

American Sign Language Interpreters and their Influence on the Hearing World

Madison Groat

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Nicole Thorn, M.A.
Thesis Chair

Tammy Fortune, M.B.A.
Committee Member

Marlene Corsini, Ed.D.
Committee Member

James H. Nutter, D.A.
Honors Director

Date

Abstract

This honors thesis is going to discuss the hearing community's perception of American Sign Language and by association the hearing community's perception of the Deaf community. For most of the hearing community their only interaction with American Sign Language is through watching an interpreter perform at their job. They personally have no physical interactions with the language. Even though they have never personally used the language or attempted to interact with the Deaf community they will draw their own conclusions about sign language and the Deaf community. The conclusions that are assumed tend to be incorrect. Early on in the field of interpreting these misunderstandings are encountered. The small nature of the Deaf community makes it hard for these false perceptions to be dismantled because the Deaf community and the hearing population with the misconceptions rarely intersect. This thesis will delve into the extent of these misconceptions and just how much of the hearing world's perspective they influence. To first understand the potential hazard of the interpreter language model it is important to understand a brief history of American Sign Language and Deaf culture. The paper when then apply these principles to the Deaf community, the interpreter, and the hearing community. The end of the paper will then dispel many of the false perceptions that the hearing community has of Deaf culture. This section is included to show that the misconceptions exist.

American Sign Language Interpreters and their Influence on the Hearing World

The American Sign Language (ASL)/English interpreter works a job that is often times misunderstood. It is thought of as a job that connects the deaf to the hearing world. Many times, it is even just referred to as the person who waves their hands in the air. It can even be thought of simply as matching an ASL sign to an English word. These are a few of the very common misconceptions about interpreters. While There are many things that are incorrectly assumed about them there are other incorrect assumptions that need to be addressed. This is how interpreters are affecting the hearing world's perception of deaf culture and by proximity ASL. In most interpreting scenarios there is a room full of hearing people and an interpreter brought in to accommodate the hearing and the deaf. Does it appear that way to both consumers though? In order to understand how the hearing world views the deaf and interpreters today it is necessary to understand the history of both. There has been a multitude of changes for the deaf and interpreters recently and both need to be addressed to know what deaf people are entitled to today while simultaneously learning where the misconceptions come from. It is also important to note the common perceptions of interpreters that have been shared on social media platforms. This is a big factor that influences people's opinions of interpreters and the Deaf community.

Vocabulary

In order to clear up any potential confusion a short explanation of the terms commonly utilized throughout this paper will be explained. The word *Deaf* with an uppercase "D" will be commonly used to explain deaf people who are a part of Deaf culture and the Deaf community. In contrast, *deaf* with a lower case "d" will be utilized

to distinguish those who have a hearing loss but may not be actively involved in Deaf culture. It may also be used generally to explain all deaf people when a cultural distinction is not necessary. To clarify, it is possible to be deaf but not utilize sign language. This could be possible because of technology, a lack of exposure to the deaf community, or a personal choice to not be involved in the Deaf community. The terms *hearing community* and *Deaf community* will also be frequently utilized. *Hearing community* is a brief way to explain the culture of America in reference to those that can hear. For the purposes of this research it is specifically referring to those in the hearing community who are not active with the Deaf or Deaf culture. It is also important to remember how *Children of Deaf Adults* (CODAs) fit into this research paper. They are an interesting juxtaposition because they grow up in both the hearing world and the Deaf world. They grow up learning ASL as their first language but most learn English at a young age. Consequently, they are involved in both cultures. The term *hearing world/community* is meant to focus on the individuals who are hearing and have had no interactions with the Deaf community, this means it excludes CODA's and interpreters. *Deaf community* or *Deaf culture* will be utilized to explain those that are deaf and actively using sign language and participating in the culture that comes along with that. A more detailed explanation of Deaf culture and the language that accompanies it will occur later on. The term interpreter will also be used throughout this whole project. Interpreter in this context refers specifically to American Sign Language (ASL) to English and English to ASL interpreters. For clarification purposes when the term interpreter is being utilized it is not referring to Certified Deaf Interpreters (CDI). This is an important distinction because the 2 are not interchangeable in the context of this paper. While

interpreters bridge both cultures they are not a part of Deaf culture. These terms will be continuously utilized throughout the paper and are used in other research projects of this nature.

Deaf Community

There are many components that need to first be understood about the Deaf community before one can understand how the hearing community is misunderstanding the Deaf community. The Deaf have overcome many barriers, with the passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) they have gained more rights. The Deaf President Now movement (1988) was also a historic moment for the Deaf community. Despite these accomplishments, it has not been an easy road and they have often been oppressed and belittled along the way. An analysis of the different components of the Deaf community will show where the perceptions about them are incorrect.

History of the Deaf in America

There is not much known about the deaf people in America before they were organized. Deaf people were often shunned and misunderstood in their communities. They would most likely be isolated and abandoned. If they had any form of communication it would most be through home-signs and reading lips. Home-signs are signs that are made up for a family or small community. The signs are local and not widely used. Some have predicted:

Deaf people who came from other countries probably brought their sign language with them, and other communities of deaf people living in America probably developed their own sign language. Because there was little contact

between different communities, several kinds of sign language probably were used before in America before 1817. (Lucas, Mulrooney, Valli, & Villanueva, 2011, 13)

The first school of the deaf was founded in Hartford Connecticut and named the Connecticut Asylum for the Education and Instruction of Deaf and Dumb Person (Lucas, 2011). The name of this school reflected society's opinions on the deaf. They thought that because they could not speak that they had no language and were unintelligent. This attitude caused Deaf people to have very limited rights. They were consistently looked down upon because they could not speak English. As Chamont (2003) highlights "Yet, from the late-1800s until the mid-1900s, signing was viewed as a substandard practice -- one that could hinder a deaf individual's ability to communicate with hearing people" (2003, para 1). For many years oralism was forced upon the deaf because of this outlook. Oralism is defined as "advocacy or use of the oral method of teaching the deaf" (Merriam-webster.com, 2018). The oral method is referring to a teaching style where the deaf were forced to learn spoken language and utilize lip reading. Karchmer and Armstrong highlight how as recently as the 1950s this thinking impacted the deaf's education:

The almost universal educational goal for deaf people at this time was acquisition of spoken language and the ability to discern speech on the lips—other educational goals, including the acquisition of general knowledge, were arguably secondary to the development of "oral" skills. (Armstrong & Karchmer, 2009, 389)

At this point and time schools were mostly focused on teaching English that learning other skills was minimized. Schools believed that learning English was so important that they would discipline the students who were caught utilizing sign language. In some cases, the deaf would have their hands strapped to their desk preventing them from signing at all (Dalton, 2007). This was done in the hope that because they could not use ASL they would have to learn and utilize English.

Even when ASL was finally being taught among the deaf and utilized, the hearing world had a condescending attitude towards its use. Even though the hearing world was condemning its use the language was spreading: “As students graduated, some became teachers in other schools, thus spreading sign language to states across the country” (Lucas, 2011, p. 14). By spreading American Sign Language throughout the country, they were unifying the sign language being utilized by the deaf in America. A key factor in culture is language, as ASL was becoming more unified so were the Deaf who were using it. Culture can be defined as “a set of learned behaviors a group of people who have their own language, values, rules of behavior, and traditions...” (Alcorn & Humphrey, 2007, p. 434). Language is a key aspect to culture. A pivotal moment for Deaf culture was when ASL became a proven language, which will be discussed more later on. Despite the language being verified and used more commonly people still looked down upon those who utilized it. During a webinar Anna Witter-Merithew (2015) shared her experience with this attitude:

When I was growing up, I remember when going out to do errands and things with my parents. They usually cautioned me not to sign openly in public. They

were concerned that people wouldn't like it, or may perceive it as being rude or that they would be dismissive. (para 21)

Merithew's experience is not limited to only her or her area. It was a common occurrence. People were/are unsettled by the use of sign language and are unsure how to behave when it is being utilized. Cokely utilizes his past as a CODA and highlights how many interpreters have had to completely change their perspective on the Deaf: "...our initial societally reinforced perceptions of Deaf people are that they are "disabled" and are therefore inferior to those of us who can hear..." (Cokely, 2012, para. 4). This connects to the idea of audism but he makes an excellent point. Society automatically looks down on the deaf because of their hearing loss. This is a stigma that they are still fighting against today. The deaf have made a lot of progress and they are becoming more accepted but there are still stereotypes that they have to constantly fight against. What is important to note about these examples is how there was no interaction between the hearing and deaf culture mentioned in these scenarios. Everyone is making judgements and forming opinions about the deaf based off of information that is not only outdated but horribly biased and prejudice.

Eventually there was progress for the deaf. William Stokoe ignited a movement when he proved that sign language was a real language. Stokoe broke down sign language and proved that ASL contained 5 different parameters and met the linguistic parameters to qualify as a language. There are language universals that every language must meet and ASL meets them all even though it is produced in a different modality: "All languages, whether signed or spoken, are based on specific rules that the users of the language know and follow" (Lucas, 2011, p. 1). This discovery helped sign language and

Deaf culture be pushed into the realm of legitimacy. People today have no foundation to accuse ASL of being compromised of only gestures and incapable of expressing thought. It was proven to be a real language. This push caused the need for sign language interpreters to also be legitimized. Overtime both sign language and interpreters have gained more attention and therefore more legitimacy. The government also helped out the Deaf community on multiple occasions. Dennis Cokely pointed out that "It's important to recognize that the federal government has contributed more than thirty million dollars to interpreter education over the years" (Cokely, 2012). The federal government did this because it became apparent that interpreters were needed, they gave money to the National Association of the Deaf (NAD) (1880).

Audism

Audism is a part of the problem that cannot be underestimated. It is a type of oppression that is not very well known. Part of the reason it is not well known is because the term audism was not created until the mid-1970s (H-Dirkson-Bauman, 2004). That is only one of the reasons it is not as well-known: "We do not hear the term audism often due to the fact that the term applies to a minority or subculture" (What is Audism?, 2012, para. 6). The application of the word audism is very limited in comparison to other terms such as racism or sexism. The group affected is much smaller. The definition of audism reflects its limited scope. "Audism can be simply defined as discrimination or prejudice that is based on a person's ability, or lack of ability, to hear" (Audism, 2012, para. 1). The term audism then only applies to people who have lost some of their ability to hear, a significantly smaller portion of the population. It is because of their lack of ability to hear that deaf people are looked down upon. This could be many different things but is

frequently seen as people assuming that they cannot operate at the same mental capacity. They are oppressed and denied possibilities because they cannot hear. This research is not supposed to be about audism but one cannot discuss misconceptions and history of the deaf without discussing audism. While the term audism was only created relatively recently, 1975, it is something that deaf people have face their whole life (Audism, para 3).

Deaf President Now

One big event in Deaf culture that drew a lot of attention towards ASL and deaf culture was Deaf President Now (DPN). This event started at Gallaudet University. Gallaudet University is the only university where ASL is the main mode of communication. Up until 1988 Gallaudet had only hearing presidents. DPN started when a group of deaf students and faculty rallied around the idea of Gallaudet having a Deaf president (History Behind DPN). According to Gallaudet University's website "The spark that ignited DPN was the announcement on March 6, 1988, by the University's Board of Trustees, that a hearing person had been selected as Gallaudet's seventh president" (History Behind DPN). This was upsetting because the campus had been asking for a Deaf president, some would argue that they had wanted a Deaf president for years (History Behind DPN). Right before the decision was made students, faculty, and people within the community made it clear that they wanted a Deaf president through a march. When the board blatantly ignored this request the campus, faculty and students, revolted. They marched to the capitol and the staff, alumni, and students all eventually united in their demands. This revolt brought about national news coverage and thrust Deaf culture into the spotlight. On day 2 of the protest they were already attracting a

voluminous amount of local media attention. “By this time, the story was front page news in the local newspapers and on television stations. Dozens of reporters descended upon the University and, for the most part, found the protesters eager to talk to them” (History Behind DPN). Interpreters were in such high demand during this week that they took to wearing colored arm bands so they would be easily identified (History Behind DPN). By day 3 of the protest they were attracting national media coverage (History Behind DPN). Suddenly, ASL and Deaf culture were becoming well known nationally. As the movement continued forward the amount of national media coverage continued to grow and led to many of the prominent members of the movement being featured on national talk shows. This movement was a large factor of ASL becoming more well known. Gallaudet University points out this media coverage was crucial and new:

There was phenomenal media attention and coverage during the entire week. It was front page news in The Washington Post and in newspapers across the country and the world and it was regularly featured on television and radio news. It was one of the first times for the reporters and the viewers alike to see for themselves that deaf students and deaf people really could do anything, except hear. (History of DPN)

All of a sudden ASL and more importantly Deaf culture was put into a position where Deaf people could openly communicate about what they desired. It also gave them the opportunity to show the world that deaf people are not limited because they cannot hear. The DPN campaign allowed many people the opportunity to learn something about Deaf culture and ASL. It gave them both positive media attention.

Americans with Disability Act

The next major event that pushed forward Deaf culture was the passing of the Americans with Disability Act (ADA) in 1990 (Callis, 2015). While the ADA is not specifically about services for the deaf there are many aspects of it that are relevant to the deaf (The Americans with Disability Act, 1990). It helped hold businesses accountable for providing interpreters and other services for the deaf. The impact this had on the field of interpreting will be discussed more later. It is because of the ADA that interpreters are observed more. The increase need of interpreters because of the ADA helped increase the demand of interpreters making them more widely utilized. Their increased presence has caused ASL to become more accepted. People would not say it is uncommon to see them at events. Witter-Merithew (2014) stated “We’ve seen a big change in social attitudes and ASL is much more welcome and accepted by the general public” (para 12). All of these collective events though allowed the hearing world a glimpse into deaf culture. This glimpse has since been taken advantage of and many things have since been assumed because of the rising popularity of deaf culture in the late 1980s. There has also been legislation passed that allows deaf children to attend public school where an interpreter will be provided. In these situations, the interpreter is most likely the only language model for the child. They may be the only one teaching the student sign language. This brings about its own set of challenges but in most cases, they are the language model for this child. This can be problematic in many states where the educational interpreters have no minimum standards and may not be qualified. The legislation passed has caused the field to increase dramatically. The increased demand of interpreters also allows the hearing world to make assumptions that they might not have before they saw interpreters frequently.

Evolution of Interpreters

In order to first understand the interaction between the hearing world and the interpreters, a background knowledge of the interpreter's role must first be explored. The role of the interpreter has changed greatly over time. When interpreters first began, they worked on a volunteer basis and it continued this way until the establishment of the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) in 1964 (Alcorn & Humphrey, 2007, p. 171). There is no specific time when interpreting started but it can be assumed that they have been around since Deaf people. They were not considered professionals nor were they held to an ethical code. This was during the Helper-Model phase of interpreting (Alcorn & Humphrey, 171). When interpreters worked on a volunteer basis, they would often impart their own opinions into the message or act on behalf of the deaf individual. This meant that the meaning and intent of the speaker was not being preserved. These interpreters were very connected to the Deaf community though. Since most of them were friends or even related to the deaf individual they had the potential to be heavily involved with Deaf culture. As time went on interpreter's goals changed and they began to be more focused on empowering the deaf. There was also a gradual understanding that interpreting is much more than matching signs and words. The actual interpreting process is much more complex and has many different steps that must be mastered. There have been a few models during the transition from the helper model to the model utilized today. One of the most influential ones is the Bilingual-Bicultural method:

In the bilingual-bicultural philosophy, the interpreters are sensitive to physical communication dynamics, indicate who is speaking, place themselves appropriately, etc. They are also keenly aware of the inherent difference in the

languages, cultures, norms for social interaction and schema of the parties using interpreting services. (Alcorn & Humphrey, 2007, p. 178)

This means that interpreters are aware that there is not only a language difference between the parties but also a cultural difference. For the interpreter this means making sure that the meaning and intent of the speaker is being preserved despite the cultural differences. Occasionally this may mean that the interpreter expounds on a topic more or has to show something slightly differently so that the original meaning and intent is still present. Today there is not a specific model that is used. There are elements from all of the models that are practiced today. Interpreters today may not be as involved in the Deaf community. They are encouraged to be involved but a majority of interpreter hiring is completed through agencies and will have no personal connection to their client. This change in interpreting models is important to note in relation to language models and ASL perceptions because the interpreters of today would be much different from the interpreters even 40 years ago (Alcorn & Humphrey, 2007). The goals of modern interpreters would cause their product to appear differently than a product from 50 years ago. They now want to interpret in a way to empower the deaf instead of accidentally oppressing the deaf. Interestingly enough though, there is a good chance that they are not as involved in Deaf culture as the first interpreters were. Interpreting now is viewed as a profession, not simply volunteer work. The difference in the field of interpreting is important to understand.

Interpreter Certifications

Even though there has been a lot of progress among the interpreting community things are not perfect. The field of interpreting is relatively new and has just recently

begun the process of being organized. As previously stated, organization of interpreters began with the creation of the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) in 1964 (Alcorn & Humphrey, 2007). This was a mere 54 years ago. The progress that has occurred happened quickly because of changing legislation in regards to interpreters and deaf accommodations. It is also interesting to note the effects that interpreting has undergone since the creation of Video Relay Service (VRS). VRS allows a Deaf person to make a phone call to a hearing individual and vice a versa. It employs the use of interpreters to communicate between the 2 languages. This has been a very positive change for the deaf but has made interpreters be perceived more like machines than human beings:

VRS has had a major influence on both the work we do and on Deaf people's view of interpreters as a group. Now, interpreters are seen as machines that can just roll through anything without pause. VRS has had been a major influence on the field. (Cokely & Witter-Merithew, 2015, para. 22)

This emphasizes a perception of interpreters that is very common. They can work and always do their job with 100% accuracy, no matter what the circumstances are. While there has been legislation passed to ensure more access to interpreters there is not a national minimum education or skill level requirement (Freeman, pg. 1). Anna Witter-Merithew (2015) highlights this discord at a Street Leverage webinar:

We don't have certification standards or even agree on what a certified interpreter looks like or what it means to be certified. We see varying skill levels from certified interpreters and variation in what the work looks like. There are no standards for hiring interpreters, for interpreter wages. (para, 12)

There is no national standard for what skill level an interpreter should possess in all situations. This can make it hard in all settings but especially educational to ensure that the school district is hiring a qualified individual (Hitch, 2005). There is a National Interpreter Certification (NIC) but it is not nationally required to interpret (History of the NIC). Consequentially, states have had to impose their own standards which vary greatly. Some states require you to have a Board for Evaluation of Interpreters (BEI) certification while other states only require interpreters to have a state license. While states like Virginia encourage interpreters to take the Virginia Quality Assurance Screening there are not statewide minimum test score requirements to interpret in different situations, with the exception of legal work. The organization that is leading interpreters is the RID. “RID plays a leading role in establishing a national standard of quality for interpreter” (RID, n.d., para 1). While the federal government, and many state governments, are not pushing for minimum skill level requirement; there are interpreters working amongst themselves to ensure that both the hearing and deaf client receive the correct skill set necessary for the situation. This determination among interpreters represents many things. First, it shows that the profession of interpreting is widely misunderstood. More specifically, the lack of nationalized standards shows that the importance of interpreters with a developed skill set is not a valued or thought of as necessary. Second, it shows that most people do not understand the complexities of sign language. If people understood the challenges of sign language it would be reflected amongst the legislation that is in effect. Instead, sign language is consistently pushed to the side and its complexities are minimized. It is often incorrectly perceived as language made up of gestures and fingerspelling that can easily be mastered and interpreted. It is also important to highlight

the fact that knowing how to converse in a language is not the same as knowing how to interpret a language. This is a true fact for spoken and signed languages. Michigan is a state that the BEI test and after it was first implemented Annie Urasky, the director of Michigan's Department of the Deaf, Deaf-Blind, and Hard of Hearing (DODDBHH) stated DODDBHH "...the credentialing of interpreters is a recognition that not all interpreting assignments are the same, and for legal and medical matters in particular, interpreters need additional training and competence in the subject matter in order to effectively communicate" (Levengood, 2016). This highlights how when states recognize the importance of skilled interpreters, they support the professional aspect of the field. It also shows that the state does understand the necessity of a qualified interpreter. Thirdly, the lack of knowledge about the complexities of sign language demonstrates how little is known about ASL and deaf culture by the hearing world. This is not just in reference to the complexities of the language but the obstacles that the Deaf have faced in wanting ASL to be accepted. This acceptance is still longed for and has not been fully achieved. Lastly, it shows that if change is truly desired the Deaf community is going to have to work very hard to achieve it. The Deaf community is specified in the last sentence because the Deaf will have to bring about their own changes. Interpreters can act alongside the Deaf but ultimately the Deaf must advocate for themselves, not the interpreters. The profession of interpreting has changed greatly over time. Instead of being a volunteer-based profession it is now a paid profession with guidelines. The lack of federal government standards proves that the profession still needs more exposure. Consequentially, so does ASL and deaf culture. By examining how interpreters have evolved over the years it shows the changes in the profession. The practices of the

interpreters today vary greatly from the practices demonstrated before. This means that when interpreters are observed today the product being watched is very different from what would have been observed 40 years ago. It also shows how society has changed in their views of interpreters. At the same time, it also shows how there are still misunderstandings when it comes to interpreters and by approximation also deaf community.

The Nelson Mandela Funeral Incident

An interpreter cannot go far without being asked about the Nelson Mandela funeral incident. What happened at this incident was that the interpreter at the funeral was not utilizing a signed language, it was not ASL nor a South African Sign Language. After this was discovered there were of course those in the Deaf community who were upset about the interpreter who was chosen. It was later discovered that the man they picked suffered from a mental illness (Smith, 2018). When this information came out there were many comments and even comedic skits made about the event. While this should have been an upsetting blip among the Deaf community it was escalated to nationwide media attention. While the media attention could have been positive publicity for ASL it reflected poorly on interpreters and the profession. Interestingly enough, most of the comments about the interpreter were not coming from the Deaf community but from the hearing community. They had the most widespread outcry about the event. Anna Witter-Merithew (2015) pointed out how after a similar incident “Within a few days, there were a plethora of vlogs and articles from hearing people, with no knowledge about Deaf people, discussing what they saw, even to the extent that interpreters have become a part of late-night comedy routines” (para.20). She also emphasizes how the hearing

community was at the forefront of these articles and comedic skits about the interpreters. It is an interesting phenomenon, the outcry about the Nelson Mandela Funeral interpreter was spread by the hearing community and not the Deaf community. This event is something that reinvigorated interest in the Deaf community but it is also interesting to see the ripple effects of this on the hearing community. They suddenly had an opinion on interpreters without ever really interacting with them. Meaning that they were sharing information about a topic that they could not even fully related to or had any background information about. They were sharing the opinion that the media had shown them. These opinions were not just briefly talked about but documented for all to see. The important takeaway from the Nelson Mandela incident really has nothing to do with the tragedy of what happened but everything to do with how the hearing community reacted. They were all suddenly giving their opinions about something that did not really concern them. The question is why did they feel so entitled to do so? One could argue that they felt they had a right because it was something that in a sense they interacted with. They saw the interpreter on their screen, same as everyone else. They just did not realize that there was a problem until it was pointed out to them. Once they knew that there was a problem they wanted to get involved and bring about change. Is this necessarily a bad thing? No but it becomes a bad thing when the voices of the hearing population overpower the Deaf community's needs. This is a prime example of how the hearing community and the deaf community are still separated today. The Nelson Mandela funeral incident became a moment that thrust sign language and the profession of interpreting back into the spotlight but this time that push came largely from the hearing community who were largely unenlightened on the topic.

The Hearing Community's Outlook on Interpreters

The simplest way to describe an interpreter is as a bridge. They bridge the hearing world and the Deaf world together through language and culture. When people think of interpreters, they are simplified to the task of interpreting a language. (Even though the act of interpreting is much more complex than most people realize). In reality interpreters are not only interpreting the language but also bridging the two cultures together. As mentioned before, this is because of the influence of the Bilingual-Bicultural model which focuses on empowering the deaf and making sure the meaning and intent of the speaker are preserved despite cultural differences. (Alcorn & Humphrey, 2007). There are sayings and concepts in English that can only be understood by hearing them. Similarly, there are jokes and cultural concepts that can only be understood if a knowledge of ASL or Deaf culture is possessed. Interpreters must explain these to fully bridge the two cultures. Even though the interpreter's main function is to bridge the 2 languages and cultures, often times they are referred to and the Deaf community is omitted. It is more comfortable for many people to ask an interpreter about ASL and Deaf culture instead of asking someone who is deaf. When this act takes place, the Deaf community is being minimized and the focus has once again returned to the hearing community: "The oppression of Deaf people, their language, and their language rights continues, even in the face of these other shifts. There is still a lack of understanding of the Deaf perspective" (Cokely & Witter-Merithew, 2015, para 23). The shifts that Merithew are referring to are the shifts in the hearing world's perspective on interpreters. As previously stated, interpreters have been thrust into the spotlight more and have even been featured in comedy routines. Their thrust into the spotlight has come from the

hearing community, not the Deaf community. Those commenting on them and even using them for their jokes do not have a full understanding of the role of the interpreter or Deaf culture. The hearing community continues to utilize interpreters without fully understanding their role or even what their job entails. Unfortunately, in general, the hearing community does not have much interaction with interpreters or the Deaf community. It is because of this that there are many misunderstandings between both cultures. It also explains why the hearing community may sometimes act in an offensive manner towards the deaf because they do not know enough about the deaf to act in a more appropriate manner.

The Problem

The problem is not necessarily that the hearing world is uneducated about Deaf culture. While this is unfortunate and something that needs to be rectified it is not the true problem. Take this situation as an example: A graduation is taking place at a local high school. Everyone has arrived, taken their seats and are patiently waiting for the ceremony to start. The ceremony begins and everyone is captivated by the valedictorian's moving speech about growing up and moving onto pursue their dreams. While everyone is captivated by the valedictorian, they also notice a figure off to the side of the stage. They are clothed in black and moving their hands in a rapid motion. Younger members of the audience will ask their parents what they are doing and why they are moving their hands like that. Most people they will look at the figure to the side of the stage and make the connection that they are a sign language interpreter. They will probably also have a thought about how beautiful sign language is and what a fascinating language it is. Now there is nothing inherently wrong with this scene or even with the thoughts of the

audience. The problem lies in the fact that this is most of the hearing world's only interaction with sign language and with the Deaf community. It is a passive observance of American Sign Language from a seat that guarantees them the safety of not having to interact with the deaf individual(s) or ever have to learn ASL or learn about Deaf culture. In that moment everything that they know about sign language is most likely being learned from hearing interpreter. Interpreters tend to be the language model for the hearing world. When this happens the hearing world is not interacting with the deaf consumer, ASL, or Deaf culture. They are only witnessing the tip of the iceberg. This research wants to discover the impact that this has had on the hearing world's perspective of deaf people, ASL, and Deaf culture. While this is a true fact, the problem is that the hearing community assumes that observing an interpreter is the same as interacting with the Deaf community. There seems to be a common perception that interacting with someone who utilizes sign language is the same as interacting with the Deaf community. Most times though, the hearing individuals do not even interact with the interpreters. Despite that, this perception is not entirely true. As involved as an interpreter is in the Deaf community, they are not Deaf. They may know many things about the culture but there are some aspects of it that they will never be able to fully understand because they themselves are not deaf. This is why it is important for the profession of interpreting to be understood, especially because they are so often the model of the language. They represent something that is much bigger than them. They are a language model that many people do not take the time to interact with.

Misconceptions about Interpreting

As an interpreter it is common to hear the phrase “Oh, you are one of those people that stands up front and waves their hands around”. While this is not meant to be a derogatory comment it can certainly be taken as such. It implies that a profession that takes years of training is nothing more than playing charades. That comment alone reflects how the hearing world views ASL and to an extent Deaf culture. ASL is consistently belittled to gestures and that comment shows that to some extent that is what people believe it is. There is no effort to learn more about ASL or understand that it is indeed its own complex language that meets all the requirements to be a language. The divide between the hearing world and the Deaf world is great and while interpreters are supposed to bridge the two worlds, they instead increase the gap. Instead of being a means to connect the two cultures they are often abused in a way for the hearing world to connect with interpreters instead of the Deaf. Interpreters will be utilized when needed and are a practical way to include the Deaf community, often times though there is no other effort made to include the deaf. Even though it may not be inclusion to the full extent; if companies are able willing/able to provide interpreters without them being requested it shows their willingness to reach the Deaf, which is important. At the same time, it is easy for the deaf to be there and included but still feel large amounts of isolation. Clearly there is a language barrier but the interpreter is there which effectively demolishes the barrier.

Cross Cultural Interactions

While the question could be posed about how are the Deaf connecting with the hearing community this question is ignoring the obvious. The Deaf are living within the hearing world. It is easy for the hearing community to ignore the Deaf and minimize them but the deaf population can never fully be removed from the hearing world. This means it is

much easier for the hearing world to ignore the deaf and never interact with them but it would be almost impossible for the deaf to do the same. They have always been a minority and will continue to be a smaller population. The fact that the deaf is a smaller population is also not the problem. Again, the problem is that interpreters are abused as a way to connect the cultures but there is very little connection that happens. This is unfortunately often times illustrated through the church. The church is not the only offender but they are a common one. If a church goes to the lengths to hire an interpreter (which they often times do not) the interpreter is normally only utilized to interpret the service. This may not seem like a problem to many but this means that no one else in the church is taking the time to approach the deaf. They are simply writing the Deaf off as someone they cannot communicate with and do not take the time to meet them. The problem is not that the hearing world is unable to communicate with the Deaf, the problem is that they are unwilling to. It is easier to ignore them and continue on with life than it is to try and reach out and connect with them. This phenomenon makes is understood by most. It is easier to stay in a comfort zone than put all the effort in to leave it and feel out of place. To summarize, the problem is not that the Deaf population is small or even that there is a language barrier. The problem comes in when interpreters are abused as a way to connect with the Deaf community without ever having to interact with the deaf. One example of this would occur when a hearing person wants to ask a deaf person a question. It is culturally appropriate for hearing person to look at the deaf when they are speaking to them. Often times though the hearing person will look at the interpreter instead of the deaf person. This is a direct example of the hearing world focusing on the interpreter and not the deaf client.

The Interpreter Paradox

The role of the interpreter itself plays a big part in how the hearing world perceives the Deaf. When interpreters are utilized, the Deaf to have more access to information, events, and entertainment on a professional level. They are no longer just helping the deaf but working to ensure that they get equal access. While they are allowing the deaf community to become more involved in the hearing world this may not be how the hearing world views interpreters. Interpreters have allowed ASL to be observed on a larger scale and also allow the two cultures to be bridged together. At the same time when the hearing world observes an interpreter, they simply perceive it as a person who has been called in to help the deaf. There is this constant struggle between interpreters being a bridge to connect the two cultures but appearing more as a walking stick to most on one side of the bridge. Interpreters themselves are often thought of as tools utilized only for the deaf and not for the hearing world. Often times they are thought of as those that are brought in to help the deaf function at the same level as the hearing world but have no direct impact on the hearing. It makes no difference to the hearing, whether or not they are present. This one-sided view of interpreters makes it appear that they are only for the deaf. If only the deaf need them, then what does this say about the deaf? It may give them the idea that the deaf are disabled. It appears as though they need another tool to be able to function and interact with the hearing world. While the interpreters have helped showcase ASL more their very presence may be sending a condescending message about the deaf. This is of course never intentional, especially because an interpreter's presence means that there may be a push and a desire for the Deaf to be included. To someone in the audience though who has never interacted with the Deaf

what will they see the interpreter as? They cannot possibly understand the complicated process that is interpreting. They also have not interacted with the Deaf so how are they supposed to know anything about deaf culture or even ASL? Are they just a way for the Deaf to be included? Or are they really something so much more? A way to bring together these two diverse, beautiful, cultures and languages?

The Solution

There is no overarching solution to this problem. Each person has their own unique hurdle to overcome when trying to communicate with the Deaf (besides a language barrier). There are actions that everyone involved in the interpreting process can take to allow there to be bridging of cultures. The interpreter, hearing and Deaf client all have been affected by the language model dilemma in different ways. They each present their own solution to the problem as well. Something that would help would be Deaf culture having more legitimate exposure. Interpreters and Deaf culture are normally only included in media today for entertainment value, not to actually learn about them and what they stand for. When they are included on TV it is often hearing people making comments on something that effects the Deaf. Ultimately though overcoming these barriers is a personal decision that each person must make. One can only hope that in this time of broad acceptance that it leads to more acceptance and understanding of Deaf culture as well. It may not be something that is easily achieved but one can only hope that it happens in the near future.

Interpreter Perspective

As far as interpreters being the language model there is not necessarily many changes that can occur there. Interpreters must be in a place the deaf can see them and the main event. They will continue to be the face of ASL until society decides to focus more on the deaf than the interpreter. If interpreters are aware of this added responsibility they should adjust accordingly. As ASL continues to grow in popularity it is the responsibility of the interpreters to continuously bring the focus back towards the Deaf. This can be illustrated in many different ways. One of the simpler ways would be to ensure that they are making themselves available to interpret. While this may seem, obvious there may be a time before or after the main event when others may want to approach the deaf client. Even though it may not be the exact moment the interpreter was hired for by making themselves available to interpret they are making communication more available. Making themselves more available means being attentive, not being on your phone, and upholding yourself in a professional manner even though they may not be actively interpreting. This does not mean that their services will necessarily be used at that time, but it sends a message to the Deaf and hearing client that they can have a conversation if they want to. Interpreters also need to be aware of how they react when others ask them questions about Deaf culture and ASL. While the interpreter may be very knowledgeable about Deaf culture in many situations it is best to refer those asking to a Deaf person. Not only does this ensure that they receive more accurate information it also gives someone else the chance to interact with the deaf. Someone who may not have done so if the interpreter just answered the question for them. Again, this does not mean that the interpreter is not qualified or capable of answering the question correctly, it just gives the Deaf an opportunity to share their culture and language first hand. Interpreters already

actively do a multitude of things to bridge the hearing and Deaf cultures together but they can still actively make sure that the Deaf are informing others about their own culture.

Hearing Perspective

The hearing world could do a great deal to improve their relationship with the deaf. As stated before, this paper is not implying that everyone needs to go out and make a deaf friend. It is implying though that there needs to be more cultural awareness. It is very easy to ignore the Deaf in society today, in fact depending on where you live it is easy to ignore many subcultures of America. The world could improve exponentially if everyone took the time to understand those around them. For the hearing population today, an easy step to take would be to interact with those that are Deaf. Do not let the language difference be a barrier, especially if there is an interpreter present. Other times it can be challenging but just be aware. It is also very respectful to take the time to learn about ASL and Deaf culture from a Deaf perspective. The hearing world is continuously giving their opinions on topics related to Deaf culture when they have no background in that field. When a topic arises about Deaf culture that is continuously being shared it is better to do research and create a well-informed opinion instead of just repeating what another hearing person said. Making well informed decisions is applicable when it comes to sharing anything on the internet. The hearing community does intend to but many times accidentally oppresses the Deaf community by not making informed decisions. While there have been many victories for the Deaf recently, there have also been many hurdles that they have had to overcome. The hearing community can make amends with the Deaf community by taking the time to be more culturally aware and doing their best to reach out the those in the Deaf community.

The Deaf population has overcome a lot of oppression recently. ASL has recently been proven to be a language. At the same time the profession of interpreting has undergone many changes. Interpreting has moved from a volunteer position to a profession with ethics and certifications. While these certifications are not required nationwide it is a step in the right direction for the profession. Slowly the world is starting to understand the pressures and challenges that come with the field of interpreting. It would be much easier if there was an easy, broad solution to the problem of the interpreter language model. While there were solutions discussed they will not be easy to implement and much of this solution simply comes from Deaf culture having more exposure. One can only hope that in the future there are changes brought about that bring more exposure and cultural bridging between the cultures. It may take a long time for these changes to come about but they will only happen if all the groups involved, the hearing, interpreters, and deaf, all work together.

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