

Power: Its Position, Purpose, and Practice Within the Interpreting Triad

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Abstract

The relationships between the three participants in a signed language interpreting situation, as well as a spoken language interpreting situation, are complex, conflicting, and contentious. This paper examines fourteen articles and three unique histories in search of the answer as to whether or not the struggle for power is the cause of friction between these participants. In particular, the questions investigated here are: (a) What is the position of power in a community; (b) What is the purpose of power; and (c) How has power been practiced and used?

Despite the oppressed group history of the minority D/deaf community, studies suggest the D/deaf identity is evolving and becoming more empowered. The non-deaf majority, which includes those individuals in the educational and medical fields, has a pathological perspective of deafness. In this paper, the history of such a perspective and its effects are further explored. The histories and roles of the spoken language interpreter, and the professional signed language interpreter, referred to as *SLI* by Dickinson (2010), involve many contradictions and ambiguities. With the awareness of the past roles and influences of power in their consumers' histories, interpreters can become skilled at diffusing potential problems and more compassionate communicators.

Keywords: DeaF identity, history, majority group, minority group, oppression, pathology, power struggle, relationships

Note: The term *deaf* is spelled four different ways to indicate four distinct perspectives of deafness. *Deaf* is used to refer to individuals who proudly and strongly identify with the Deaf community, embrace Deaf culture and use American Signed Language. I have used *deaf* to refer

to people who lack the physical/audiological ability to hear and prefer to identify with the majority non-deaf/hearing population. *D/deaf* is used to describe the previous two groups of people collectively. *DeaF* defines a relatively new bicultural/bilingual identity.

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There are three stakeholders within the triad of any interpreted discourse: the minority consumer, the majority consumer, and the interpreter. Besides the interpreter, this generally involves two participants: a more powerful figure with inside knowledge and other resources, and a lesser or disadvantaged figure (Mason & Ren, 2012). In a signed language discourse, the non-deaf consumer would be the more powerful figure, and the *D/deaf* consumer would be the lesser or disadvantaged figure. Harvey (2003) observes in his research on signed language interpreters that the majority of cross-cultural exchanges between *deaf* and hearing people are filled with unintended misunderstandings and deliberate acts of oppression.

Through the eyes of each stakeholder's past experiences, the SLI can learn much from the sources of these misunderstandings and acts of oppression by the non-deaf majority. With this knowledge, the interpreter may be able to anticipate and avert potential problems through skillful and diplomatic communication. To achieve this goal, it is important to ask whether a struggle for power could be the source of conflict between these three stakeholders.

History is basically about the struggle for power, control, and independence. Analyzing a group's collective history allows one to become more aware of how the group perceives power, how the group obtains power, and how the group responds to power. The focus of this paper is the history of each member of the triad: the *D/deaf* community and consumer, the non-deaf consumer and the pathological view of deafness, and the history of the signed language interpreter/SLI.

Of the fourteen articles reviewed that involved interpreters, nine are specifically written about *D/deaf* issues, signed language interpreters, and the signed language interpreting profession. The remaining five papers exclusively research the spoken language interpreting

interactions between (a) the powerless minority, who are the oppressed non-native speakers living in a foreign country; (b) the dominant majority, who are the native-speaking oppressors; and (c) the “in-between” third party, spoken language interpreters for whom the concept of “neutrality” continues to be debated (Bahadir, 2010, p. 124-125). Interestingly, some of the dynamics between the stakeholders in the signed language dialogue are similar to some of the dynamics between those in the spoken language dialogue.

Deaf History: Identity and Oppression

“Language is a powerful weapon which speakers use to exert power, dominate, appease, and manipulate” (Bahadir, 2010, p. 126).

There are many facets to the history of *D/deaf* people, with regards to their language, community, culture, and relationships with the non-deaf community and SLIs. However, language and the power associated with it are of particular significance. In their research on spoken language interpreters, Mason and Ren (2012, p. 233) state that “mankind’s interlingual communication has been inextricably linked to the issue of power since antiquity.” A common belief since ancient times is that because people who are deaf lack the ability to hear or speak, they also lack the ability to think. Van Cleve and Crouch point out (as cited in Scheier, 2009, p. 5) that “*deaf* and *dumb* or *deaf-mute* are derogatory terms that have their derivation in Aristotle’s time.”

McEntee-Atalianis (as cited in Dickinson, 2010) asserts that the use of signed language is a core value and important indicator of identity and group unity. Mathews (2011, p. 362) also points out that “Sign[ed] Language lies at the heart of the social model of Deafness.” It is apparent that language, whether signed or spoken, is fundamental to the development of community and culture; and a self-advocating community “is only possible by means of a

common language” (Bahadir, p. 126). Several striking events and perspectives, such as the Milan Conference of 1880, government involvement, and actions stemming from the pathology of deafness reveal what occurs when power “changes hands” from those of the *Deaf* community to those of the non-deaf majority. Each incident and perspective confirms that signed language continues to be de-valued, disregarded, and misunderstood.

Thomas Gallaudet and Laurent Clerc are a successful example of non-deaf and *deaf* individuals working together in the early 1800s to promote education for the *deaf* and establish schools in the United States (Benedict & Sass-Lehrer, 2007). However, in the 1870s, Alexander Graham Bell advocated that oralism/speech be used for communication in *deaf* education (Scheier, 2009). At that time, many non-deaf educators within the field considered *Deaf* people and signed language to be “deficient, deviant, and defective” (Cokely, 2005, p. 11). When oralist supporters at the Council of Milan in 1880 made the decision to ban the use of signed language in education, it was effectively removed from the hands of teachers and pupils. Most *Deaf* schools then concentrated on teaching oralism/speech communication and becoming staunch opponents of signed communication as it was considered to be an inferior language. Consequently, it was no longer used in schools and students were not permitted to use it at all. Since then, hearing people and the values of the dominant hearing community continue to control the education of *deaf* children (Benedict & Sass-Lehrer).

As of 2005, there continue to be countries that do not recognize signed language. One such example is the Republic of Ireland. The Irish Government has yet to officially recognize Irish Signed Language because it is considered a ‘crutch’ that makes children ‘lazy’ in their use of speech and causes deterioration in English grammar (Mathews, 2011, p. 347, 369). The shame of deafness, combined with the efforts of non-deaf people to discourage the use of signed

language and “otherwise undermine *Deaf* people’s linguistic and cultural integrity” are, according to Leonard, Duren and Reiman (2007, p. 5), “strongly suggestive of oppression.”

If a culture were to exist without a language, the absence of communication that would follow would mean alienation and a lack of a connection with others. And so it has been for this minority linguistic group; the *Deaf* community; being misunderstood, overcoming discrimination and the negative perception of self by the power-wielding non-deaf majority. This common experience motivates *D/deaf* individuals to search for an identity outside of the current non-deaf community’s cultural values. The evolution of self-discovery, *Deaf* identity and culture begins when contact is made with other *D/deaf* people and signed language is learned (McIlroy & Storbeck, 2011).

Just as the majority non-deaf community wields its power to oppress the minority *D/deaf*, so too does the majority native-speaking community wield its power over the minority non-native speaker. Edwards, Temple, and Alexander (2005, p. 77) examined spoken language interpreting and argue that “there are links between English language disadvantage and social exclusion.” Furthermore, Bahadir’s research on spoken language interpreters observes that those who do not know the first language of the native born tend to be the disenfranchised, the immigrant... the oppressed *Other*.

Postmodern Deaf Culture and Identity

Empowerment involves people contributing in those choices affecting their lives.

In light of the history of the global oppression and discrimination committed against people who are *D/deaf*, one can understand why they continue to be distrustful today. Even so, “there is a tacit recognition of the reality of the Deaf community as a minority that signs, living surrounded by the majority of people who speak” (McIlroy & Storbeck, p. 509). There is a broad

range of approaches numerous countries have taken in supporting (directly or indirectly), legislating or recognizing signed language as the language of the minority *D/deaf* population, according to the European Union for the Deaf/EUD (CD-P-RR, 2005, pp. 103-104). An example of two countries that have chosen to officially recognize the signed language and identity of its *deaf* citizens in 2003 are Belgium, with Belgian-French Sign[ed] Language, and the United Kingdom with British Sign[ed] Language.

Cultures are dynamic and changing. Old ways of thinking and doing are re-evaluated, reinvented or cast off. In the same way, McIllroy and Storbeck (2011, p. 494) suggest that “deaf identity is not a static concept but a complex ongoing quest for belonging, a quest that is bound up with the acceptance of being deaf while ‘finding one’s voice’ in a hearing-dominant society.” The traditional *Deaf* Pride identity *itself* [emphasis added] is an example of this ongoing quest for belonging and change. McIllroy and Storbeck note that the “Deaf Pride narrative is restrictive... because it does not tolerate movement beyond Deaf identity politics,” nor does it accept bicultural/cross-cultural lives of *deaf* people (p. 508). It regards oral communication as being in opposition to signed communication and the Hearing world as being against the *Deaf* world. The “*DeaF*” identity understands and supports *D/deaf* individuals skillfully crossing the proverbial divide between the *Deaf* and culturally hearing identities/communities to develop opportunities found within each community. Hence the title *DeaF*, which recognizes the fluidity and flexibility of the *DeaF* individual’s exchanges with both communities (McIllroy & Storbeck, 2011).

Non-deaf Consumers’ Attitudes and the Pathology of Deafness

Audism (Benedict & Sass-Lehrer, 2007): the belief that a person is superior based on the ability to hear and speak or behave as a person who hears and speaks.

The pathological or traditional medical model refers to deafness as an audiological deficiency, “a disabling condition best corrected through audiological treatment and speech instruction” (Mathews, 2011, p. 362). In addition, most non-deaf people who have had minimum contact with *D/deaf* people or the *Deaf* community tend to believe deafness is an impaired condition that must be repaired (Benedict & Sass-Lehrer, 2007). Likewise, Scheier (2009, p. 5) reaffirms that “Deaf people are treated as if their hearing loss is a pathology that needs to be cured.”

Witter-Merithew and Johnson (2005, p. 32) claim that “there is often a power differential between the deaf individual and the non-deaf person who often has inherent authority, such as a doctor, lawyer, employer, teacher, counselor or pastor.” As stated earlier, language is an effective tool that can be used to exercise power, and is quite formidable in conjunction with education, inside knowledge and information (Mason & Ren, 2012). The same power differential might apply to non-deaf individuals or non-native speakers interacting with these same professionals. S. Wendell suggests (as cited in Mathews, p. 362) that this leading pathological view of deafness is due to the “great deal of social authority” attributed to the medical field.

In their article on health care providers and spoken language interpreters, Hsieh, Ju and Kong (2010, p. 178) write “having control over the medical encounter is critical to providers, as they feel the need to be in charge of interpreter-mediated interactions.” This attitude also relates to trust issues the provider might have with the interpreter’s function, competence and/or conduct. For example, while it is not customary to habitually place the same patient and interpreter together, managers deliberately prevented the same patient from frequently having the same interpreter for appointments because they were concerned that such a bond would

encourage the interpreter to disregard his or her professional boundary and become a patient advocate (Hsieh et al, 2010).

Dickinson (2010), a practitioner-researcher within the field of signed language interpreting, examines the dual nature of her role and how it influences her relationships with *Deaf* research participants in the workplace. She reports that in the workplace environment, *Deaf* consumers tend to presume that the SLI is there on behalf of the *D/deaf* consumer: “part interpreter, part advocate, and part cultural workplace expert” (p. 115). In this same setting, the non-deaf majority is likely to see the SLI as either a ‘helper’ or ‘conduit’, which are at opposite ends of the interpreter service model. This leaves the SLI unclear about his or her role and responsibilities (Dickinson, 2010).

Mathews (2011) reports that in Ireland, non-deaf professionals use several strategies on parents that perpetuate the non-use of Signed Language and maintain the hegemonic medical model of deafness. These include such tactics as (a) filtering or regulating access to available information, (b) seducing parents “into the medical model with the sometimes misleading promise that their child will acquire speech”, (c) extolling the practicality of speech, and (d) warning parents about “the risk of ‘damaging’ their child by introducing them to Sign[ed] Language” (p. 368-369). Moreover, McLaughlin et al. (2004) explain that in the United Kingdom, “considerable segregation and exclusion” (p. 158) from what is considered to be common knowledge and information is the experience for most *Deaf* people, especially older *Deaf* individuals. They also state that *Deaf* people in the United Kingdom believe the failure of society to acknowledge and respond to them as a linguistic group is the main problem.

According to Baker-Shenk (as cited in Dickinson, 2010), the dominant culture routinely degrades the oppressed minority’s self-worth, abilities, intelligence, and right to be different.

This view is responsible for the oppression the *Deaf* community has historically suffered at the hands of non-deaf people. On the contrary, Napier mentions the remark of a non-deaf person who said, “I think it’s quite interesting if the deaf person refuses to use an interpreter but you, the hearing person, *need* an interpreter” (2011, p. 72).

Professional Interpreters’ Position and Power

Interpreter: “one who ensures that individuals who do not speak the same language are able to communicate with one another” (Bahadir, 2010, p. 124).

Historically, signed language interpreters were linked to the *Deaf* community through a deaf parent, sister, brother, friend, or church congregant and/or they worked with *Deaf* people in education or social work (Dickinson, 2010). Baker-Shenk (as cited in Dickinson, 2010, p. 106) concedes that today, signed language interpreters continue to intercede “between clients from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds,” and between members of the powerful *non-deaf* majority and the *Deaf* oppressed minority.

Signed Language interpreting was once a successful community-focused venture led by *D/deaf* individuals. However, as the field has become more academia-focused; with power being transferred to non-deaf teachers and ‘professional’ interpreters; the relationship between *D/deaf* people and SLIs has become strained (Witter-Merithew & Johnson, 2005). Dickinson also confirms that relationships between *Deaf* individuals and SLIs continue to be complex and inevitably linked to the history of the oppression of *Deaf* people and the progression of Signed Language interpreting as a profession. The same is said about power within the spoken language interpreting field: What is considered “professionalism is closely connected to issues of power and control” (Bahadir, 2010, p. 126). As a professional, it is the interpreter who “perceives, listens, sees and speaks in the name of the Other, both in the language of the symbolically and/or

practically oppressed Other and in the language of the oppressor” (Bahadir, p. 124).

Furthermore, Napier (2011) suggests that because SLIs can hear, they are considered *outsiders* and consequently have a different relationship with *D/deaf* consumers than that of their spoken language counterparts.

Since the establishment of the national Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf in 1964, a code of professional conduct and principles was created to protect both the *D/deaf* consumer and the SLI. Likewise, national and international professional translation and interpreter organizations require interpreters to maintain a traditional position of “strict neutrality.” Mason and Ren (2012) explain that interpreters are to be “transparent, invisible, passive, neutral and detached” (p. 235); “yet cultural identity and social affiliations are so strong that they may, perhaps even unconsciously, affect behavior” (p. 247). Additionally, Hsieh et al. (2010, p. 170) confirm that “researchers have demonstrated that [spoken language] interpreters do not assume a passive or neutral role as prescribed by the conduit model.” Mason and Ren (2012, p. 236) propose, as well, that “the idealized role construct of the invisible, machine-like interpreter is frequently deconstructed in real-life, face-to-face interpreting events.” Bahadir (2010), Hsieh et al. (2010), and Mason and Ren (2012) comment also on the fallacy of the neutral-conduit model, and the interpreter’s lack of power. There can be no neutral part in mis/communication, nor an objective way of perceiving, analyzing, and processing information and emotions. As a result, professional interpreters must position themselves appropriately (Bahadir, 2010). This is especially true of interactions between SLIs and the *D/deaf* consumer as “once an interpreter enters into the discourse, the dynamic between the other two stakeholders is fundamentally and permanently changed” (Bahadir, p. 128).

Mason and Ren (2012, p. 233) claim that “although interpreters often lack institutional power; they may be equipped with power within the exchange as a result of their bilingual and bicultural expertise.” One such example of a spoken language interpreter’s use of interactional power to deviate from the conduit model or principle of strict neutrality is the use of eye gaze and gesture (p. 248). They also mention scholar R. Bruce W. Anderson’s claim that the interpreter is “a power figure, exercising power as a result of monopolization of the means of communication” and having “an unusually great impact on the structure of the entire situation” (p. 236).

The spoken language “interpreter plays a participant role in the interplay of power” (Bahadir, p. 132). Moreover, they “are capable of empowering or assisting comparatively weaker parties to exercise their responsibility to make decisions for themselves” (Mason & Ren, p. 243). Bahadir (p. 127) further maintains that “the apparent power imbalance during crisis, conflict, and distress legitimizes the interpreter to stand up for both her own rights and those denied to the speechless [not deaf] individual for whom she interprets.” Grbić and Pöllabauer (2013) observe as well that spoken language interpreters are usually members of the same minority group as the consumers they serve. For this reason, they must be conscientious of their role and the degree of power it appears to contain; yet Hale (2005, p. 14) writes in her research that although there is a professional code of ethics, community interpreters’ inconsistent understanding about their roles leads to confusion. Interpreters who are unaware or unsure of their inherent power can potentially affect the outcome of an interpreted discourse just as much as those interpreters who understand and are aware of their equivalent power.

Compared with the spoken language interpreter’s advocacy role, Dickinson (2010, p. 117) indicates that “as hearing people, SLIs are part of a dominant and oppressive culture and yet

[they] have a strong alignment with the minority group in the interpreted interaction.” In an effort to maintain neutrality, the SLI’s code of professional conduct recommends that interpreters stay within their stated boundaries and not counsel, interject or advise *D/deaf* consumers.

It is vital that SLIs and spoken language interpreters have the trust of both participants in the discourse in order to ensure genuine communication and cooperation (Bahadir, 2010, p. 129). Such a partnership is evident when a provider shares the goals of the health care team with the spoken language interpreter. Many medical professionals are willing to acknowledge this demonstration of mutual power (Hsieh et al, 2010, p. 174). In contrast to the reality of the control and hegemony that is characteristic of the medical perspective of deafness, SLIs continue to be challenged.

Conclusion

“It is important not to overstate or exaggerate the prevalence of (the) oppression of deaf people by hearing people. Oppression...implies intent” (Harvey, 2003, p. 208).

Research related to the histories of the three stakeholders reveals that the struggle for power continues. The *Deaf* community will persist with their efforts towards full empowerment and self-identity. There are non-deaf people in the teaching field who will proceed with the use of power to control *deaf* education and the *D/deaf* population by taking away this minority’s signed language and identity. There are also some who, while maintaining a pathological view of deafness in the medical profession, will pursue the use of their appointed social authority to heal, repair or fix the “brokenness” of being *deaf*. The educational and medical fields are just two examples of the institutionalized oppression of *D/deaf* people and their community. The fact remains that this oppression is prevalent in all areas of society, including: the courts, the judicial system, businesses, social agencies, public services, and religious activities. SLIs in this

relatively young profession will persevere in the struggle with those in the non-deaf majority who fail to recognize the specialized skill of the SLI; as such a lack of recognition erodes and diminishes the power of the interpreter.

Power struggles, conflicts and tense relationships are inevitable, considering the impact of divergent histories, cultures, different languages and expectations within the triad of any communication requiring the services of a signed language interpreter. More research can be done on understanding how particular types of interpersonal power affect various cultures and people differently. Newfound perspectives can empower one to become more tolerant and sensitive. Thus, an informed SLI will be able to draw upon the knowledge of the consumer's group history to anticipate, recognize, and deal with issues related to the dynamics of a discourse that includes signed language. Acknowledging and applying this information within the practice of an interpreted dialogue has several advantages. It will cultivate trust, increase understanding and empower stakeholders. The resulting environment will be one where power is shared and communication thrives.

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