Deaf Professionals and Designated Interpreters: A Collaborative Approach to Service Delivery

Denise Sedran

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In its short yet rich history, the profession of signed language interpreting has defined the interpreter’s position in numerous and sometimes contradictory ways that describe both the interpreting task and role in relation to the communities that the interpreter works within. These definitions have been expressed by different models of interpreting that have developed and been adapted, portions discarded and incorporated into new iterations; the role of the interpreter being transformed from a conduit or machine-like intermediary to that of a cultural ally. The different models of interpreting reflect “certain attitudes and behaviours that are often associated with particular time periods in the development of the field” (Janzen & Korpiniski, 2005, p. 166). In recent years with the rise in professionalization among Deaf people a new model of interpreting has emerged, that of the designated interpreter; an interpreter who has worked with a Deaf professional for a considerable amount of time and has developed mutually agreed upon interpreting strategies (Hauser & Hauser, 2008, p. 3). Previous interpreting models define the parameters of interpreting based on a relationship where the interpreter is predominantly working with numerous Deaf people in a variety of settings within a delimited time frame. The designated interpreter model, similar to other models, has developed in response to a need arising in the Deaf community, specifically, an increase in the number of Deaf people employed in professional positions (Hauser, Finch & Hauser, 2008; Cook, 2004). To frame what Hauser, Finch and Hauser (2008) refer to as “a new paradigm” between Deaf professionals and interpreters, we must understand the changes in occupational opportunities for Deaf people and how those impact the profession of interpreting.

This paper interrogates current research that addresses the unique role and relationship between the Deaf professional and the designated interpreter, as well as the professional considerations particular to this emerging interpreting model. Further, it extends the current
literature by applying theoretical and practical aspects of signed language interpretation to this new paradigm by grounding it in interpretation theory from a cognitive linguistic perspective. Finally, it identifies areas for further consideration, discussion and scholarship in this emergent field.

Deaf and hearing people have been using interpreters to communicate with each other for centuries (Lane, Hoffmeister & Bahan, 1996). Yet Deaf people have typically been on the receiving end of the service; as a student in school or college, an employee in a factory, a patient in a doctor’s office, or a participant at a conference; configuring the interpreting relationship primarily one-directional. With the general increase in employment opportunities for Deaf people they were afforded the opportunity to move into professional positions, which is a relatively new phenomenon. The number of Deaf professionals has been steadily rising in the last three decades (Lane, Hoffmeister & Bahan, 1996; Padden & Humphries, 2005; Kushalnagar & Rashid, 2008). Deaf people now have greater opportunities to access post-secondary education and as a result are working in a myriad of professional positions such as lawyers, doctors, psychologists, film makers, academics, administrators and managers (Hauser, Finch & Hauser, 2008). With the unprecedented number of Deaf people entering professional fields, the demand for interpreting services has changed from spontaneous ad hoc service delivery to highly specialized, discipline specific designated interpreting.

Despite its relatively short history, the field of signed language interpreting has undergone considerable growth. The roots of interpreting in the Deaf community began with family members or those who had strong ties to the community and has evolved into a profession with training programs, certification, national and international associations, and corresponding scholarly research in the field of signed language interpreting. Throughout the profession’s
history, interpreters have used a variety of models to describe what they do in relation to those with whom they work: helper, conduit, communication-facilitator, cultural mediator, and recently interpreters as allies and a cognitive model of interpreting (Janzen, 2005). Models of interpreting have adapted to changing attitudes and beliefs, yet the relationship of service delivery between interpreters and Deaf people has remained relatively constant. Until recently Deaf people have been conceived of as passive consumers of interpreting services with limited agency as to when they will get service and who will provide it. As Deaf people gain professional status and enter into specialized fields, the dynamic between them and interpreters is being challenged; where once Deaf people were in positions of limited capacity for power, they are now endowed with greater power and authority predicating a need for interpreters and Deaf people to interact differently (Kushalnagar & Rashid, 2008, p. 43). The Deaf professional-designated interpreter paradigm is emerging as a model of interpretation with its own form of specialization and its own unique design that defines a fundamental relationship between two professionals.

Not only has the field of signed language interpreting embraced different models, it has also recognized the need for further education and training in the areas of legal, educational, medical, and mental health. Further, “as deaf people achieve greater degrees of access within society and as services are expanded, practitioners are entering settings for which they have little or no foundation for effective practice” (Witter-Merithew & Nicodemus, 2010, p. 137). This marks a transition towards specialization in signed language interpreting. “This trend requires that interpreters have the advanced knowledge of a specialist versus the default knowledge of a generalist” (Witter-Merithew & Nicodemus, 2010, p. 137).
The first publications recognizing the specialization of interpreting for Deaf professionals are credited to Teuber (1996) and Kale and Larson (1998). Teuber wrote a letter in response to an article in the journal of the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf and Kale and Larson presented a paper titled “The Deaf Professional and the Interpreter: A Dynamic Duo” at the 1998 PEPnet conference. Following that, the next publication to explore this special area of interpreting was “Neutrality? No Thanks. Can a Biased Role be an Ethical One?” in the Journal of Interpretation (Cook, 2004). Cook refers to the specialization as “diplomatic interpreting” and explores ethical considerations, Deaf cultural values and interpreter behaviour. Cook provides a broad overview of the key issues that make diplomatic (designated) interpreting a specialization within the profession and poses questions for future consideration. Teuber, Cook, Kale and Larson, each contributed to the preliminary literature on interpreting for Deaf professionals, yet it is the edited volume Deaf Professionals and Designated Interpreters: A New Paradigm (Hauser, Finch & Hauser, 2008) that will likely be considered the seminal text in this specialized area of interpreting. Deaf professionals and designated interpreters contributed to the book by examining their relationships, sharing best practices, and exploring their partnerships from both a theoretical and practical perspective.

The common understanding of the role of an interpreter, whether she works between a spoken and a signed language or between two spoken languages is to convey information between people who do not share the same language. Yet relaying information between Deaf and hearing people transcends strictly linguistic message transmission. It requires an understanding of what Padden and Humphries (2005) refer to as the “problem of voice”, or how can Deaf people make themselves heard (p. 76) and what role do interpreters play in facilitating the expression of that voice. It also requires knowledge about and sensitivity to the experiences
of a diverse group of people who share a history of oppression and who have struggled to have their language recognized after its usage was prohibited. Consequently, the role of the signed language interpreter is one that is inscribed with a considerable amount of trust. Kale and Larson (1998) remind us of the importance of trust being earned because, “[m]any deaf people recount stories of feeling ‘violated’ by someone claiming to be a ‘professional interpreter’” (p. 2). Thus, not only must the interpreter garner trust she must also demonstrate an awareness of cultural values and how they motivate behaviours, thoughts, communication and actions (Janzen & Korpinski, 2005). This type of awareness is applied generally in the interpreter’s practice and specifically with each Deaf person she works with. In the case of the Deaf professional and the designated interpreter, the foundational requirements are the same however trust needs to be mutually reciprocated.

Similarly, the designated interpreter also conveys information between people who do not share the same language but she does this solely for the Deaf professional and the people with whom she or he communicates with. “The primary factor that differentiates a designated interpreter from a non-designated interpreter is that the former is a member of a professional team, not an outsider” (Hauser & Hauser, 2008, p. 6). However, like any interpreting relationship, a degree of trust is required to successfully facilitate communication. In the Deaf professional-designated interpreter model, the trust and the relationship develop over time and outside of interpreting (Hauser & Hauser, 2008, p. 11). Because they share these personal and professional experiences, the Deaf professional and designated interpreter “learn each other’s likes and dislikes; they sense each other’s moods. […] [They] develop a shared silent

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communication, a sense of loyalty to each other, and a mutual caring. In essence, they become friends” (Oatman, 2008, p. 167). For this relationship to be successful, there needs to be a balance between the personal and the professional. One needs to remember that, “[a]lthough this partnership may touch on the personal, it is first and foremost, a -work-related association, and that type of partnership functions most successfully in an atmosphere of confidentiality, empathy, and mutual respect” (Oatman, 2008, p. 167. Italics in original). The amount of time these two professionals spend together and the knowledge that is shared between them is significantly greater than in non-designated interpreting interactions, however articulating boundaries and clear expectations are integral to success. When this professional partnership flourishes there is a measure of familiarity that “results in a seamless presentation, a target message synchronously produced by the Deaf professional and the interpreter rather than reproduced by the interpreter” (Cook, 2004, p. 59). Not only do these two professionals co-construct the communication act, they also collaboratively enhance each other’s performance and mutually work towards excelling in their respective fields. In essence, they work together as a cohesive team.

This kind of reciprocal relationship is particular to the Deaf professional-designated interpreter model because not only does the interpreter empower the Deaf professional, but it is in the interest of the Deaf professional to also empower the interpreter, “providing them with the information, agreeing on strategies, working with them as a team. By empowering the interpreters, the deaf professional is then empowering him-or herself” (Napier, 2008, p. 38). Another aspect of this relationship is the unique role that the designated interpreter plays in representing the Deaf professional and reflecting his or her performance beyond communication. More so than the non-designated interpreter, the designated interpreter must be conscious of
workplace protocols, corporate culture and institutional politics, expectations around behaviour, dress code and discourse norms. Taking all of this into consideration, it is evident that the benefits of the Deaf professional-designated interpreter model outweigh the traditional, generalist approach to interpreting demonstrating a need to pursue further research into the modalities of this approach.

One of the shortcomings of Deaf Professionals and Designated Interpreters: A New Paradigm (Hauser, Finch & Hauser, 2008), is it remains at the rudimentary level when it comes to a critical engagement with the interpreting process. At times it gives an air of lyrical and emotional assessment of the interpreting task, yet, such shortcomings are not atypical of emerging scholarship. Four specific examples that are problematic come to mind: referring to the relationship between the Deaf professional and the interpreter as a marriage (Hauser & Hauser, 2008, p. 12; Kurlander, 2008, p. 122); conceiving of shared knowledge and prediction skills in terms of mind-reading (Hauser & Hauser, 2008, p. 10); mapping the cognitive task of interpreting as real estate (Pouliot & Stern, 2008, p. 135); and describing the interpreter as cheesecloth (Pouliot & Stern, 2008, p. 133).

Evidently, the relationship between the Deaf professional and the interpreter is unique and reaches a level of trust and familiarity that is not often achieved in non-designated interpreted interactions. However, to refer to the relationship as a marriage assumes a level of intimacy that goes much beyond mutual professionalism; taking a partnership that has a foundation in trust, mutual respect, shared goals and a unique relational approach to service delivery and reducing it to a covenantal ideology that does not inherently lead to success is problematic. Hauser and Hauser go on to use yet another reductive term in their description of the shared knowledge between the Deaf professional and the designated interpreter, “The deaf professional and the
designated interpreter need to spend enough time together to be able to develop some ‘mind-reading’ skills” (p. 10). When in fact, what they may be attempting to describe is what Russell (2005) refers to in her “meaning-based model of interpreting” as “comprehend source language message” (p. 145), which is a stage where the interpreter, rather than mind-reading, draws on her language fluency in the following areas: syntactic knowledge; semantic knowledge; associated knowledge and background experience; cultural awareness; and contextual knowledge” (p.145). This five-stage meaning-based model reminds us there is much more to text and language analysis than simple prediction skills.

In a similar, yet slightly different vein to Hauser and Hauser, Pouliot and Stern diminish a complex and multi-faceted cognitive task to an economic metaphor by referring to mental processes as “cognitive real estate”. The authors claim:

The term cognitive real estate within an interpreting relationship, like possibilities of real estate in the geographical world, means extra space to those who have the means of acquiring “property.” Just as someone can buy more land to house a surplus of material possessions, one can sometimes acquire more mental room to house a surplus of mental baggage.” (2008, p. 135)

By using a simplistic metaphor, Pouliot and Stern fail to recognize existing scholarship that analyzes the interpreting task from a cognitive linguistic perspective (Janzen, 2005; Gile, 1995; Janzen & Shaffer, 2008; Wilcox & Shaffer, 2005; Leeson, 2005). More pertinent to the task of interpreting is an acknowledgment that interpreters are “constrained by the interpreting process in that there is a limited amount of processing energy available to carry out the task. The effort of dealing with complex data can, at times, demand more processing energy than is in fact available” (Leeson, 2005, p. 66). Understandably, Pouliot and Stern are speaking to the
advantages the designated interpreter has because of familiarity with the content, which frees up processing energy and creates cognitive space that can be reassigned to extralinguistic tasks. The issue is not so much a problem of “geographic space” or “mental baggage” but one of processing capacity as Gile so judiciously argues in his Efforts Model of Interpreting that addresses cognitive-load limitations (1995).

Some contributors to the *Deaf Professional and Designated Interpreters: A New Paradigm* volume acknowledge the technical aspects of the interpreting task, yet they still fall short of incorporating current and highly relevant scholarship. One such unpolished example that stands out is Oatman’s attempt to address the task of interpreting from a cognitive perspective:

> Because of my familiarity with this deaf professional […] I now spend much less of my mental energy on the mechanics of interpreting. As I spend much less of my mental energy understanding the language I am receiving and finding the correct vernacular for the target language to match my listening, audience, I can concentrate my effort on refining the nonlinguistic and noncultural aspects […] of the interpreting […]. (2008, p. 165-66)

Despite these perfunctory endeavors at problematizing designated interpreting, the majority of the *Deaf Professional-Designated Interpreter: A New Paradigm* volume remains prosaic and undeveloped when it comes to understanding the complex cognitive and linguistic of producing meaning-based interpretation.

The final and most problematic example comes from Pouliot and Stern (2008) who refer to the interpreter as a filter using a culinary analogy of cheesecloth.

> The interpreter who is relaying the message colors it naturally and unavoidably filters. This filtering is almost always exemplified by the interpreter’s prosody, which is the free
radical of interpreting. Think about it as if the interpreter is a sheet of cheesecloth placed across the mouth of a glass. Everything that is poured into the glass must go through the cheesecloth […] No matter what the cloth is made of or how loosely knit or tightly knit the cloth may be, it will always color the liquid beneath. The interpreter is the cheesecloth. (Pouliot & Stern, 2008, p. 133)

That the interpreter “colors” the interaction is not in dispute, however it is less related to filtering and more to do with the interpreting process and how the interpreter imprints the task of interpreting with her own subjectivity as a discourse participant (Janzen & Shaffer, 2005; Wilcox & Shaffer, 2005; Wadensjö, 2002). Referring to the interpreter’s prosody as a free radical suggests that little cognitive thought or processing energy is applied to analyzing the prosodic features in the source language in an effort to find a dynamic equivalence in the target language. Nicodemus (2009) wrote an entire volume, *Prosodic Markers and Utterance Boundaries in American Sign Language Interpretations*, providing a thorough review of the literature and emphasizing the importance of prosody in signed language interpretation. If the interpreter’s prosody was simply a “free radical”, listeners would have difficulty apprehending meaning given that “prosody plays an essential role in the production and perception of every utterance, spoken or signed, in language” (Nicodemus, 2009, p. 13).

While marriage, mind-reading, real estate and free radicals trivialize the interpreting task, the “interpreter as cheesecloth”, is at best a misguided metaphor that attempts to describe maladroitly what Janzen and Shaffer (2008) refer to as “intersubjectivity” in interpreted interactions, what Shaffer and Wilcox (2005) refer to as the “co-construction of meaning”, and what Wadensjö (2002) describes as “dialogic interpreting”. Each of these scholars have deconstructed and critically analyzed the dynamics of the interpreter as participant in the
discourse event. Janzen and Shaffer (2008) have expounded on the myth of objectivity in interpretation and they make the following four assertions: 1) the interpreter is a co-participant who “contributes to the intersubjective relationship in the interchange”, 2) “the interpreter’s construction of meaning is complicated by the fact that she does not share the same context as the primary discourse participants given that she most likely spends the majority of her time outside the other participants’ environments(s)”, 3) “the interpreter brings her own conceptualized view of the event to the discourse”, and 4) the interpreter is simultaneously creating discourse relationships with each of the other participants and attempting to convey their discourse linguistically “as if it were still their own”. (pp. 347–348).

The assertions that Janzen and Shaffer make can be applied to the designated interpreter model to better understand how it successfully serves Deaf professionals. It can be argued that the familiar and on-going nature of the relationship between the designated interpreter, the deaf professional and his or her colleagues may lend itself to the interpreter contributing less to the intersubjective relationship during the discourse exchange because she shares the same context of communication, thereby reducing the number of assumptions she needs to make about the knowledge that is shared between the interlocutors. So rather than bringing her own conceptualized view of the event to the discourse exchange, she has a mutually shared view with the participants. Contextualization is a necessary component of communication (and the interpreting process) and unlike the non-designated interpreter, the designated interpreter will likely be aware of previous contexts reducing her own subjectivity, and consequently being more likely to render a target text that is closer to the original.

Further, as Janzen and Shaffer state: “Interlocutors construct meaning that depends extensively on situational factors as well as by linking what is communicated at a give moment
to knowledge that is carried forward from past events and experiences. (2005, p. 342). Since the designated interpreter is working with the Deaf professional and his or her colleagues on a daily basis, she too can carry forward knowledge from past events. A non-designated interpreter at best may interpret on a weekly basis but is not privy to the daily interactions. Further, the designated interpreter can create her own relationships with the discourse participants that develop both during the task of interpreting and through social interactions within the workplace. Developing these relationships contributes to a repository of shared knowledge, which undoubtedly decreases the cognitive demands while interpreting, thereby facilitating greater accuracy in the work. However, with more shared knowledge a new challenge emerges: the designated interpreter must allocate processing energy to monitor the fidelity of the message to ensure that her shared knowledge is not imposed on the interchange. Conversely, accurate interpretation can be impeded by lack of knowledge and inaccurate assumptions, and the designated interpreting model eliminates some of this guesswork but also requires the interpreter to “filter” her own mutually shared knowledge from that of the discourse participants she is interpreting for. Thus, because of the nature of the Deaf professional-designated interpreter relationship the amount of ‘known’ information is increased among all the discourse participants contributing to accurate and efficacious interpretation.

The advantages of the designated interpreter model can also be explained using what Wilcox and Shaffer (2005) refer to as a cognitive model of interpreting that suggests, “communication, and therefore interpreting, is an active process of constructing meaning based on evidence provided by speakers” (p. 27), thus meaning is not inherently conveyed in the form, the words and grammar, but inferred by it and is co-constructed (p. 35). A designated interpreter is able to co-construct meaning from a different experiential reference point than a generalist
interpreter who only works with the Deaf professional on an infrequent basis. Because the designated interpreter is a member of the professional team, she understands intertextual references and is more able to effectively co-construct meaning having more linguistic and pragmatic information at her disposal. Similarly, Wadensjö (2002) posits, “interpreting as interaction” (p. 368) and argues that interpreted renditions are rarely a “word-by-word transfer” but instead the dialogue interpreter enables information and experiences to be exchanged (p. 356-357). The designated interpreter is more likely to create interpreted renditions that are closer to the originals because some of the unknowns, namely discourse pragmatics, are minimized during the interpreted interaction. The aforementioned analysis of the designated interpreting task, framed within the context of “interpreting as interaction” accounts for the intersubjective and dialogic nature of interpreting and the co-construction of meaning in a way that more accurately represents the very complex and cognitively demanding task of information interchange between people who do not share the same language.

For Deaf professionals, it is clear that having access to a designated interpreter is far superior to hiring generalist interpreters on an as-needed basis. The Deaf professional can feel confident that the designated interpreter has awareness about the context of the work environment, has prior content knowledge that contributes to efficacy in the interpretation of the discourse interchange, and also has a familiarity with the Deaf professional’s communication style and overriding professional goals because the interpreter is a member of the professional team. The foundation of this professional relationship is built on mutual trust and respect, qualities that develop over time both on and off the job. The success of the model also depends on both the Deaf professional and the designated interpreter being aware of the cognitive and linguistic processes inherent in signed language interpretation and acknowledge how each of the
discourse participants contributes to the intersubjective nature of the communication act. When all of the above factors are in place, the designated interpreter can focus more on the communication needs in the context of the Deaf professional’s work and less on the interpreting process.

Although the Deaf professional-designated interpreter model is in its infancy, it is well on its way to becoming a specialization in signed language interpreting and, as such, it behooves interpreters and Deaf professionals to engage in collegial exchange for the purpose of further reflection to delineate the nuances of this new paradigm. It is incumbent on those who do the work to contribute to the body of knowledge about this unique area of interpreting because it has the potential to inform general interpreting practices. Considering the mutually beneficial nature of the Deaf professional-designated interpreter dynamic, it may in fact be more productive to rethink the terminology in such a way where designated interpreting is not conceived of as a prescriptive model but rather a dynamic approach that incorporates the best of the current interpretation models to optimally meet the needs of the Deaf professional.
References


