Roles, Models, and WorldViews :

A View from the States

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Introduction

I was asked to write about what I perceive is happening in the US in the field of Sign Language Interpreting[1], and if possible, relate that to what is expressed in the other papers in this volume. No small task, given the state of the field in America: a national association (the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, a professional association and certifying body) of about 5,000 members, some of whom are certified by the association, others not; still others who are not members of the national Association doing the job of 'interpreter' in various and sundry settings, and, in general, no clear consensus on what we are doing. I would dare say that in the profession in America in 1997, there are not only different, but actually conflicting, views of what interpreters should and should not do. I believe that these fundamental disagreements about the roles and models of interpreting are based on differing WorldViews[2] of Deaf/non-Deaf interactions.

This paper looks at how the concepts of role, model and WorldView interrelate. It is my contention that while these concepts are linked together, they inform our work in different ways.

Let me preface this paper saying that it represents my own personal view of what is happening in the US at this time. In addition, as a hearing interpreter actively working in the field, I am not above any of the attitudes or biases I mention. Indeed, I can speak to the fact that I have felt many of the feelings I express in this paper. Recognition of one's own place in the shaping of the work is vital to the health of both the individual and the profession.

I also recognise the debt I owe to those who have guided my thinking. In particular, I would wish on this occasion to acknowledge my debt to the late Marie Philip, and to dedicate this paper to her.

Roles, Models and WorldViews

In many of the papers in this volume, and in general discussions in the field, the words role and model are used quite often. It is important to explore not only what we think the role of an interpreter is, or the current model of interpretation is, but how and why we use these constructs. Generally speaking: individual interpreters speak of their role, groups of interpreters (e.g. instructors of interpreting or professional associations) often speak of the model of interpreting. In addition, I feel that there is an overriding WorldView which we often do not overtly speak of. There is a hierarchical relationship: the role of an interpreter is based upon the prevailing model of interpreting which is embedded in a WorldView of the interaction of Deaf and non-Deaf people.

Roles

What is the role of an interpreter? Pollitt (this volume) speaks of the role of interpreters as 'arbitrators at sites of discoursal conflict'. Her definition helps to separate the interpreter (in the role of 'arbitrator') from the Deaf and non-Deaf people in the situation. In addition, it provides a functional definition of what we as interpreters will be doing in the language event. Since our role in situations is often new to hearing people, it is vital that we frame our description in a way that is clear and understandable.

Tate and Turner (this volume), note that, "What is clear from the many responses [to their ethical dilemma questions] is that practitioners feel that the Code [of Ethics] specifies a particular role from which they must sometimes depart in order to work efficiently." Often we hear talk of the need to 'step out of role' in order to clarify communication or to make it clear that we are speaking as ourselves and interpreting the language of one of the participants.

It is obvious that interpreters see their role as something that they can step in and out of; it is a different set of behaviors from those used when merely conversing. The concept of role is used by individual interpreters to define (and perhaps explain) how they 'fit into' the language situation in which they are interpreting.

In a non-interpreted language event, the participants are usually clear about their roles; they are understood and are often dictated by the situation. For example, in the language interaction of "Job Interview" there are the roles of "Interviewer" and "Interviewee". These roles are mutually exclusive, understood by the participants and each has certain expectations associated with them.

However, when an interpreter is present, one or more of the participants may not know what to expect. What is the role of this 'extra' person? For example, when an interpreter is present in a job interview, the interviewer may think (albeit somewhat unconsciously), "What is this person doing here? In this language event you are either the interviewer (and that's ME!) or the interviewee (and that's that deaf guy!) What is the person going to do??" Situations with interpreters are not 'normal'; there is an extra participant whose role must be defined before the other participants can get down to business. Therefore, interpreters use the concept of role to define themselves to the other participants in the event. We use our role to distinguish ourselves from the active participants whose languages we are interpreting.

How an individual interpreter defines her/his role is based on a multitude of factors. A Code of Ethics (see Tate and Turner, this volume), a view of oneself as a Professional (see Pollitt, this volume), and the settings and situations in which we find ourselves. Those interpreters who work in staff positions where they interpret for an entire agency might define their role differently than a freelance interpreter would. In addition to being an interpreter, staff interpreters are also are answerable as a staff **member** of a larger entity. Often, staff interpreters are looked upon as a staff member first and as an interpreter second (e.g. there are expectations of loyalty to the company over loyalty to the profession). However, in a larger sense, the roles of both staff and freelance interpreters are heavily influenced by the prevalent model of interpreting.

Models

Just as the word role is bandied about often in this field, so is the word model. While we define our role to persons outside the field (and often in the midst of an assignment) we talk among ourselves, as professionals, about the model of interpreting that we work under.

Many people are familiar with the historical change in the models of interpretation over the past few decades. (see, for example, McIntire and Sanderson, 1993). In a nutshell:

Helper---> Machine ---> Conduit---> Bilingual-Bicultural Mediator

All of these terms we have used to describe to ourselves what we do. In addition, they describe our relationship to the Deaf and non-Deaf people for whom we interpret. While the use of role described an individual interpreter's function in a language event, the use of model is used to describe how interpreters fit into the larger world. For example, the Helper model was a view that interpreters had to function to assist Deaf people in their interactions with non-Deaf people. In contrast, the Bi-Bi model viewed the interpreter as someone knowledgeable about both languages and cultures and who uses that knowledge to allow participants to understand one another.

There have been discussions recently in the US about defining a new model of interpreting, that of the Interpreter as Ally. Much of this discussion has taken place at two conferences that were held in New Hampshire in 1994 and 1995. The goal was to get interpreters and Deaf people together to discuss what the concept of Interpreter as Ally would mean. The discussions were held in ASL, without voice interpretation, although there was a native signer present as 'Clarifier' in the event that someone was unsure that was being expressed, or if someone was unsure how to express themself.

During some of the discussions at the conferences, Deaf people expressed the need for interpreters to be more open and to 'share their pain'. It was the feeling of many Deaf people that interpreters are involved significantly in the lives of Deaf people, often in highly personal and sensitive situations. However, there is little or no reciprocity; hearing interpreters can share as little (or nothing) of their personal lives as they want. This is reminiscent of the some sentiments prior to the change from the conduit model to the Bi-Bi model. Does that mean that we never really changed our model of interpreting? Are we still viewed as conduits; impersonal and unfeeling? Perhaps, but I think that we are attempting to define a model of interpreting, when what we really need to first look at our current world view of Deaf/non-Deaf interaction.

Even after a few years of attempting to define this new model, it is still unclear what the concept of Ally means. Initially many (non-CODA) hearing interpreters (myself included!) talked about what the **word** Ally meant. Many of the Deaf people instead described characteristics of what they wanted in an interpreter. So from the beginning, there has been a fundamental difference in how one even goes about defining a model. I believe this difference is related to differences in how the world is viewed.

WorldViews

A model of interpreting does not exist in a vacuum. Indeed, models reflect the prevailing thoughts, ideas and attitudes of the culture in which the practice takes place. The Helper model of interpreting occurred at a time when the dominant WorldView was that deaf people needed "help" in interactions with non-Deaf[3] people. Deaf people were viewed as less autonomous, and less capable of handling their own affairs than their non-Deaf counterparts. As time went on, more and more people started to realize that this was not necessarily the case, Deaf people could be autonomous, and, if interactions with hearing people were necessary, accurate, successful interpretation could allow Deaf people access.

It is important to note that for the longest time, it has been non-Deaf people shaping and defining the WorldView of Deaf/non-Deaf interaction. In the fields of interpreting, education and linguistics, it has been non-Deaf people shaping (and often imposing) the view of the world on Deaf people. Now, more and more Deaf people are in positions to influence how they themselves are being viewed. (See Harrington, this volume, for some views on the Deaf Community's input into interpreting services.) This is a radical departure from the imposition of a WorldView. Instead of being recipients of a view of themselves, Deaf people can now be agents of change and definers of that view. It is this fundamental difference that we are faced with today.

I believe that many of the problems of defining a new model of interpreting have to do with the fact that many hearing people are unused to (and uncomfortable with) having Deaf people actively involved in the process. I believe that this discomfort stems from a faulty view of power dynamics. If one believes that there is only a limited amount of power to go around, then the empowerment of one person means this disempowerment of another. So, if Deaf people are getting more power, it might come from me! For this reason many hearing people are wary of Deaf people gaining more power.

The Ally model of interpreting mentioned above is not one that is talked about in all parts of America. As stated in the introduction, there are many conflicting views on the role of interpreters and the model of interpreting in America. The difference in the view of an interpreter's role is based on a different model of interpretation, which, in turn, reflects a different WorldView. Indeed, I would dare say that there are many hearing interpreters threatened by the idea of Deaf people defining their work.[4] This represents a change

from how things have been done all along. As humans, we often resist such large changes, since they often mean admitting that the way we functioned in the past was, in a word, wrong.

For example, if I have worked for 15 years with a basic set of assumptions that are now being challenged, I am faced with having to admit that the last 15 years, I was, in some way, wasting my time. Psychologically, that is very difficult to accept. Therefore, I deny the new information, holding steadfastly to my own beliefs, even in the face of mounting evidence that those beliefs no longer hold.

The Interaction of WorldViews and Models

As stated above, there was a fundamental difference in how Deaf and non-Deaf people approached the task of defining Ally. Indeed, Deaf and non-Deaf culture often approach the idea of discussion from differing perspectives. How are we going to start a discussion about change if we don't approach the concept of discussion the same way?

We haven't gotten very far in the defining of the Ally model of interpreting, precisely because we have not clearly agreed on a single WorldView. As I stated above, models are reflections of prevailing WorldViews. We are currently in a state of flux in defining our WorldView about Deaf/non-Deaf interactions. Until we can reach some consensus about a WorldView, all discussions of models are moot.

Along with the WorldView, one must identify who the stakeholders are in the process. Corker (this volume) looks at the definition of consumer in light of the language choices of deaf people. Heaton and Fowler (this volume) look at how Deaf people can define the range of services that should be available. All of these issues are tied to a WorldView of who Deaf people are, who non-Deaf people are, and what the interpreter in the middle is supposed to be. Until we can reach some consensus on who the players are, we can not even begin to define what the playing field will look like.

Conclusion

So, this is where I see us in 1997. I believe we are at the beginning of an incredibly exciting time. However, we must be careful not to think we can do everything overnight. A change in the role of interpreters can not happen until there is a change in the prevailing model of interpreting. The change in model can not occur until we agree on the same WorldView. For the first time, the profession of interpreting is being truly opened up to allow the input and influence of Deaf people. The critical question is whether or not we are ready to accept it.

Biography

Robert G. Lee CI/CT, is an interpreter in private practice in Boston, Massachusetts. He holds an MA in Applied Linguistics from Boston University and is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in the same field. Robert is also a Research Assistant in the American Sign Language Linguistic Research Project, housed at Boston University (for information on the World Wide Web, go to http://www.bu.edu/ASLLRP). He is an adjunct instructor in the ASL-English Interpreting Program at Northeastern University, and is a member of RID's Professional Standards Committee as well as CIT's Educational Standards Committee.

References

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[1] I use the generic term Sign Language interpretation to refer to the work between Signed and Spoken languages as well as between two or more natural signed languages. It is becoming more common in America to speak of 'ASL-English Interpreting' to emphasize the fact that we work between two languages. The term Transliteration is used to describe working between spoken English and a manually-coded form of English. Note that these terms have evolved from previous terms like 'Interpreter for the Deaf', reflecting the recognition that we interpret 'for' both Deaf and non-Deaf people.

[2] I use the word WorldView as a single word since I am really attempting to approach what is meant by German word, *Weltanschaung* which means a comprehensive view of the world in which one exists. *Weltanschaung* is a more all-encompassing world view than expressed by the English words 'world view'.

[3] Indeed, the use of the word 'non-Deaf' as opposed to 'hearing' represents a specific WorldView; one that recognizes that the center from which one views the world will have an impact on the words one uses. Specifically, if I try to look at the world from a 'hearing' center, then Deaf people are defined as 'non-hearing'. Looking at the world from a Deaf center, hearing people are 'non-Deaf'.

[4] This is interesting since there are more and more Deaf people in America who work as trained, qualified interpreters. Many people seem to try separate 'interpreters who are Deaf' from 'Deaf consumers' as if somehow a Deaf person who is interpreter is intrinsically different from a 'consumer', even though that interpreter might be a consumer from time to time. This seems to reflect a WorldView where Deaf people can have only one role. See also Duncan (this volume) for a view on Deaf people as interpreters and Heaton and Fowler (this volume) for Deaf consumers' perspectives.