

Introduction

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Kotahi te kowhāo o te ngira i kuhuna ai te miro ma, te miro pango, me te miro whero. There is but a single eye of the needle through which the threads of white, black and red must pass. (Mead & Grove, 2001, p. 246)

In this Māori homily, the white, black, and red threads of traditional weaving are used as a metaphor for the joining together of people from different cultures to form a strong social fabric. In this volume, we cast the sign language interpreter as the “eye of the needle” through which a plurality of languages, cultures, and identities of various hues are delicately passed to weave positive human connections.

FROM DUALISM TO PLURALISM

Linguistic proof that signed languages are distinct from spoken languages has supported a narrative of oppositional contrast between Deaf cultural identity and social norms and those of hearing people. In turn, the discourse of the sign language interpreting profession has tended to characterize consumers and languages in a binary distinction as Deaf or hearing, at times perhaps implying that these social categories are homogeneous, mutually exclusive, and all-encompassing primary identities. While the Deaf-hearing contrast is obviously central in defining the context of our work, this dualism potentially dulls our perception of the multiplicity and fluidity of identities, allegiances, and language resources that Deaf and hearing participants (and interpreters) bring to interpreted interactions. This volume probes the multiplex nature of interpreted interaction involving Deaf and hearing people of diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, and the contextualized interpreting practices and considerations that transpire from this diversity.

Contemporary studies of variation within and contact between signing communities are building a more detailed picture of the linguistically heterogeneous profile of Deaf communities and showing how variation in language use correlates with dimensions of social identity and context (Branson and Miller, 1998; Brentari, 2001; Lucas & Valli, 1989; Lucas, Bayley, & Valli, 2001; Metzger, 2000; Quinto-Pozos, 2007). Social scientists have also drawn attention to the spectrum of ethnic and social identities within Deaf communities, observing how Deaf elements of identity interact with other contextual variables such as family, race, place, and ethnicity to manifest in plural constructions of “Deaf” (Ahmad, Darr, Jones, & Nisar, 1998; Aramburo, 1989; Breivik, 2005; Christensen & Delgado, 1993; Foster & Kinuthia, 2003; McKay-Cody, 1998/1999; Monaghan, Schmaling, Nakamura, & Turner, 2003; Parasnis, 1996; Paris & Wood, 2002; Smiler & McKee, 2007).

Demographic data in the United States show that ethnicity in the Deaf population is rapidly diversifying (Leigh, 2008, p. 24). Leigh emphasizes that Deaf people are increasingly likely to interact with up to four communities: the majority hearing community, the larger deaf community, the ethnic hearing community of their family, and their ethnic deaf peers. In each of these contexts, Deaf and hearing people use language and other means of self-representation in fluctuating ways to construct identity and connection with each other. The multiplicity of identities in the Deaf world challenges the sociolinguistic repertoire of interpreters who are called upon to mediate communication across multiplex combinations of culture and language.

It is widely noted that the interpreter workforce is less diverse than the profile of Deaf populations: The majority of sign language interpreters in Western countries tend to be white, majority-culture females, and sign language interpreters are more commonly bilingual than tri- or multilingual. It can therefore be difficult for consumers from diverse backgrounds to find an interpreter with overlapping social characteristics and thought-worlds, or the ability to work in a third language that would connect them to the minority language community of their family. Few training programs and professional accreditation systems address multilingual/multicultural competencies in sign language interpreting; the National Multicultural Interpreting Project (Mooney, 2006) is an example of a pedagogical initiative in the United States that focused on preparing interpreters for the demands of cultural diversity in their work.

The first section in the volume focuses on the growing specialization of American Sign Language (ASL), English, and Spanish trilingual interpreting in the United States. Some contexts involving two spoken languages and two sign languages require quadrilingual interpreting (e.g., Mexican Sign Language (LSM), ASL, English, and Spanish). In Chapter 1, Ramsey and Peña explore the convergence of the Mexico-U.S. border with the Deaf-hearing border and the complex dynamics of this physically close but culturally distant interaction mediated by tri- and quadrilingual interpreters. In particular, they examine sociocultural and competency considerations for three- and four-language interpreting in this context, including disparity of language status and interpreting education between these countries.

In Chapter 2, Quinto-Pozos, Casanova de Canales, and Treviño describe an innovative trilingual (ASL, English, Spanish) Video Relay Service (VRS). Their chapter reviews the history of the trilingual VRS, discusses some of the linguistic challenges presented by the consumer cultures and the medium, analyzes evaluation data from practitioners and stakeholders in the service, and considers implications of this data.

Although the need to provide proficient interpreters qualified to work between ASL, English, and Spanish is well established, only recently has a formal trilingual interpreter certification process been successfully developed. In Chapter 3, González, Gatto, and Bichsel review the development and testing of a recently implemented trilingual (ASL, English, Spanish) interpreter certification process; they explain the processes of ensuring standardization, fairness, and psychometric validity of the test in measuring appropriateness and accuracy with respect to linguistic and cultural elements of candidates' interpretation.

MEDIATING MINORITY VOICES AND IDENTITIES

Acknowledging cultural diversity in Deaf communities highlights that the voice of some minorities is marginalized within the Deaf world and doubly so in hearing society (Anderson & Bowe, 1972; Dively, 2001; James & Woll, 2004; Padden & Humphries, 2005; Smiler, 2004). As witnesses to the inequities arising from differences in hearing status, class, ethnicity, and language, interpreters are often intrinsically concerned with empowering the voice of these Deaf consumers. In practice, interpreters sometimes agonize about how to respond ethically to underlying issues of

social disadvantage in situations (particularly crises) involving minority group consumers who are culturally marginal in any community; they may struggle to reconcile their responses to these challenges with the textbook interpreter role. In a slightly different vein, interpreters of minority identity may choose to align themselves with the goals of indigenous and ethnic minority Deaf people to access their hearing community's sphere of cultural and political activities. The goal of interpreted transactions for Deaf participants in such contexts may be principally negotiating ethnic identity and solidarity, and gaining access to heritage cultural capital. Accordingly, the interpreter's ability to codeswitch between three languages or varieties is critical to enabling Deaf participants "to opt for a language that would symbolize the rights and obligations they wish to enforce in the exchange in question and index the appropriate identities" (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004, p. 8).

We agree with Dean and Pollard's (2005) assertion that "revealing situated practice" is a vital source of evidence for refining models of professional practice that are based in particular, and diverse, realities rather than universal idealizations. In situated practice, how does an interpreter's personal alignment with cultural norms and power relations shape their ethical framework and their manner of working? How do the cultural positions and agendas of ethnic minority Deaf and hearing people shape their expectations of an interpreter in situations of contact? These issues have been somewhat explored in relation to African American Deaf and interpreters in the United States (e.g., Jones, 1986; Mathers & White, 1986) but remain relatively under-researched.

The need to stimulate and disseminate further practice-based evidence prompted our invitation for contributions on the theme of interpreting in indigenous and minority language community contexts. This second group of chapters focuses on interpreters working with people of indigenous origin, addressing issues of role and responsibilities, the challenges of bridging wide gaps in cultural competencies and discourse norms, and the use of indigenous sign varieties. In Chapter 4, McKee and Awheto examine the way in which a trilingual Māori interpreter in New Zealand negotiates a role in response to the divergent schemas of participants, her own cultural alignment, and the sociocultural conditions framing the event. This chapter highlights that the role and ethics considered normative for a professional interpreter are not culturally neutral, and that contextualized practice in culturally diverse situations may be differently motivated and manifested.

Davis and McKay-Cody, Chapter 5, report on ethnographic fieldwork and observations from over two decades of collaborating, interpreting, and participating in multicultural and multilingual North American Indian communities. They describe the traditional and contemporary varieties of sign language used among North American Indian communities, and suggest strategies, best practices, and links to resources for interpreters working with Deaf people in these communities.

Indigenous Deaf people in legal settings can be doubly disadvantaged by their distance from the cultural parameters of “the system”; this is a context in which facilitating understanding about cultural-linguistic background is critical to the process of interpreting and achieving fair outcomes. In Chapter 6, Fayd’herbe and Teuma bring their professional experience in interpreting and forensic psychology to a discussion of issues in affording due process to Indigenous Deaf people of Far North Queensland, Australia. They discuss cultural differences and language competencies of these clients, outline practical interpreter strategies for working in a forensic team, and illustrate the risks of denial of due process by reference to relevant cases.

TRANSNATIONAL INTERPRETING

International exchange between members of different sign language communities has increased rapidly due to factors including improved Deaf access to higher education (leading to professionalization and international academic exchange), greater mobility, and the formalization of global Deaf advocacy activities. Increasing trans-national exchange between Deaf people over the last 20 years has presented sign language interpreters with challenges akin to those of spoken language interpreters who have traditionally worked in elite, multilingual domains such as conferences, business, and politics. Furthermore, borderless technologies such as video relay and remote interpreting services have changed the boundaries of when, where, and how Deaf and hearing parties can use their respective languages to interact via interpreters.

An emerging area of expertise is interpreting across multiple signed and spoken languages at international conferences. In Chapter 7, Supalla, Clark, Neumann Solow, and Muller de Quadros address the requirements of ensuring quality of interpreted access for Deaf and hearing academics participating in a conference. The authors describe the development,

implementation, and outcomes of a protocol for conference interpreting designed to bring Deaf participants, including minority sign language participants, from the margins of the conference into full involvement. Finally, in Chapter 8, de Wit discusses challenges and skills relevant to interpreting in multilingual, multimodal European conference settings, and suggests practical strategies for furthering these, such as the acquisition of additional languages, teamwork, and mentoring into the specialist skill-set required.

Most of the chapters in this book draw strongly upon practitioner and consumer insight as a source of data. In each instance, authors describe a localized situation and explore its implications for interpreting practice in the wider field. We believe this is a valuable contribution to an emerging area in the research literature. Commenting upon methods of sociolinguistic research, Coupland (2007, p. 28) states that “Single-case analyses are more likely to allow adequate sensitivity to context and contextualization” and may allow generalization to the possibilities in a given situation rather than to “what people typically do.” Since the practices of interpreters in culturally and linguistically complex situations are as yet little-documented, this volume aims to highlight the state of current practice and perspectives via case studies of practice from various contexts, in order to stimulate directions for further research and dialogue.

Collaborative authorship of all but one of the chapters seems to reflect an intuition that alliances between culturally and academically diverse professionals, consumers, and researchers are important in constructing new knowledge about interpreting, and in re-balancing power relations. All chapters emphasize the importance of dialogue and cooperative initiatives, and reflect an orientation towards the practitioner as researcher. We would like to think that the collaborative nature of the work in this volume enacts the following advice from the National Multicultural Interpreting Project (2000):

Without true and authentic multicultural partnerships with both Deaf and Hearing interpreters from a diversity of backgrounds, experiences and cultural competencies, we will not be able to effectively meet these challenges. With the development of increased access to technology, transportation, and organizational networking, we no longer have to function as “Super Interpreters” who must understand all languages, know all cultures and be all things to all communities. With the development of multicultural partnerships, agencies, teams, and training programs, we can develop the true respect and appreciation for our colleagues in this dynamic field. (p. 4)

In many respects the fundamental challenge of interpreting in multiethnic contexts is like that in any interpreting situation: to bridge a gap of linguistic and cultural expression between hearing and Deaf people who need to communicate with each other, while managing the logistics of bimodal communication. At the same time, there are particular contextual issues for interpreters in multilingual/multiethnic situations relating to cultural assumptions about relationships and roles within the interaction, differences in power, the impact of participants' social identities and alliances, interpreter training and competence, and negotiating teamwork. The degree of distance between the languages and thought-worlds of participants in such situations sometimes requires interpreters to span very wide gulfs or to build multiple bridges between a diverse set of participants.

This volume particularly addresses the experience of interpreters in those “wide gap” situations, in order to identify challenges, strategies and consequences, and to stimulate consideration of how this kind of work abides with more “mainstream” models of practice.

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