training courses. Initially we saw the establishment of short courses (two weeks in length). Later came the establishment of university degrees (Brien, Brown, & Collins, 2002). The shorter courses (two weeks) targeted people who already had some fluency in BSL and perhaps were working as interpreters. Some of these courses targeted working interpreters with their full professional status undertaking further professional development. The shorter courses focused on specific areas of the interpreting process and developed/improved practical skills. More recently there are part-time and full-time interpreter training courses (several years). Undergraduate courses now train interpreters for their associate professional status and post-graduate courses train working interpreters to gain their full professional status (IRP, 2007).

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<sup>3</sup> [http://www.cacdp.org.uk/interpreters/BecomeLSP/BSLEngInt/Reg\\_categories.html](http://www.cacdp.org.uk/interpreters/BecomeLSP/BSLEngInt/Reg_categories.html)

Initially these courses often involved contact with the Deaf community and the Deaf club. Interpreting students were taken to the Deaf club and given Deaf 'grand-parents' for weekly interactions with Deaf people. The students may have lived with Deaf families during interpreting work placements. On work placements, students had to shadow working interpreters, observe their work and possibly work alongside experienced interpreters within safe environments. These students would be placed nationally (throughout the UK) and live with Deaf families during their two-week placements. This is reminiscent of the in-service training for the DWEB Certificate/Diploma. It gave the interpreters exposure to colloquial BSL and Deaf lives outside of the classroom. Initiatives such as these have declined in recent years giving students less structured interactions with Deaf people. Many of the interactions between interpreting students and Deaf people now happen on an ad hoc basis. There are no systems in place for extra-curricular interaction.

When CACDP became independent from the BDA we saw Deaf people having less and less control over the assessment of BSL and interpreting. CACDP as an awarding body was responsible to its board of trustees. Although Deaf people did not have control of DWEB there was greater contact with Deaf people and required active immersion in the community. The establishment of the national occupational standards for interpreters<sup>4</sup> led to the creation of the Independent Registration Panel (IRP). This is a panel that administers the registration of interpreters on CACDP's behalf. It consists of many stake-holders including Deaf BSL tutors, the BDA (representing the Deaf community) and Deaf interpreters.

The process of creating a separate profession in the UK has gradually eroded the control that Deaf people have over who is chosen to become an interpreter (Stone, 2005). Legislation (PACE<sup>5</sup> 1984, DDA<sup>6</sup> 1995, SENDA 2001<sup>7</sup>) has created legal obligations on institutions (the police, the courts, social services, schools, colleges, universities and businesses) to provide interpreters for Deaf people's access. In some areas national agreements dictates that only those interpreters on the CACDP (or SASLI) register should be used to interpret (PACE Code C2005: 94). CACDP's register has become something that enables institutions, businesses and public services to fulfill their legislative responsibilities. This does not mean they fulfilling the needs of Deaf people.

### **Expectations of the Deaf community and of mainstream institutions**

Today Deaf people have to rely more heavily on the hearing interpreters from outside of their community. The decline of traditional routes for Deaf people to sanction who is to be an interpreters means that mainstream institutions make these judgements, not the Deaf community (Scott-Gibson, 1991). But as with spoken language minorities, friends and family are often trusted because of shared understandings and community obligation (Edwards, Bogusia, & Alexander, 2005). An informant, who chose the pseudonym Clark (cited in Stone, 2006) said,

[hearing] interpreters dip in and out of the [Deaf] community, if a hearing interpreter was deeply involved in the community all the time then maybe they could take on board all of these factors perhaps, but most interpreters now a days dip in and out, that's it, they work in the community and then leave, it's rare that interpreters now a days are like those in the past, that was different, they were part of the community and socialised within it, it's different now.

The Deaf community expects interpreters to have a greater contact with the community and gain shared understandings and notions of obligation. This way the interpreters are felt to have accountable to the Deaf community.

The community only has power to decide who will interpret for them on a personal level. If Deaf people have some degree of power in the decision making process, or in the administering of funds that pay for the interpreter's services they can exercise some choice. This may be something that is UK specific. Interpreters chose interpreting as a profession. Traditionally the Deaf community would have chosen the people who would go with them to the doctor's

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.cilt.org.uk/standards/>

<sup>5</sup>Police and Criminal Evidence Act

<sup>6</sup>Disability Discrimination Act

<sup>7</sup> Special Educational Needs and Disability Act

appointment, or the job interview, or the bank appointment, etc (Stone, 2006). Now as government funds are available for communication support in employment some 'Deaf' control might be regained. There are no rules which say that those people undertaking communication support need to be registered, qualified or trained interpreters. Deaf people are free to choose whomever they want. To some extent market forces can redress the balance (preferred interpreters are contracted for work), but since demand far outweighs supply in the UK, choice is still seen to be limited.

As noted above some national agreements (e.g. legal) require contracted interpreters to be registered. The CACDP register requires interpreters to have taken specified courses and have passed specified assessments (portfolio assessments or university assessments)<sup>8</sup>. It also requires interpreters to be held accountable to the Code of Ethics via a complaints panel. This Code is something that has been developed in consultation with ASLI, as the representative body for the interpreting profession. It does not hold interpreters accountable to the Deaf community per se, but rather CACDP and the establishment.

### **UK compared with other Finland**

The description above summarises the developments in the UK. This allows for comparison with other countries. Finland has had interpreter training since 1978. They started with short courses and then with one-year training (1983), two-year vocational training (1986), three-year vocational training (1988), and reaching a degree programme (210 ECTS<sup>9</sup> credits 1998 to 240 ECTS from 2003). The degree is taught at two Polytechnics (DIAK and HUMAK) in three locations (Turku, Koupio and Helsinki) (SVT, 2007). Finland has the Services and Assistance for the Disabled Act (380/87) which states that, 'the municipality shall provide interpreting services in order to manage everyday affairs' and that the interpreting will be free of charge for the service users (SVT, 2007). Again this shows an institutionally driven need for interpreter provision although the Deaf community lobbied this for provision. As Deaf people are personally allocated 120 hours of interpreting per year they have control over whom they chose to interpret for them.

### **UK compared with other Estonia**

In Estonia the drafting of the professional standards were prepared by a variety of stake-holders. These included Tartu University, the Estonian Association of Sign Language Interpreters, the Estonian Association of the Deaf and their sign language interpreting centre, Tallinn school for the Deaf, Pärnu sign language interpreting centre, the Estonian association of parents with hearing impaired children, the ministry of science and education and the Estonian association of translators and interpreters (Professional Council of Servicing, 2007). This shows a more comprehensive way of including stake-holders than in the UK. They ensured Deaf people and their representatives were included in the development of the standards. This gives a louder voice to the Deaf people in the Estonian consultation than the Deaf people had in the UK. Including all interpreters (spoken and signed language) and institutions weakened the voice of Deaf people.

### **Structures involving Deaf people**

Examining the development of the interpreting profession and the interpreter as an empowerment tool, we have seen a historic change. There is and was some level of choice when there was no legislation and institutionally governed choice now there is legislation (Stone, 2006; Stone & Woll, 2008). It is useful to examine what structures currently involve Deaf people and the Deaf community. And when Deaf are people able to exercise some control over who is interpreting for them.

In the UK many BSL tutors are Deaf (although by no means all). With the introduction of portfolios of evidence, language assessment also has some Deaf involvement. The candidates need to film evidence of them interacting in BSL and talking with Deaf people. Most of the BSL assessors are Deaf and so able to decide who meets the language standard required of an

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.cacdp.org.uk/learners/Career-Options/progression-routes.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> European Credit Transfer Scheme

interpreter. Many of the universities teaching interpreting have Deaf staff teaching BSL. Some of those have Deaf people teaching a variety of courses related to interpreting such as translation, ethics and professionalism, interpreting, etc. These Deaf members of the teaching staff are also involved in the marking of assessments and examinations. Some Deaf people have been able to study in these interpreting courses and gain interpreting qualifications. We also see, as mentioned above, Deaf representation within the IRP.

In Finland Deaf people are involved in language and interpreting assessments. Deaf people are completing interpreting courses. Deaf and hearing people judge message equivalence, ensuring the interpreters meet the needs of both Deaf and hearing people. In Estonia Deaf people were actively involved in the consultation and subsequent development of the professional standards. All of these things allow for better empowerment of Deaf people concerning the services they receive and their engagement with the mainstream via those services.

Looking further a field than Europe there are clear examples of engagement with the Deaf community in Canada<sup>10</sup>. Deaf people are involved in the selection of candidates who enter the interpreting programs. They draw upon traditional (Deaf) models of interpreter selection where Deaf people deliver preparation workshops for the professional assessment exam in partnership with hearing interpreters. Deaf people test the fluency of the ASL in the interpreter professional examination. Deaf people are involved in the delivery of continual professional development courses. More recently Deaf people are being trained to act as mediators within the dispute resolution system that AVLIC<sup>11</sup> have developed in consultation with the Deaf community. This draws upon traditional models of accountability to the Deaf community.

### **Ideal developments for the UK**

It would be useful for the national occupational standards to be reviewed by Deaf people and their organizations. It is possible there are Deaf community specific notions of interpreting and accountability that are lost when the voice of Deaf people is not heard above the views of mainstream institutions and spoken language interpreters working within majority world languages.

We need to move towards Deaf BSL teachers teaching at lower language levels to ensure that students learn about Deaf Culture as early and consistently as possible. We also need more Deaf BSL teachers teaching at higher language levels. Interaction with the Deaf community needs to be factored into the curriculum and assessment. This ensures native-like fluency and accent-less BSL is more common amongst interpreters. And we need more Deaf people teaching translation and interpreting. There are many examples of Deaf people working as translators and interpreters within the community that hearing interpreters can draw upon as role-models.

We need to ensure that examination of BSL includes Deaf people in a leading role. We also need to ensure that the examination of Deaf and hearing people as interpreters involves Deaf and hearing assessors on an equal footing. This ensures sensitivity to all communities and cultures involved in the interpreting. And finally we need to ensure that interpreting within the community is undertaken by Deaf and hearing people. That Deaf people have access to people from their community as well as people from outside their community in providing access to mainstream public services and other institutions.

### **Conclusion**

When considering whose interpreter we are, there are many questions that we can ask ourselves. Whether we are just there as tools of the state ensuring that legislations is adhered to, or whether we are actually serving the Deaf community. If we ensure that we work hand in hand with the Deaf community at all levels of language and interpreter selection, teaching, training, assessment, professional development and grievances then we are working for both communities. If we do not ensure that the Deaf community and Deaf people are involved at all of these levels then we are probably not there for our Deaf clients, but rather for the establishment.

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.avlic.ca/>

<sup>11</sup> Association of Visual Language Interpreters Canada

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