

GENDER AND INTERPRETING

Gendered Communication and Speaking Styles Related to Sign Language Interpreting

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Abstract

Sex and gender are involved in any interaction. Sex is biologically determined while gender has more fluidity, and clues of gender affiliation can be found in conversation. Gendered communication and linguistic styles feature qualities of dominance or difference and appear in the early years of childhood. By analyzing gender-homogeneous and heterogeneous groups and dyad interactions between children and adults, it was found that the certain traits that correspond with each gender stereotype are consistently represented in both children and adults. It is important for sign language interpreters to be aware of linguistic styles to be able to best reflect the Deaf individual. Deaf individuals need to be aware of the impact of gender on communication to best navigate the hearing world. Communication failures in a sign language interpretation can happen easily and often without the proper knowledge of gender communication differences, communicating between same sex and intersex groups, and cultural norms of communicating between same sex and intersex and individual persons.

Gendered Communication and Speaking Styles Related to Sign Language Interpreting

Gender is one feature that divides the human race into two macro categories. In the American culture the idea of gender is most commonly related to biological sex. This idea creates characteristics that are most commonly associated with females and characteristics that are most commonly associated with males. The physical XX, XY chromosomal gene difference referred to as biological sex is static, while gender, or a chosen point on the spectrum of masculine to feminine, is fluid. The characteristics that are socially associated with each of the biological sexes will stay consistent regardless of where any chosen gender point falls on that spectrum. More recently, the characteristics of male and female use of language has been researched from a different perspective that the two genders operate like two cultures that are made easily visible through two different conversational styles (Tannen, 1985). This differs from previous studies by incorporating the gender's different use of language. Since the 1980s, linguistic features that were labeled "female" slowly became understood as powerless linguistic style, leaving linguistic "male" features to be understood as a powerful linguistic style.

Powerless language includes elements such as but not limited to: tag questions, intensifiers, hedges, hesitation forms, gesture forms, questioning intonation and questioning statements, while powerful language lacks these elements (Morgan, 2008). Regardless of their sex or their own gender affiliation, sign language interpreters must be able to recognize, and produce powerful and powerless language in both English and ASL regardless of the biological sex of the Deaf client.

Gender

Understanding social norms is the foundation to competently socializing in any culture. Paramount to any culture, gender roles profoundly impact the social hierarchy of power. For

example, even before conception two predefined categories exist: male and female, and once born, the baby will instantly be identified with one of the categories. The attributes of the category will shape their perception of self, their conceptualization of their “proper” role in society, and potentially their view of others. Given that the categories are the current social norms, and are perpetuated through societal beliefs, and corresponding reinforcements, it is logical that the child will tend to display behaviors that accommodate sex-role expectations and refrain from exhibiting the behaviors that are attributed to the “opposite” sex of their own (Moreno, Kramer, Scheidegger, & Weitzman, 2005)

Gender Roles Found in Children’s Play

Like any other aspect of culture, sex or gender roles are taught to children through parenting and cultural exposure that can be observed in their play. Research from Bateson (1970) and Bruner, Jolly and Sylva (1976) proves that play has been recognized as the window into the cultural life of societies and as a social and personal source of the development of cultural metaphors. Thus, play serves as a perfect reference to suggest the timing of chronological milestones, like gender roles, of cultural development. Cook-Gumperz (1995) has found that children as young as three can comprehend and express “discourse complexity that would have been previously considered far in advance of their three-year-old grammatical and communicative skills” (p.116). Like Bateson, Cook-Gumperz found children as young as three demonstrate cultural characteristics, such as gender roles, while playing. The three-year-olds in Cook-Gumprez’s study participated in a narrative game called “Mummies and Babies”. The researchers collected information to discern what makes a woman a mother, and what aspects of mothering (controlling resources, and destiny of her children) makes women powerful. This

powerful position that the mother holds in the household meets its first challenge when the child leaves the domestic zone (Cook-Gumperz, 1995).

Boys Versus Girls

Children normally have been exposed to social and conversational rituals by kindergarten. They notice that there are “boy activities”, such as car mechanics, and “girl activities”, like dancing. “Flocks of girls, especially at ages 3 and 4, go about their days swathed in pink, glitter, hearts and ribbons” (Haim, Ruble Lurye, Greulich, Zosuls, & Tamis-LeMonda., 2013, p.1269). Boys also exhibit their own kind of “gender rigidity,” defined by Haim, Ruble, Lurye, Greulich, Zosuls & Tamis-LeMonda (2013) as a strong adherence to gender-stereotypical behaviors, like “boys kicking in the air, flexing their muscles, and running around imagining themselves as Spiderman” (Haim et al., 2013, p.1269). They begin to make their own decisions on producing gendered language, like using patriarchal references like uttering *he* for an animal whose sex is unknown (Hopper, 1998). Boys begin to display masculine or dominant attributes such as talking loudly, and girls develop feminine or indifferent qualities such as being soft spoken, or lady-like.

Stereotypically females are labeled are more emotional than men (Timmers, Fischer, & Manstead, 2003), and North American cultures typically label females as more emotionally intense (Robsinon & Johnson, 1997). The female gender role has been defined as exhibiting traits and behaviors such as nurturance, sensitivity, warmth, empathy, dependency, compliance, emotionality, and passivity. These traits equip women to be more emotionally expressive than men, and to be more skilled in the use of non-verbal cues related to emotion (Hall & Briton, 1995). This stereotypically permits women to more commonly hold the communicator role, in which the sign language interpreter profession reflects. However, gender roles are not limited to

action, they also encompass emotions and expressive behaviors. Male gender roles begin in infancy and pressure men to adhere to socially prescribed sex-based standards of emotions. (Moreno, Kramer, Scheidegger, & Weitzman, 2005). The attributes of gender roles can be easily identified in the language use of each sex.

Dominance Versus Difference

Goldschmidt and Weller (2000) state that “difference” and “dominance” explain gender differences in conversation:

The ‘difference’ perspective views the distinctive styles of interaction as ‘cultural’, originating in sex-segregated peer cultures. Boys and girls are seen as learning to talk differently... In talking, boys are competitive and assertive, whereas girls are cooperative, observe the norm of consideration for other people, use hedging strategies, and respect the speaking rights of others. These styles are carried into adulthood. (p. 120)

The difference traits can manifest in a variety of additional forms, such as vague, poorly articulated attempts to join conversations, or apologetic utterances. These styles and cultural attributes carry into adulthood and are first challenged when met with conflicting cultural communication styles.

Applying Gender To Deafness

One major component of any communication interaction is the language or languages used. When working between two languages, such as English and American Sign Language (ASL), sign language interpreters need to be aware of not only the language differences but also the cultural and gender conflictions. By understanding Deafness and its culture, sign language

interpreters can functionally serve as bicultural mediators, and by analyzing these small situations we can understand how components such as gender impact sign language interpreting.

Initially, the American mainstream culture struggled to accept that Deafness is not a disability. There are many published texts that are dedicated to changing this thought, such as Branson and Miller's 2002, *Damned for their difference: The cultural construction of deaf people as 'disabled': A sociological history*, an entire book dedicated to the topic. Only after accepting that Deafness is not a disability can cultural differences be analyzed. The cultural difference from mainstream American culture can be compared to the d/Deaf American culture (Padden, 2009). Padden (2009) discusses the similarities between Deaf children and hearing children, most of which attend the same primary schools and are continuously socializing together. Therefore it can be accepted that Deaf children also exhibit signs of Deaf cultural development in their play, such as the way and amount of information is shared, or appropriate use of attention getters.

ASL interpreters normally facilitate the communication for the Deaf child in the mainstreamed educational setting, functioning as a bicultural mediator (Mindess, 2006). The interpreter must be aware of the distinct cultural differences between hearing American and Deaf American culture, and most often will be the cultural teacher to all consumers, deaf or hearing, to ensure equal communication access. "Whether male or female, designated interpreters must be aware of the range of conversational rituals and styles as well as how gendered language and conversational style can affect interpreted communication" (Morgan, 2008, p. 75). Deaf children deserve to have the same knowledge of gender as hearing children, which ultimately will remain with them into adulthood. These tools include having the knowledge of gender communication differences, knowledge of communicating between same sex and mixed sex groups, and cultural

norms of communicating between same sex and mixed sex and individual persons. Deaf individuals benefit from possessing and using these tools to navigate and function competently in the mainstream American culture.

Communication In Gender-Homogeneous And Heterogeneous Groups

Small-groups researchers commonly report that in mixed sex discussion groups, men talk more, engage in more task behavior, are evaluated as more competent and knowledgeable, and exercise more influence within the group than women (Ridgeway & Smith, 1999; Wagner & Berger, 1997). Women have also been observed striving for the approval and attention of the male counterparts, while the males were observed to be competing for the group leader's approval and attention (Carlock & Martin, 1977).

Research insists that a female group leader will encounter a myriad of gender-related beliefs that will prohibit group members from accepting her as a competent authority figure (Doherty & Enders, 1993; Johnson, 2001). Other research states that female group leaders will be conceptualized as a mother, or as a sex object by male members in a group, while male group leaders are perceived as being significantly less empathetic and has having less regard for all group members (Geillinger-Tess, 1992).

In all-female groups, self-disclosure and intimacy may be present from the beginning and participants may be less concerned with status and leadership and members speak more frequently, freely and intimately (Moreno, Kramer, Scheidegger, & Weitzman, 2005). Stein (1983) indicates that membership in a men's group (a) represents participation in a nontraditional male activity suggesting rejection of traditionally masculine ideals; (b) provides a unique opportunity for men to relate in a personal context without the presence of females; (c) provides an environment in which men may become aware of how they have related to significant male

figures in their lives; (d) illustrates to men how they behave around other males in the present; (e) helps men significantly improve the nature of adult male-male relationships; and (f) increases men's awareness of how they are both the objects and perpetrators of sexist attitudes. Male groups tend to be characterized by stable dominance patterns.

Sign language interpreters need to be aware of the dynamic of a group, including how gender impacts the situation. Female leaders of groups face different obstacles than male leaders, and all-female groups and all-male groups operate differently with each category having identifiable characteristics. Regardless of the role of the Deaf individual in the group, sign language interpreters must recognize and label gender attributes or obstacles to ensure the Deaf individual receives the same message and meaning as the hearing participants.

Communication In Gender-Homogeneous And Heterogeneous Dyads

Stets and Burke (1996) found in their study of married couples discussing disagreements that spouses with a more masculine identity used more negative behavior in the marital interactions, while those with a feminine identity used more positive behavior. This mirrors Drass's (1986) report that self-meanings of masculinity and femininity could shape conversational dynamics even in same-sex discussions (Ridgeway & Smith-Lovin, 1999). In 1998, Dovidio, Brown, Heltman, Ellyson & Keating found that when a mixed-sex dyad shifted conversation from a gender-neutral topic to a masculine topic, the male's visual dominance and gesturing increased, but when the topic transferred to a feminine topic, the females would display even greater visual dominance and gesture more than men.

Karakowsky and Siegel (1999) found that men would ask for feedback more when they were participating in a same sex dyad, and less when they viewed themselves as competent members of the mixed sex dyad. In Karakowsky and Siegel's study, the participants were

coworkers or had a platonic relationship, which best reflects a sign language interpreting situation. In any dyadic situation, regardless of gender the participants must be aware of the others masculinity or femininity to ensure the communication process functions smoothly.

Consequences

Deaf professionals, which “refers to any deaf or hard of hearing employee, trainees, or interns who require interpreting services to access the level of communication needed for them to learn, perform their job responsibilities, or both”, normally operate with a designated interpreter (Hauser, 2008, p.4). In one of the first international studies of sign language interpreters, Bontempo, Naiper, Hayes and Brashear (2014), found that an overwhelming 89% of sign language interpreters are female. Statistically, this means that male Deaf professionals will likely encounter many female interpreters throughout his career. Female interpreters must be aware of female language characteristics; if she does not reflect his dominant linguistic style, the message males intend to send may never reach its source. On the other hand, if a female Deaf client is paired with a male interpreter, his normal dominant speaking style may be perceived as too powerful or overbearing for her graceful intentions. By both Deaf individuals and interpreters knowing the effects of gendered language, Deaf individuals can competently engage in gender relevant situations and interpreters can adjust their linguistic style.

Consider this situation, at a job interview for a managing position, a male Deaf applicant has arrived early, prepared and confident presenting himself to the male interviewer with a strong handshake. The female interpreter voices, *Hi! I'm Joe!* using a rising intonation at the end of an utterance, also known as uptalk, rising inflection, or high rising intonation (Speer, 2011). The interviewer just heard the same intonation used when he hears a question, leaving him with the impression that Joe is unsure of his own name. This may be an exaggerated situation where

the repercussions of not applying powerful speaking characteristics may actually cost a man a fair shot at a job.

Conclusion

Sign language interpreters must balance a series of processes simultaneously. Interpreters have to listen to a speaker, translate the English into ASL, produce the message in ASL, and maintain eye contact with the Deaf client(s) to ensure comprehension. Even though this is often an overwhelming process the objective is to ensure equal communication access. English can be produced powerfully or powerlessly impacting the context of the message and to completely fulfill equal communication access this impact needs to be addressed in the target language. It is the responsibility of the interpreter to operate as a bicultural bilingual mediator. This includes applying the skills and components, such as powerful and powerless language, used in English to the target language, and by demonstrating these tactics while rendering the interpretation a Deaf client is given more and full communication access.

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