Video Relay Service Interpreters

Intricacies of Sign Language Access

JEREMY L. BRUNSON

Video Relay Service Interpreters

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GALLAUDET UNIVERSITY PRESS

Washington, DC

Studies in Interpretation

A Series Edited by Melanie Metzger and Earl Fleetwood

Gallaudet University Press
Washington, DC 20002
gupress.gallaudet.edu

© 2011 by Gallaudet University
All rights reserved. Published 2011. Paperback published 2019.
Printed in the United States of America.

Hardcover ISBN 978-1-56368-483-8 | Paperback ISBN 978-1-944838-70-6
Ebook ISBN 978-1-56368-484-5
ISSN 1545-7613

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences–Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984.

Dedicated to Kelly Douglas Mease.
This book is as much a product
of my labor as it is yours.
Your love, passion, and support
are infused into every page.

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Preface

What does it mean to be a professional? What is the appropriate relationship between a professional and a consumer? How does society's growing incorporation of technologies into everyday interactions complement and complicate these relations? It is these questions that are explored throughout this book. Before the reader begins, however, I think it would be helpful to understand the path that led me to take up these questions.

In 2001, I attended the business meeting that took place during the national conference of the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID). During the meeting, a motion was made that, if passed, would require any person wishing to test for a certification from RID to hold a college degree. Those in attendance were split on the issue. The argument put forth by those who made the motion and those who supported the motion was that a degree would, among other things, situate the field of sign language interpreting as a profession rather than an occupation. Unconvinced by the argument put forth by either side, RID referred the motion to a committee charged with exploring the issue further and making recommendations during the next conference in 2003, when it passed. While I was in support of the degree requirement, I was left wondering about its impact on the field and our consumers (see Brunson 2006).

A few years later, a service that had been around for some time began to be a staple in the field of sign language interpreting: video relay service. This new form of service delivery provided an opportunity for me to explore the issue of professionalization and sign language interpreting further. In the pages that follow, I lay out the findings of that project.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The data discussed throughout this book were gathered for my dissertation. And although any errors are mine alone, it was the work of many people that made this project possible. The following people are those who have encouraged and inspired me, directly or indirectly, throughout this process. They asked about my work and progress. They told me that

my work was important. And they patiently listened to me as I ranted about my work, sometimes incoherently, as I struggled to make sense of it all.

The first person is Professor Suzanne Vaughan. She introduced me to institutional ethnography and encouraged me to go to graduate school, an idea that had not entered my mind until she suggested it.

Of course, there is no way this document you are about to read would have been complete without my dear friend, guide, mentor, and dissertation advisor, Marjorie L. DeVault. She provided nurturing guidance throughout my training. She never told me what to do but helped me unpack the dialectics of every decision. I only hope that I am able to be half the scholar and mentor to others as she has been to me.

I cannot say enough about the participants of this study. They made this project possible. I will of course keep their confidence and only say you know who you are and I thank you from the deepest part of my being.

The next person is Jennifer A. Morse, a talented and gifted sign language interpreter and mentor. Although she probably never realized it, she made me want to understand the practice of interpreting as a process of negotiations. We spoke for many hours about how to improve our interpretations, and the end result was my realization that sign language interpreting is not a science, but an art. In the same vein, I acknowledge my Tuesday Night Family, with whom I spent several Tuesday nights rehashing the conundrums produced by various assignments; they gave me a language with which to talk about my work. I thank them.

I raise my hands and applaud the many deaf people who have accepted me into their world and taught me their language and culture, especially my dear friend, colleague, and language model, Gino Gouby, who has allowed me to bounce ideas off of him and has engaged me in insightful discussions about the relationship between deaf people and sign language interpreters.

Additionally, I acknowledge Deb Stone, who used her contacts in the Deaf community to make sure I had participants for my focus groups and who stayed late at work so that I could hold the focus group in her office. Without her help, chapter 3 would be incomplete.

I have to thank my family. While at times they may not have understood the project I was undertaking or the process involved to receive a doctorate, they provided me with encouraging words. My mother, Danette Brunson; my sister, Shawna Brunson; and my Aunt Robin have been tremendous.

My dear friends: Danielle, whom I met in graduate school, and who will always have a space in my heart, has demonstrated the meaning of fortitude, which inspired me, on more than one occasion, to continue my pursuits; and Emily, whose weekly lunch dates provided me with a reason to turn my computer off and take a much-needed break.

Any person who has embarked on a journey to create a dissertation realizes that her or his journey is often one of isolation. While gathering data, reading and understanding the literature through discussions with friends, and talking about the project with advisors and colleagues are extremely social acts, the actual writing of a dissertation can be a solitary practice. I, however, was fortunate enough to have my life partner, Kelly Douglas Mease, whose love for me allowed me to ramble about my work. He patiently listened as I told him of the exciting data I gathered, and pushed me when I thought I had bitten off more than I could chew. To him, and everyone who helped me along the way: Thank you!

Chapter 1

Toward a Sociology of Interpreting

Sign language interpreting is about access. The simplicity of the statement, however, belies the actual work that goes into producing, facilitating, and providing access. Access occurs through people's doings, both visible and invisible, both paid and unpaid. That is, access is the product of someone deciding to ask for an accommodation. It is the result of someone creating a line item for Communication Access Realtime Translation (CART) or an interpreter. Someone makes a call, someone schedules a service, someone makes a decision to accept or decline a particular assignment, and, if all goes well, someone shows up and provides access. The labor does not end there; more people must take up more work. Someone must accommodate the accommodation, by allowing the individual to set up and work in a place that lends itself to access. This can include allowing the interpreter to stand or sit in a place where the person needing the accommodation will be able to take advantage of it. And, of course, this does not include other invisible labor that goes into receiving an accommodation. While the interpreter is the one "providing" the access, making that access a reality is really the aggregate product of many people's efforts and doings.

CONCEPTUALIZING WORK BROADLY

Traditionally, *work* has had a limited definition. We have understood work to be an activity that occurs in a particular place, for a set duration, and under the direction of others. The focus is also on the stated function of the work in relation to the larger system in which it occurs (e.g., the relationship of customer service to the bottom line). Furthermore, work has been restricted to that for which a person receives remuneration. Feminist scholars and others have pushed for a broader definition of work (Daniels 1987; D. Smith 1990b; DeVault 1991). This new definition encompasses a wide range of activities that are both visible and invisible labor, essential to the operation of society, and those activities that are both paid and unpaid (e.g., mothering). Within this materialist view of work we can explore work as the product of people's activities, as well as the catalyst that drives people's activities.

Throughout this book, I use a Marxist-feminist understanding of work that recognizes both paid and unpaid work activities, focusing on the "labor processes" (Burawoy 1979), or the conscious, purposeful, learned activities that people perform with the intent that they will receive some benefit from them. These activities can include behaviors such as attending a company picnic in order to be seen as a team player, looking for a parking space close to the store to reduce the distance one has to walk, going through a drive-thru rather than cooking, or being nice to an interpreter coordinator in order to get called first for a job.

EMOTIONAL LABOR

One type of work is *emotion work*. "Emotional labor emphasizes the relational rather than the task-based aspect of work found primarily but not exclusively in the service economy" (Steinberg and Figart 1999, 9). Hochschild (1983), who introduced the concept of "emotion work," and others have examined the issue from the perspective of the service provider. More contemporary scholarship has attempted to further define and expand the meaning of "caring labor" (Himmelweit 1999). "Emotional work is performed through face-to-face or voice-to-voice contact" (Steinberg and Figart 1999, 10), just like all of sign language interpreting; therefore, we can discuss sign language interpreting as a form of emotional labor.

Most individuals who engage the public as a part of their job are more than likely participating in emotion work, but people also do emotion work outside of employment situations. For example, rather than focus on the emotion work between service providers and service receivers, Cahill and Eggelston (1994) study the emotional labor that individuals with disabilities—in their study, users of wheelchairs—perform to spare themselves and "walkers" any awkward feelings. Schwartz (2006, 112) finds that deaf people as well engage in emotion work, a phenomenon he calls "letting it go": For example, deaf people allow doctors to end appointments before answering all of their questions, because they sense the doctors getting impatient.

One form of emotional labor is care work. Himmelweit (1999) suggests that the definition of "care [work] should be reserved for relationships in which the recipients are dependents who cannot provide for their own needs, though more broadly it could be extended to include reciprocal relationships of true equality" (30). England and Folbre (1999) define care work more broadly: "Care work includes any occupation in which the worker provides a service to someone with whom he or she is in personal (usually face-to-face) contact" (40). Although England and Folbre do allow for the possibility that other kinds of interaction (e.g., writing) could also be considered care work, they focus on face-to-face interactions.

I suggest that sign language interpreters and the people with whom they work, specifically deaf people but non-deaf people as well, have a reciprocal relationship. Interpreters often learn at least some American Sign Language (ASL) from deaf people. The work that interpreters perform depends greatly on the relationship that develops between the interpreters and the deaf and non-deaf persons they are working with. Furthermore, deaf people's access does, at times, depend on the sign language interpreter's mood; as I discuss in chapter 4, interpreters who feel they have been disrespected by the deaf (or non-deaf) person may choose to withhold services until they receive the respect they feel they deserve. Therefore, deaf people must engage interpreters with the understanding that their relationship is one of reciprocation. They must teach would-be interpreters ASL and, in some cases, acquiesce to the interpreter's demands in order to get access through them. In these ways the work of interpreting can be classified as care work and examined through this lens.

As some scholars have discussed (see Baynton 1996; Branson and Miller 2002; Davis 1995, 2002; Lane 1999), deaf people have rejected the label *disabled*. Therefore, conceptualizing the interaction between interpreters and deaf people as care work is political. The connotation is that someone needs to be taken care of, which may reinforce some of the stereotypes about people with disabilities, such as the idea that they are "more dependent, childlike, passive, sensitive, and miserable and are less competent than people who do not have disabilities" (Linton 1998, 25).

I introduce the idea of care work despite this concern because I believe that we should disrupt the negative connotations associated with asking, needing, and receiving care. There are very few (if any) people in the world who can sustain the claim that they have gone through life without benefiting from someone's care work. This care work can be overt, such as the service of a caretaker (e.g., parent or partner) or paid service provider, or it can be more covert, such as the emotional labor done to spare a person's feelings. I feel that both types of care work should be embraced as necessary components of a civil society.

ACCESS

Rejecting the disability label, most deaf people prefer instead to be considered a linguistic minority. "Deaf advocates such as Paddy Ladd, Tom Humphries, and MJ Bienvenu claim they have nothing in common with amputees, paraplegics, or people with mental retardation" (Davis 2002, 37). Rather than accept disability as an inherent condition of the individual, some deaf people point the finger outward to explain the ways in which the world is not accessible to them by design; they see society's audism as the problem, not their deafness (Lane 1999; Davis 1995; Baynton 1996; Branson and Miller 2002). This is exactly the argument put forth by Disability Studies scholars. Disability Studies scholars, in examining disability as a social construct, have looked at the ways in which people with disabilities have been systematically excluded from society. An outgrowth of this exclusion is a need for access.

Whether one is negotiating one's car onto the freeway or entering a building, gaining access requires work. However, for certain populations, gaining access is not as simple as deciding to enter a building. For those, such as deaf people, who rely on others to gain access, a forced collaboration occurs. Both deaf people and interpreters must do their parts to create access. History has shown that access can be achieved in two ways. The first way requires a radical shift in the everyday practices of the populace, to include an outright acceptance of difference. The second way, not as dramatic a change, requires society to make accommodations.

We can look to Martha's Vineyard from the seventeenth century to the early part of the twentieth century to see how outright acceptance of difference can lead to access. In *Everybody Here Spoke Sign Language: Hereditary Deafness on Martha's Vineyard,* Nora Groce (1995) documents the societal acceptance of deafness among the people of the isolated community of Martha's Vineyard between 1600 and 1900. Not every person on Martha's Vineyard was deaf, but there were unusually large numbers of deaf people, most likely a result of inbreeding. Most people on the island, deaf and not, used sign language to communicate, even when speaking with people who were not deaf. Within this accessible environment, deaf people were able to hold positions in local government and participate in the daily life of the island.

As Groce talked with people who had lived on Martha's Vineyard, she discovered that there was often uncertainty as to who was deaf. People were known not by their differences but by their contributions to the community. Groce points out that "the Martha's Vineyard experience suggests strongly that the concept of a handicap is an arbitrary social category" (108). Furthermore, "the most important lesson to be learned from Martha's Vineyard is that disabled people can be full and useful members of a community if the community makes an effort to include them" (108).

THE FIELD OF SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETING

More commonly, people who are deaf or hard of hearing gain access to the larger society through the use of an intermediary. This intermediary can take several forms. In some cases it can be a simple pen and paper or typing apparatus. In other situations, a more sophisticated means is necessary, such as a person who is trained in two or more languages and who understands two or more cultures—a sign language interpreter.

As long as there have been deaf people, and non-deaf people with whom they need to communicate (except in rare communities such as Martha's Vineyard), there have been interpreters to bridge the communication gap between people who rely on a sign language to communicate and those who do not. The field of professional sign language interpreting, however, is relatively young. It was not until the establishment of the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) in 1964 that payment for the services provided by interpreters became the norm. Prior to this time, most interpreters were volunteers and do-gooders (Neumann Solow 2000) who typically held full-time employment in other fields and provided occasional interpretation services for friends and family members (Fant 1990).

Sign language interpreting has now blossomed into an employment niche in which interpreters can sustain themselves and their families on the income gained from interpreting. They have a national organization, RID, that tests and certifies interpreters, lobbies on their behalf, and maintains a registry of practitioners in the United States, Puerto Rico, and parts of Canada.[1] RID has worked to define the practice of sign language interpreting as a skill-based trade that requires extensive training. In a few states interpreters and deaf people have lobbied successfully for requirements that interpreters hold one or more RID certifications in order to charge for interpreting services.

CONVERSATIONS ABOUT PROFESSIONAL STATUS

The term *professional* has come to mean a person who performs a certain task for money, for example, a professional football player. A football player who is a professional does not necessarily have special theoretical knowledge; "professional" conveys only that he receives money to perform. Furthermore, professional does not refer to the ranking of a particular occupation in relation to another occupation (i.e., a cook versus a chef). To determine whether someone is a professional, some focus on relations in which someone engages. Marianne, an interpreter educator and interpreter referral owner, says:

> I want to be perceived as a professional and I think that we are being held back because of others. [. . .] Because that is how I perceive myself. That is how I want to be perceived. That is what I want to project. [Being a professional] means a couple of things. It means respect to the consumer, the deaf person, and respect to me. Value for the money [we earn]. We get paid a lot. [. . .] I consider it a profession because that is how I want it to be. That is where I see it going, where it should be. Interpreting is rather new . . . but I think we should walk the walk. We can't wait until others see us as professionals before we behave like professionals. We need to lead by example. Show people how it should be.

For Marianne, being a professional means one behaves in a particular manner. She wants to be "perceived" as a professional but implies that one can be a professional without such recognition.

Sociologists take a much broader view of what it means to be a professional; indeed, there is a wealth of sociological literature relating to the study of the professions. Rather than looking solely at the individual, sociologists look at the ways in which individuals are part of a larger social structure that situates some individuals as professionals. In society, labor that is invisible or unpaid is often seen as less valuable than labor for which people are paid. This value is often associated with the prestige of a particular occupation. In the United States, for example, secretaries are given less prestige than CEOs; police officers have more value than groundskeepers. The value of occupations is increased when society sees them as professions rather than merely occupations. Sign language interpreters have been trying to gain recognition as a profession; it was toward this aim, in an attempt to reconceptualize interpreting as something other than "charity" (Fant 1990), that practitioners vying for professional status formed RID.

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[1] Canada has another organization, the Association of Visual Language Interpreters of Canada, that serves the same purpose as the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf in the United States.

Professions are different from occupations in that professions "are *deliberately* granted autonomy, including the exclusive right to determine who can legitimately do its work and how the work should be done" (Freidson 1970). Five characteristics distinguish a profession from an occupation (see Carr-Saunders 1928, 1988; Greenwood 1957, 1988; Hughes 1960): a systematic body of theory, professional authority, sanction of the community, regulative code of ethics, and a professional culture. In the "trait approach" to understanding professions (MacDonald 1995), scholars examine how many of the five characteristics a particular occupation possesses. The trait approach can help chart the development of a profession: By the number of professional characteristics a particular occupation possesses, one can place that occupation on its path of development into a profession.

Power of a Profession

It can be useful to examine traits possessed by a particular occupational group, but there are some limitations. Namely, a focus on particular traits does not provide us with an understanding of the power dynamics between professionals and those who use their services. Although those in attendance at the 2001 RID Conference did not openly discuss the idea of power that is afforded to a profession, it was present. That is, there is an assumption that any occupation that is recognized as a profession will enjoy certain freedoms. Hence, part of the definition of profession is the power professionals wield.

Eliot Freidson is a scholar whose work illustrates an examination of the power of professionals. He has written a number of books and articles on the place and powers of the professional in society. In *Professional Powers: A Study of the Institutionalization of Formal Knowledge,* Freidson (1986) describes the professionalization process and the authority professionals are able to wield in society. As other scholars have done, he suggests that professionals hold a significant and influential role. He refers to this power as "professional autonomy," or the ability to exercise control over one's work. And this prestigious position in society is in part due to the acquisition of an advanced education.

Professional autonomy goes further than mere control over the immediate work, however. Once professional status is achieved, this autonomy brings with it the power for practitioners to act as gatekeepers. As gatekeepers, professionals are able to determine the criteria that must be met in order for someone to join the profession. They also protect their own professional "turf" or jurisdiction. For example, in the field of nursing (Wertz and Wertz 1997; Reverby 1997), as physicians achieved professional status, there was a change in the types of procedures nurses and midwives could perform. Particular procedures were reserved for physicians, and persons who were not licensed physicians could face sanctions if they performed them.

Occupations that have achieved professional status have *functional autonomy* (Freidson 1970, 1986; Conrad and Schneider 1997). Practitioners who have functional autonomy are afforded the ability to determine how to best go about performing their work. However, "the autonomy connected with skill should not be confused, as it often is in the literature [and by sign language interpreters], with the economic autonomy of the traditional self-employed professional" (Freidson 1994, 73). Once in a profession, a person's practices are evaluated by the standards established by the field (e.g., codes of conduct). These standards are not always known or understood by lay persons and therefore it may seem a person's decisions are beyond reproach from those outside the field.

However, the very status that allows professionals to be evaluated by their peers is also part of a system of control over that professional's work. Recognized professions, such as physician, are heavily regulated by the state. Although physicians have significant functional autonomy as they interact with individual patients, there is also a great deal of oversight from the state and from insurance companies.

In addition to functional autonomy, professional status brings with it the authority to define a given situation. It is this claiming ownership over a particular phenomenon that situates the professional in a position of power over those for whom she provides services (Spector and Kitsuse 2001; Gusfield 1989). Just as with work, often scholars have focused on the function of a profession rather than exploring what Abbott (1988) calls the *ecology* of a profession. That is, very little attention is given to the relations that the professional maintains with clients and other professionals.

Professional Identity

Some scholars, such as Hughes (1971), rather than count traits or talk about the power afforded to professionals, prefer instead to understand the meaning attached to being a professional. Hughes ties the meaning to the prestige of the label. The move, or labeling, of an occupation to a profession comes about by occupational mobility, of which there are two kinds.

The first type of occupational mobility is individual. The individual works to increase his knowledge and hopes to use that knowledge to secure his position in the social hierarchy. The other way is by group mobility. Hughes (1971) suggests that as society is quickly changing, people within particular occupations are unable to quickly adjust; therefore, people of particular occupations, rather than learn additional skills or change occupations, work to change the status of their occupation by renaming it a profession. This can include the practice of limiting who enters a particular field through tests, education, and association fees. One example of this is the medical field; doctors enjoyed very little prestige in the United States until the Jacksonian period, when they began to redefine who could become a physician (Conrad and Schneider 1997; Starr 1982).

However, the status of a professional field is not fixed. Scholars have also written about the processes of *deprofessionalization* and *proletariatization* (Pandey 1988). If occupations can become professions through the specification of particular traits or characteristics, then the opposite would hold true. Just as occupations can achieve professional status, they can lose it. The authority that professionals possess is in part due to their control of knowledge. As more people have access to that same body of knowledge, one might expect that the professional's authority wanes. However, Freidson disagrees with the deprofessionalization and proletariatization theses, stating: