

Sign Language Interpreting: Moving Towards Professionalization

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Abstract

The field of Sign Language interpreting has been moving towards professionalization for over thirty years. The efficacy of this process is still unclear. In this essay I will provide a brief overview of the field of Sign Language interpreting in the United States and provide examples of how the field has attempted to become a profession. I conclude this essay with a research question and my hypotheses.

Introduction

Deaf and hard of hearing people are labeled as disabled in American society. This stigma (Goffman 1963) places deaf and hard of hearing people in an inferior role in American society. Furthermore, individuals who work with deaf or hard of hearing people are often thought to be charitable or helpers when providing services. This is the case with Sign Language interpreters. Until recently, Sign Language interpreters were not required to possess any credentials to perform the task of interpreting. In the past, mostly members of the clergy, family members, and close friends who were able to understand American Sign Language did assist an individual who was deaf or hard of hearing communicate. Although the clergy, family members, and close friends still provide these services, it is more common for someone who earns their living as a Sign Language interpreter to perform this function.

Overview of the RID

The Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf was established in 1964. This organization administers examination, maintains a registry of Sign Language interpreters, and lobbies on behalf of Sign Language interpreters. The establishment of the RID was the first step in changing Sign Language interpreting from something people did for friends and family members to a profession with regulations, a code of ethics, and standards – institutionalized. Before the RID was established, those individuals who worked as interpreters did so in addition to a traditional job. Most people who provided Sign Language interpreting services did not identify as a Sign Language interpreter. “There were many who could interpret, but few of us saw ourselves as interpreters. We earned our living as school people, rehabilitation counselors, religious workers, or were primarily housewives” (Fant 1990: 9-10).

Since these interactions between deaf and non-deaf people occurred at any time during the day, those with more flexible work schedules were most often called upon. As Fant (1990) pointed out, a majority of the individuals called upon to provide interpreting services were housewives. Over thirty years later, the field is still predominantly female. Humphrey and Alcorn (1994) suggest that the reason Sign Language interpreting has been dominated by women is two-fold. First is because women are biologically predisposed to being able to master the complex task of interpreting. Interpreting requires the ability to multitask – listening, analyzing, and signing simultaneously. The second is that the field of Sign Language interpreting is viewed, as I suggested earlier, as a helping occupation, which has traditionally been seen as women's work.

Defining a Profession

Before I am able to provide an analysis of how the field of Sign Language interpreting is working towards becoming a profession, it is necessary for me to describe what is meant by the word "profession." Unfortunately there is little consensus on what a profession is. Some have claimed that profession is a label that provides a certain amount of status (Macmillan 1972). That is to say that those members of a certain occupations adopt the label of "professional" to enhance their position in society.

Larson (1977) suggests that occupations in which the members possess specific knowledge, provide a needed service, and have a way of evaluating the occupations function as compared to other occupations are professions. The undisputed characteristics of a profession are autonomy and specialized knowledge. Members of a "profession" are independent from a bureaucratic structure that coordinates their activities on a daily basis. Additionally, the specialized knowledge of the members provided needed services within a society. Implicit in the

possession of specialized knowledge and the provision of needed services, is recognition from society that the occupation is a profession. Using the criteria that a profession is an occupation that requires its members to possess specialized knowledge and there is recognition by society that an occupation is indeed a profession, is the field of Sign Language interpreting a profession?

Statistics from the RID

Since the formation of the Registry of Interpreters of the Deaf in 1964, there have been biennial conferences. These conferences are used as a time for interpreters from various parts of the country and Canada to come together to discuss techniques and theories. It is also a time for interpreters to interact with other interpreters. The RID has divided the United States into five regions that cover all fifty states, Puerto Rico, and provinces in Canada. The biennial conferences are held in a different region each year to promote attendance.

These conferences are the only time that demographics of interpreters can be obtained. I was able to obtain two demographic surveys. Dr. Dennis Cokely administered the first one in 1980 and Dr. Linda Stauffer, Dr. Daniel Burch, and Dr. Steven Boone administered the other. The second survey was conducted in 1997. It should be remembered that some interpreters may not be able to afford to attend these conferences and therefore this is only representative of those who could attend the conferences. Stauffer, Burch and Boone (1999) suggest, "literature describing the number of demographic profile of the interpreter workforce is limited" (p. 105).

As stated earlier, the field of Sign Language interpreting is predominately women. In 1997, Stauffer et al. found that 78.6 percent of the attendees at the biennial conference were females as compared to 21.4 percent that were male. In 1980, Cokely found that 76 percent of those in attendance were female and only 24 percent were male. There is no explanation provided for this disparity.

Europeans comprise the majority of interpreters in attendance at these conferences. Although other nationalities and ethnicities are represented, they are on a much smaller scale. The largest ethnic groups were Native Americans, Latino/a, and African Americans (Stauffer et. al 1999). Other demographic information obtained was degrees held and where the interpreter learned American Sign Language. In 1997 everyone responded to the question of degrees held and 35.8 percent of the respondents stated they held at least a bachelor degree, 17.9 percent held a master's degree, and 1.5 percent of the respondents held a doctorate degree.

Sign Language Interpreting as a Profession

It was at the biennial Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf conference of 2001 that the members of the RID answered this question. At the 2001 conference in Orlando, FL the discussion of the professionalization was the focus of the business meeting. One of the motions was to require a minimum education for individuals who wish to apply for a certification from the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf. The writers of the motions argued that a minimum education requirement would translate into a more professionalized status for Sign Language interpreters.

There were several interpreters present during the meeting. The participants at the meeting broke into two factions. The first were individuals who became interpreters because they had a family member, usually a parent, who was deaf. The other group was those interpreters who did not have a deaf family member and had gone through some type of training to learn Sign Language. Some of the interpreters had been providing Sign Language interpreting for over 30 years. They had provided this service before the RID existed. As they spoke about their dismay about the motion, they told stories about how they remembered being called in the middle of the night by their parents, who were deaf, and asked to go and interpret. Their

argument, they did not need a degree then and they do not need one now. The other group of interpreters was those of us who had attended some type of training program. We were interpreters who did not have deaf family members (sometimes called the “store bought” instead of “home grown” interpreters) were in favor of some type of minimum standard.

This discussion was not settled at the meeting. However the discussion points out two consensuses. The first is that interpreters do not feel that society views what they do as a profession. Second was that it is clear that all of the interpreters wanted to be considered a professional. The only difference was how to accomplish that goal. Is it necessary for a minimum educational requirement? Additionally, what would it mean to be considered a profession? Lois Wilson (1999) discusses the same issue in regards to the field of midwifery. “Both the word “professional” and the word “client” imply a business relationship and underscore the all-important nature of such relationships in a capitalist society” (p. 1).

The relationship between interpreters and deaf people has always been an intimate one. Interpreters are been present during the birth of children to the death and burial of loved ones. Deaf people are our friends, family, and partners. Most interpreters socialize with deaf people outside of work assignments. If we consider ourselves professionals does that make us professionals?

People come to understand their role and that role is given meaning through interactions with other people. Interpreters’ sense of self is generated by the interactions with the people we work with, but more significantly by each other. It is for this reason; my examination begins with the national organization of interpreters – the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf.

After the RID was established, local organizations that provided Sign Language interpreting services began to emerge. These agencies that had previously provided employment

services, counseling, and lobbying added interpreter referral services to their list of services. Each state in America has at least one interpreter referral service agency; most have more than one. These agencies provide services from both staff interpreters and contract interpreters.

Although a number of these agencies have no affiliation with the RID, most of them require that the interpreters that work for them hold or aspire to hold a certification from the RID. The RID certifications (Figure 1) provide some assurance of a minimum competency by the holder.

Certification	Meaning
CI	Certification of Interpretation
CT	Certification of Transliteration
CDI	Certified Deaf Interpreter
OTC	Oral Transliterating Certificate
SC:L	Special Certificate: Legal

Figure 1¹

To obtain a certification, an interpreter must first pass a written examination. As previously discussed, although there are training programs at the community college, college and university, and graduate level, there are currently no educational requirements or specialized training before someone is allowed to take the examination. The examinations are provided in every state. Frequency and location is determined by availability and need. The examinations have been revamped over the years to improve its validity. Each examine has been psychometrically tested.

¹ There are other certifications that interpreters hold that are no longer offered by the RID.

Interpreters who hold a certification from the RID must earn eight continuing education units per four-year cycle. The cycle is on a calendar year. Additionally, each interpreter must pay her or his annual membership dues.

Conclusion

The development of a national organization and testing system were the first steps in becoming a recognized profession. The question is, what other steps must be taken? All of the members at the national convention want to become a profession but disagreed on the means of securing that goal. In my research, I will examine the field of Sign Language interpreting from both the perspective of interpreters and the staff at the RID. This will be an institutional ethnography that will include the use of interviews, review of documents, and historical analysis. My research question is, what factors go into the RID being considered a profession? I have developed five hypotheses to help me answer my research question. One of my hypotheses is that the dominance of women influences the recognition of the field as a profession. Another hypothesis is that lack of educational requirements hinders the field of Sign Language interpreting being seen as a profession. My third hypothesis is that the dominant paradigm in America that people who are deaf are broken, prevents Sign Language interpreters from being seen as professionals. My final hypothesis is that, some interpreters still consider interpreting something they do rather than something they are, and this lack of consensus within the field prevents professionalization.

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