

## **Deaf Interpreters: An Introduction**

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We, the authors of this chapter, have worked together as Deaf interpreters in various combinations at international events over the years. Our earliest collaborations go back to 2003. We come from different family, cultural, and language backgrounds, but we nonetheless have much in common. We believe that our personal experiences reveal the cultural, political, and social elements of interpreting, and we use this information to describe the skills necessary to become a Deaf interpreter (hereafter, DI).

The literature on Deaf interpreting presents differing perspectives on the variety of assignments that call for a DI, who may sometimes work as an assistant to a non-DI and as a professional in the DI's own right at other times (Adam, 2010). This wide variety of perspectives is problematic because (1) they arise from insufficient knowledge and understanding of what a DI is and what sort of work a DI does, and (2) they may have an adverse impact on the recognition and the employment conditions of a DI. The ultimate aim of this chapter is to provide a better understanding of what makes a DI and to describe the work a DI undertakes in the hope that the information presented here will foster better working relationships between Deaf and non-DIs, both during and outside of interpreting assignments. This would be the best possible service outcome for the Deaf and deaf-blind clients whom we serve.

In the following section we offer our brief biographies to describe our background experiences, language inventories, and the types of work we have done.

Robert Adam was born in Melbourne, Australia, and his parents are Deaf. His mother's first language is Australian Irish Sign Language, and his father's first language is Australian Sign Language (Auslan). As a child, Robert would watch his hearing grandmother draft letters for various Deaf relatives, and this led him to do the same himself. As an adult in the local Deaf club, he was often asked to translate from sign language into

English (reports, minutes, letters, dissertations, etc.), and this translation work was often reciprocated by Deaf people by using other skills; the favor was returned in kind and not with money. Robert's first paid interpreting work was with deaf-blind people, and he has done DI work (as a relay interpreter) in mental health, legal, and social work settings. Later he worked as an International Sign platform signer at World Federation of the Deaf congresses, Deaflympic Games, and the International Congress on Education of the Deaf, and he has interpreted between British Sign Language (a dialect of Auslan) and American Sign Language or Irish Sign Language. He is a registered sign language interpreter and a sign language translator in the United Kingdom and undertakes sign language translation from English for websites.

Markus Aro was born in Helsinki, Finland. His parents and siblings are Deaf, and his hearing grandfather worked as a volunteer interpreter. After 4 years of full-time study, with a major in interpretation and translation between Finnish and Finnish Sign Language, Markus is now a certified sign language interpreter in Finland. He learned International Sign (IS) by traveling around the world and attending Deaf events, using it informally in contact with Deaf people from various countries. He is now a full-time interpreter working in the legal, deaf-blind, business, leisure time, and religious domains, interpreting between Finnish Sign Language (FinSL), IS, and Finnish, but he interprets only from American Sign Language, Swedish Sign Language, and Finnish-Swedish Sign Language. He is currently CEO of VIPARO (an interpretation and translation company).

Senan Dunne is a native of Carlow, Ireland, and is from a mostly hearing family; he has a younger Deaf brother. Senan began attending boarding school in Dublin at the age of 3. He is currently a registered DI, having been registered in Ireland since June 2006, when the first assessment of DIs took place (although the third assessment of hearing interpreters took place that year). His first experience with interpreting was at the age of 6, when a Deaf friend stayed at his house, and Senan relayed to his friend what was being said. Later, he interpreted between his hearing relatives and his Deaf brother. He also relayed for teachers and supervisors in the dormitories, as did many other students. His first official interpreting assignment was in 1992, when he worked with a deaf-blind client. He has also carried out platform interpreting between Irish Sign Language (ISL) and BSL, ISL and ASL, and ISL and IS, and has made a video translation of English text to ISL.

Juan Carlos Druetta was born in Córdoba, Argentina, the third of four siblings with Deaf parents. His mother went to the Magnasco School for the Deaf, which was influenced by Spanish Sign Language, and his father went to the Bartolomé Ayrolo School for the Deaf, which was influenced by Italian Sign Language. Both institutions were in Buenos Aires and were in operation before the establishment of Deaf schools around the country. The effect of the two sign languages can be seen in the modern version of Argentine Sign Language (Lengua de Señas Argentina, LSA), which is descended from both sign languages (Druetta, 2000). Juan Carlos translated from Spanish to sign language (reports, minutes, letters, dissertations, etc.) at the Deaf club.

Juli af Klintberg is from a big hearing family, one that learned Swedish Sign Language (SSL) when Juli was very young. Since Juli's father was a professional performer, language and the theater have always been important parts of her family life. Many members of her family are multilingual, and so she learned different languages early on. Her mother is a Swedish Sign Language (SSL) interpreter, and her father uses SSL in his performances; thus she was able to be involved with both of their professions. At a young age she started interpreting between Deaf and hearing friends and was able to jump between various languages. At the school for deaf students she started learning English, which is her fourth language. Her languages, in order of fluency, are as follows: SSL, Swedish, American Sign Language, and English. Juli used her experiences with different languages to learn International Sign. When working as a DI, she receives her "feed" in a variety of ways: (1) from an SSL/Swedish interpreter working as a relay interpreter for her; (2) directly from the presenter (by watching the presenter on the stage); (3) by standing off stage and watching the presenter a video camera shows Juli's interpretation to audience members on a screen; or (4) by watching the feed from a little screen on stage, with the camera on the lecturer.

We come from diverse backgrounds, from different countries around the world (albeit the Western world), and we have different language inventories. Yet we all started language brokering from within the Deaf community either as a child in school or in a Deaf club, which is common among DIs (Bienvenu & Colonomos, 1992). Each of us has had a multilingual upbringing, which means that we are able to use various languages to enhance the interpreting act. Both Juan Carlos and Robert had parents who used different sign languages, and the others learned a variety of sign languages after acquiring their first sign

language. Ultimately, all of us brokered between a sign language and a spoken language from a very early age. This background emphasizes the bilingual and multilingual nature of DIs' lives even before they commenced language brokering.

## **RESEARCH TO DATE**

It is worth exploring the origin of DIs and the way in which they are positioned (in cultural terms) within the Deaf community. In doing so, we first look at the very nature of the Deaf community, which Ladd (2003) refers to as a collective body in which Deaf people have traditionally supported each other in various practical ways (e.g., exchanging manual skills), and our own life experiences reinforce this point. Deaf people have historically been trained and employed in the manual trades after finishing school. For example, Deaf people who were good at carpentry would support other Deaf people who had different skills, such as repairing cars or cobbling shoes or tailoring (Ladd, 2003). This sort of exchange has extended beyond the manual trades as Deaf people have also helped each other with written and signed translations of various texts (Stone, 2009). In fact, this happens not only within Deaf clubs; for instance, Deaf children have often interpreted for classmates at school when the teacher was unable to understand or make themselves understood by their Deaf pupils (Boudreault, 2005; Stone, 2009; Adam, Carty, & Stone, 2011; Bienvenu & Colonos, 1992). This indicates that what Deaf people do in Deaf clubs often transpires in Deaf schools as well.

This raises the question of what exactly takes place in these interpreting and translation events. Often these tasks included translation and the drafting of letters and documents by bilingual Deaf people. Adam et al. (2011) state that bilingual Deaf people were often committee members (quite often secretary or minutes secretary) of Deaf clubs, where they utilized their bilingual skills to support their minority language community; as members of this group themselves, they garnered trust from within the Deaf community. To date, little is known about the various aspects of DI "work" as it has been carried out within the community, when in fact non-Deaf people are not the only ones who have done this kind of language brokering within the Deaf community; it is well documented that hearing children of Deaf parents have been called upon to perform language-brokering tasks (Corfmat, 1990; Ozolins & Bridge, 1999;

Napier, Goswell, & McKee, 2006), but fewer studies have focused on Deaf people who have also undertaken this work (Bienvenu & Colonomos, 1992; Boudreault, 2005; Ozolins & Bridge, 1999).

### **DIs: A New Concept?**

Boudreault (2005) summarizes the situation for DIs succinctly with the following two quotes in his seminal chapter on DIs. The first is a question posed to a DI: “How can a Deaf person be a signed language interpreter in your own Deaf community? It can’t be. You’re Deaf!” (Boudreault, 2005, p. 323); yet at the same time he reports that “There is a new trend around the world for the Deaf interpreter service provider to be an integral part of Deaf life” (Boudreault, 2005, p. 323). This lack of consistency and understanding is also evident in the United Kingdom, where DIs have had their legitimacy questioned (see also Morgan & Adam, 2012, for a discussion of DIs’ experiences in working with non-DIs, as well as with agencies and non-Deaf clients who do not understand the work that DIs do). And yet the work of a DI is hardly new: for as long as Deaf people have communicated with each other using sign language, they have also acted as language brokers. Carty et al. (2009) tell the story of a Deaf woman, Sarah Pratt of Weymouth, Massachusetts, born in 1640, whose Deaf husband, with the help of Sarah’s two sisters, wrote down her replies to the elders of her church as a part of her examination for membership in the congregation. It is reasonable to assume that, although this is the first documented evidence of such brokering, Deaf people have been acting as DIs ever since first coming together as a community.

### **Terminology**

The terminology used to describe DIs varies across the literature. In addition to “deaf interpreters,” they have also been called “relay interpreters,” “deaf relay interpreters,” “intermediaries,” “mirror interpreters,” and so on. Napier et al. (2006, p. 143) define *relay interpreting* as serving as an “intermediary communicator between a non-DI and a deaf client, a deaf presenter and a deafblind client, or a non-DI and a deafblind client” (see also Bienvenu & Colonomos, 1992, for a description of the roles of a DI). On the other hand, Boudreault (2005, p. 323) uses the term “Deaf interpreters” but notes that these individuals were sometimes assumed to be “language facilitators” or “mirroring” interpreters. Forestal (2005)

refers to intermediary interpreters, with the non-DI remaining the lead interpreter in any given situation. Adam et al. (2011) refer to ghostwriters, who are Deaf people who perform translation tasks for other Deaf people or act as language brokers for people in a community where not everyone has English as a strong second language.

It is of interest to note that some of the terminology used (for example, relay interpreters, intermediary interpreter, mirror interpreters) can be taken to mean that DIs exist only to assist the non-DI, whereas other terms (e.g., DI) seem to indicate that DIs are professionals whose work is quite distinct from, but closely associated with, that of non-Deaf sign language interpreters. We propose, therefore, that the term “Deaf interpreters” (DIs) be used to cover the work we have thus far discussed.

### **So What Is a Deaf Interpreter?**

As discussed, perspectives on the role and work of DIs vary. One is that DIs are assigned when a client uses his or her own signs or home signs; uses a foreign sign language; is deaf-blind or has limited vision; uses signs particular to a region or to an ethnic or age group not known to the non-DI; or is in a mental state that makes ordinary interpreted conversation difficult (Napier et al., 2006). This definition is useful when looking at some of the situations in which a DI can be of value. Boudreault (2005), on the other hand, presents a concise description of a range of aspects of Deaf interpreting work. He outlines various language situations that may call for a Deaf bilingual with skills in both a spoken and a signed language; Deaf people who work between two sign languages; or Deaf people who work within one sign language (i.e., DI mirroring, facilitating, working with deaf-blind people). These skills are particularly useful, especially in the United Kingdom, where, anecdotally, Deaf people who work within one language do most of their work.

Yet some researchers, including Collins and Walker (2005), refer to the first and second group and do not consider the third group (i.e., Deaf people who work within a single sign language) as Deaf interpreting work. We argue that, as most DIs do this form of interpreting in one way or another in their professional employment, it is an integral part of DI work; moreover, DIs who are skilled at interlanguage work are usually able to do intralanguage interpreting and vice versa. Because of obligations under the Broadcasting Act (1996) and the Communications Act (2003), there exists a pool of DIs who work in the UK from English

to BSL on television, which makes it somewhat easier to argue that DI work is exclusively interlanguage. However, similar anecdotal evidence indicates that intralanguage interpreting forms a considerable proportion of the work done by DIs in the UK and other countries. A skills analysis undertaken by the National Centre for Languages in the UK (CILT) (*CILT Occupational and Functional Map for Languages and Intercultural Skills*, 2009) reports that most spoken-language interpreters undertake a variety of language-related jobs as well, and not just interpreting assignments. It seems that DIs parallel that experience in that their work is not restricted to interpreting between two languages but instead involves different aspects of language brokering between Deaf and other people.

### **What Is the Difference between a DI and a Non-DI?**

Discussions with workshop participants in Prague (Adam, Aro, Dunne, & af Klintberg, 2010) and at the ASLI Conference in Nottingham (Adam, 2010) resulted in debate on the similarities between DI and non-DIs. Similarities that were discussed include the need to be bilingual (minimum requirement), the fact that language processing (whether inter- or intralingual) takes place, the need to abide by a code of conduct, an expectation of professionalism, performance of a specific role in relation to the Deaf and the hearing clients, and the types and range of work undertaken. Differences that were discussed include the fact that DIs are Deaf all of the time (whereas non-Deaf interpreters can go home after interpreting assignments and “be hearing/part of the majority”); DI and hearing interpreters have dissimilar access to information; DI and hearing interpreters have a different relationship with Deaf culture in that the former have more confidence in their position in that culture than do the latter; DIs are role models for other members of the Deaf community.

Other differences include how the code of conduct is followed inasmuch as (1) Deaf and hearing interpreters are situated differently with respect to their habitus (Bourdieu, 1991) (i.e., where Deaf and hearing interpreters are culturally placed within a minority language community); (2) DIs and hearing interpreters treat nuances of language differently (e.g., DIs have a better understanding of sign language nuances, and hearing interpreters have a better understanding of spoken language nuances); and (3) speech is not always a central part of a DI’s work. Acceptance and recognition of the interpreter’s language inventory, skills set, qualifications, and experience also differ between DI and hearing interpreters

(Morgan & Adam, 2012): DIs are often treated differently and accorded a lower status than hearing interpreters.

Advocacy was extensively discussed, and although it is generally agreed that the role of a sign language interpreter, whether Deaf or hearing, does not include advocacy per se but perhaps rather a form of advocacy for effective communication, some of the DI's work may include passing on information (e.g., referral to a Deaf agency for additional support) that was not covered during the interpreting assignment but may benefit the Deaf client. This last point leads to extensive and robust discussion within the profession, and even though Stone (2009) finds that DIs and non-DIs will pragmatically enrich and/or impoverish a message in different ways, no other theoretical frameworks have been offered to explain these differences.

Of interest is the point that both groups follow a code of ethics that is both similar and yet different. It was argued at both workshops that, because of the diverse cultural starting points for DI and non-DIs, the code of ethics, although equally applicable to both groups in that both DIs and hearing interpreters must be professional and punctual and maintain confidentiality and so on, these requirements have contrasting implications for each group. For instance, whereas DIs are insiders of the Deaf community and hearing interpreters often come from outside the community, the behaviors that manifest from following the same code of ethics will arguably be different.

### **Deaf Extralinguistic Knowledge**

A working document of the National Consortium of Interpreter Education Centers (*NCIEC Deaf Interpreting Work Team, 2009*) refers to the knowledge gained from these firsthand Deaf world experiences as Deaf extralinguistic knowledge, or DELK, which is a prerequisite to training as a DI and is “needed in consumer assessment, message analysis, even in the production phase of the interpreting process, to achieve an interpretation that is consistent with the linguistic and experiential frame of the deaf consumer” (2009, p. 1).

The same document refers to the formative experiences of a DI, which include the following (2009, p. 2):

- 1.1.1. Exposure to American Sign Language and a wide variety of other communication forms of deaf people through life-long



interactions with Deaf family members, Deaf peers within the education system, and Deaf people in the community.

- 1.1.2. Early experiences of interpreting for family and peers;
- 1.1.3. Experiences of personal challenges to comprehending situations, interpreters, and various communication styles;
- 1.1.4. Personal experiences of discrimination, oppression, and what it is like not to have access to communication.

This chapter neatly dovetails with some of the findings of Adam et al. (2011), who discuss traditional DIs with long-term experience in ghostwriting and language brokering within the Deaf community. The implication of this is that it does not suffice for a DI merely to know sign language and have a hearing loss to be a DI; this role comes with a linguistic, cultural, and experiential dimension in that a DI needs to have lived as a Deaf person and have the necessary language and cultural background in order to perform effectively as a DI.

### **When Are DIs Assigned?**

An earlier view of DIs was that non-DIs believed that “certified Deaf interpreters are only there for deaf people with minimal language skills or whenever I need them” (Egnatovich, 1999, p. 1). However, Bienvenu and Colonos (1992, p. 76), in discussing the role of DIs, conclude that although it is difficult for non-DIs “to admit that a relay interpreter is necessary,” such an acknowledgment is not a sign of a weak interpreter but rather of “a disciplined and ethical interpreter. Some situations call for the use of two qualified interpreters—it’s as simple as that.” Forestal (1999) discusses situations in which DIs are necessary for a number of reasons: when required by law, particularly in legal and medical settings, in serious matters, including mental health, psychiatric, and drug/alcohol treatment programs, at public events, and when the non-DI is not qualified (e.g., due to the great demand for interpreters, sometimes the non-DI is not quite ready to actually interpret). Other domains include the attendance of deaf-blind people at international events.

However, it seems that attitudes have evolved, as is evidenced by workshops (e.g., EFSLI summer school, 2010, and ASLI conference, 2010) that have examined the potential situations in which a DI may be assigned:

where a barrier to communication exists, for example when a hearing person does not sign

when a written translation is needed  
when another Deaf person is needed  
when TV translation and interpretation are necessary  
in various media settings (on websites or hand-held museum guides)  
in mental health settings  
to assist with child protection  
when an arrest may be imminent  
to assist with immigration issues  
in educational venues  
to assist a client's participation in significant life events, such as weddings and funerals.

This demonstrates that the work actually done by a DI is indeed varied: it can also include voicing, gesturing, writing, or using other sign languages (Boudreault, 2005; Adam et al., 2011).

### **How Are Deaf Interpreters Positioned in Various Interpreting Settings?**

Because DIs must be able to see their source text (be it a sign language feed or written language scroll), extra thought needs to be given to the setting in which they will work.

Figure 1 shows the DI positioned between two sign language users. The DI can see both clearly (although not at the same time) and can interpret consecutively (or sometimes simultaneously) between the two participants. Boudreault (2005, p. 336) explains this setting.

Figure 2 shows the DI working with a signed language or a spoken language between a sign language user and a spoken language user, where

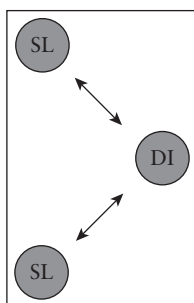


FIGURE 1. *A Deaf interpreter working between two signed languages.*

a DI and a hearing interpreter, working as a team, can interpret between the two languages.

Figure 3 shows a DI working alongside a sign language presenter and interpreting from one sign language into another sign language for this sign language group.

Figure 4 shows a DI working from a sign language feed from a sign language/spoken language interpreter who is interpreting spoken language produced by a hearing person. The feeder interpreter is working with a coworker who monitors the DI and supports the process.

Figure 5 shows a DI working from a Deaf or a hearing feeder interpreter who is relaying a presentation in one sign language to an audience whose sign language is different from the presenter's.

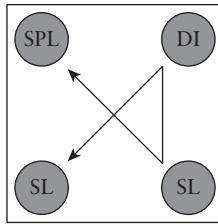


FIGURE 2. A Deaf interpreter working in a Deaf-hearing interpreting team. The source languages are a signed language and a spoken language.

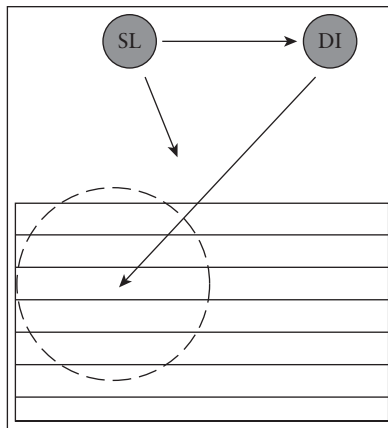


FIGURE 3. A Deaf interpreter working on stage interpreting from a presentation in a signed language (or interpreted into a signed language). The audience watching the Deaf interpreter and the presenter are on the same side so as to minimize the amount of turning required.

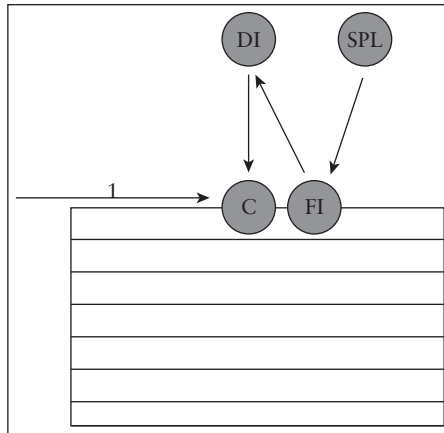


FIGURE 4. A Deaf interpreter works in a Deaf-hearing interpreting team with a “feed interpreter.” The feed interpreter interprets from the spoken language presentation into a signed language so that the Deaf interpreter can further translate this information to the audience members/clients.

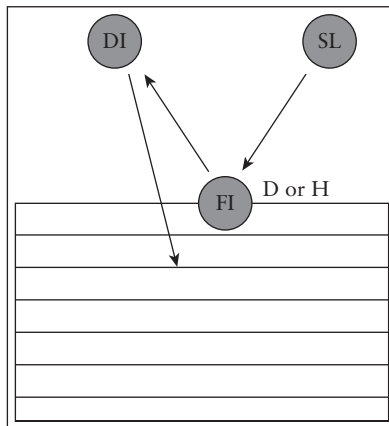


FIGURE 5. A Deaf interpreter works on stage beside a presenter using a signed language. A feed interpreter conveys the information from the presenter to the Deaf interpreter, who then interprets this to the audience.

Figure 6 shows a situation similar to that in figure 5, but here the feeder interpreter is not required; the DI is interpreting from one language to another, and the interpretation is projected onto a screen that can be seen by the audience, whose sign language is different from the presenter’s.

Figure 7 shows a DI working with a Deaf client (often in mental health settings) with a hearing professional. Because the client may be vulnerable

and perhaps easily confused, the hearing interpreter is placed behind the Deaf client and can still be seen by the DI, who can watch both the client and the hearing interpreter at the same time. This setting is particularly useful where it is important not to confuse the Deaf client by having two different people signing at the same time.

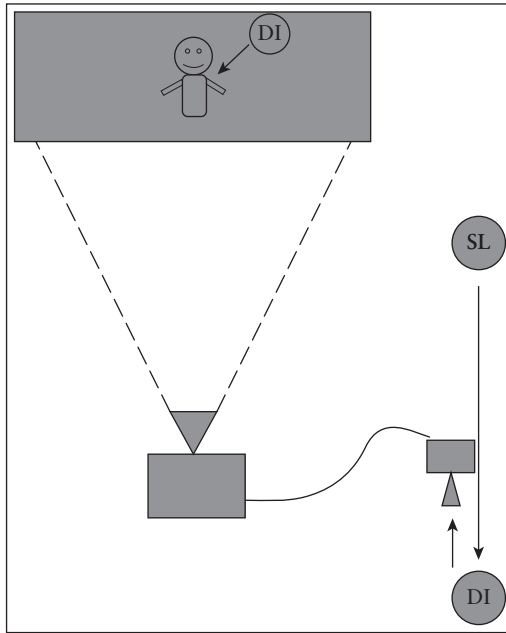


FIGURE 6. A Deaf interpreter directly observes a presentation in a signed language. The Deaf interpreter is filmed and then this image is projected onto a large screen for the audience to observe.

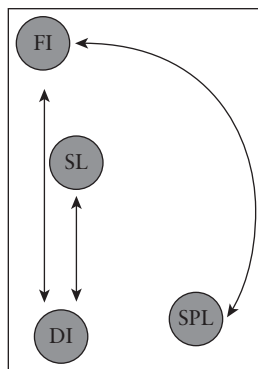


FIGURE 7. Similar to Figure 2, this configuration sees a Deaf interpreter working in a Deaf-hearing interpreting team with a feed interpreter. The source languages are a signed language and a spoken language.

Figure 8 shows a DI working from the video feed of a presenter, who is using a different sign language: the DI watches the video feed and faces the audience at the same time.

Figure 9 shows an international event where a spoken-language presenter’s talk is interpreted into the DI’s working sign language and fed to the DI, who then presents the information in International Sign. Teams of Deaf International Sign platform signers and hearing feeders work within the same sign language and are paired with whatever spoken language is used at the conference (usually English). International Sign is a situational pidgin (Allsop, Woll, & Brauti, 1995; Supalla & Webb, 1995; Murray, 2009; Adam, 2012); that is, it is not a natural first language of Deaf people but results from contact between Deaf people in translational contexts. The World Federation of the Deaf and the International Committee for Sports for the Deaf both use this contact variety of signing as a means of communication at international gatherings of Deaf people.

Figure 10 shows an international event (such as the Deaflympic Games) where the DI is working in a different location and presenting

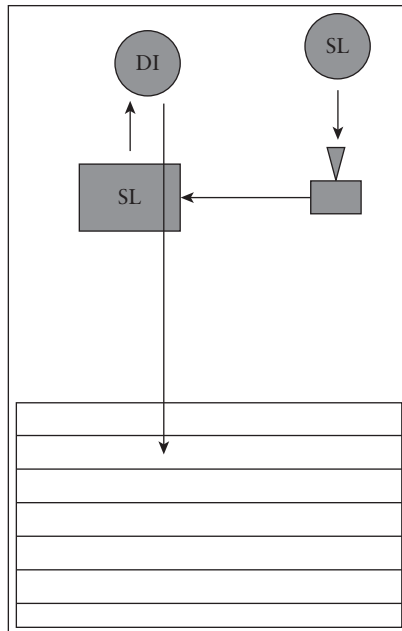


FIGURE 8. *A presentation is given in a signed language and this is relayed onto a screen for the Deaf interpreter to view. This is placed in front of the Deaf interpreter so that the Deaf interpreter can maintain eye contact with the audience.*

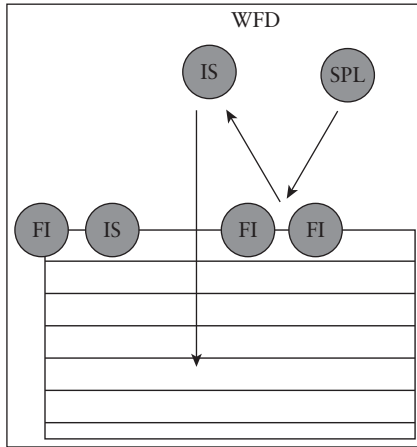


FIGURE 9. A Deaf interpreter is on stage working as part of an International Sign team. The feed interpreters translate the spoken language presentation into a signed language to the Deaf interpreter. The next Deaf-hearing International Sign team to interpret waits off to the side, allowing them to observe the topic of the presentation, and how the information is being conveyed.

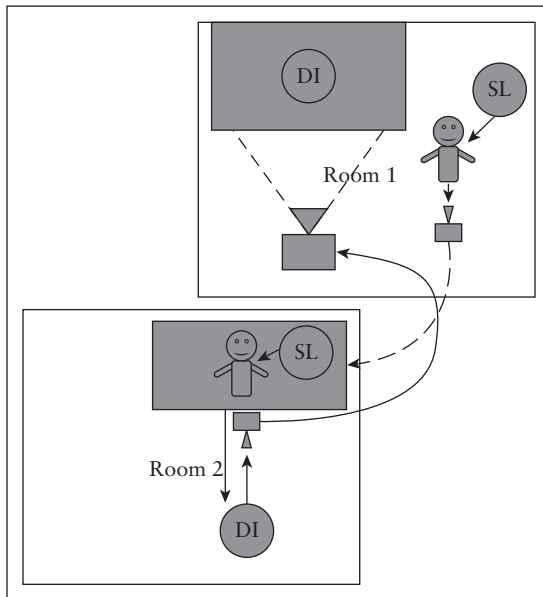


FIGURE 10. Similar to Figure 8, but in this case the presenter and the Deaf interpreter are not in the same room. A presentation is given in a signed language and this is relayed onto a screen for the Deaf interpreter to view. The Deaf interpreter is in another room, at least, not on stage. A camera is then used to capture the translation of the Deaf interpreter and this is projected onto a screen in the room where the original presentation is taking place.

information in International Sign (or even another sign language) from a video feed; this interpretation is projected onto the screen behind the presenter, which can be seen by the audience.

These positionings in different settings constitute a comprehensive, although not an exhaustive, list. Various situations may lend themselves to positioning that has not been covered in this chapter, but it is of great importance to realize that DIs can work in a variety of settings and increasingly with an English feed from captions on video screens and scrolling text (communication access realtime translation [CART] text in the United States or speech-to-text relay [STTR] in the United Kingdom).

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Even though there are differing views of what a DI is and does, we argue that a DI is defined as a Deaf professional who undertakes both inter- and intralanguage interpreting, as well as translation from a written or a spoken language to a sign language. In addition, this work may be done in a number of settings that may vary both in the type of situation and the physical interpreting arrangement. The cultural standpoints for DIs and non-DIs are dissimilar, and this has implications for some aspects of DIs' work, particularly with respect to the code of ethics and how messages are rendered. Finally, the partnership between DIs and non-DIs will lead to heightened service-delivery standards for Deaf people.

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