

THE CHANGING PROFESSION

Lessons from American Sign Language–English Interpreting

ROBERT G. LEE, ELIZABETH A. WINSTON, AND EILEEN M. FORESTAL

ROBERT G. LEE is associate academic specialist at Northeastern University. He recently coauthored (with Elizabeth A. Winston, among others), the Gallaudet University Press volume *Beyond Equivalence: Reconceptualizing Interpreting Performance Assessment*. He and Peter Llewellyn-Jones are the creators of the role-space model of interpreted interactions.

ELIZABETH A. WINSTON is director of the Teaching Interpreting Educators and Mentors Center, a center focused on excellence and integrity in interpreter and mentor education and research. Her areas of expertise include teaching and research in interpreting, ASL discourse analysis, interpreting skills development, educational interpreting, multimedia applications in ASL research and teaching, and teaching at a distance.

EILEEN M. FORESTAL is a retired professor of ASL-Deaf studies and ASL-English interpreter program after thirty-six years. While still teaching as an adjunct at a few universities, she is working as a certified Deaf interpreter, mainly in medical and legal arenas. She has several publications and is a national and international presenter.

Even though interpreting as a human activity has been a part of multilingual, multicultural human interactions for as long as we have records, the organized profession of interpreting is a relatively new phenomenon, dating from the mid-twentieth century, with the founding of the International Association of Conference Interpreters (or Association Internationale des Interprètes de Conférence) in 1953 in Paris (see Baigorri-Jalón; Pöchhacker). Interpreting with Deaf people (involving naturally occurring sign languages as well as spoken languages) has also occurred for an extended time throughout history (Forestal, “Deaf Interpreters”; Adam et al.) but is an even more recent development in terms of professionalization (Brunson; Cokely). Signed languages and Deaf people have always been minoritized and, at times, severely oppressed (Ladd; Lane). By extension, interpreting involving Deaf people (either as primary participants or as interpreters themselves) has been similarly stigmatized and devalued.

Signed languages are visual and spatial (as opposed to aural and oral), and research on them has provided unique insights into the fundamentals of the human language faculty, the neural bases of language, and the visual manifestations of expression at all linguistic levels, from phonology to discourse and pragmatics (see Bahan; Bahan and Petitto; Brentari; Padden and Perlmutter). Further, interpreting involving signed languages can also provide key insights into how we model, discuss, and view language. As we have matured as a profession, we have begun to understand better the depth and complexity of interactions, especially in community interpreting, and have begun to embrace a less mechanistic view of communication. This essay explores two specific areas of this broad topic where the profession’s changing attitudes are affecting our perceptions about

© 2023 The Author(s). Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of the Modern Language Association of America

PMLA 138.3 (2023), doi:10.1632/S0030812923000731

interpreting: the complex factors involved in communication and interaction, and the role or roles of each participant, including the interpreter, in every interaction.

Shifting Perceptions about Communication and Interaction

Since we work with signed languages along with spoken languages, the concept of physical space used to construct meaning is almost always at the forefront of our thinking. Signers use space on a variety of linguistic levels, representing referents in specific locations around the signer's body, which is shared and referred to by conversational interlocutors for different linguistic purposes, including pronominal reference, syntactic verb agreement, and discourse-level phenomena such as the spatial mapping of reported speech, comparatives, and constructed action (Neidle et al.; Lee et al.; Metzger, "Constructed Dialogue" and *Sign Language*; Winston, "Spatial Mapping" and "Spatial Referencing"). We believe that applying the metaphor of space helps define and discuss language use in interpreted interactions, regardless of whether the languages are signed or spoken. Thus, instead of talking about people having languages (or not), we prefer the idea that people inhabit and exist in (metaphoric) linguistic spaces. An individual's linguistic space consists of the knowledge of their languages and the strategies and repertoires they employ when communicating (García and Wei). This focus on space is consistent with the recent shift in looking at bilingualism as a more complex notion than just having two languages (Grosjean), and it fits with the move from talking about code-switching and mixing to talking about the concept of translanguaging. (For a discussion of the concept of translanguaging space, see Wei; for a discussion of translanguaging among Deaf signers, see De Meulder et al.) It also builds on the growing body of work from cognitive linguists who debunk the idea that language is simply a means for conveying meaning, like packages through the mail, and who argue that communication is an ongoing process through which participants negotiate meaning, choosing specific linguistic, paralinguistic, and pragmatic

cues to do so (Wilcox and Shaffer; Shaffer and Janzen; Janzen and Shaffer, "Interpreter's Stance" and *Shared Mind*).

We thus propose that interpreting can be conceived as linguistic-spatial bridging between and among those who do not share the same linguistic spaces. Just as people who are multilingual do not merely "switch" between languages, interpreters do not merely switch between languages when interpreting; rather, they make use of the strategies and repertoires that exist in their linguistic space to reconstruct the content and intent between and among participants. Thus, interpreters, along with the primary participants, are engaged in the coconstruction of the interaction itself (Bélanger; Janzen and Shaffer "Interpreter's Stance" and *Shared Mind*).

Shifting Perceptions about the Role and Valuation of Interpreters

Just as there have been shifts in conceptualizing interpreting as the coconstruction of meaning, there have been changes in how the role of interpreters has been characterized (Lee). In the United States the change in the concept of the role of ASL-English interpreters has been described as parallel with changes in how Deaf people are perceived (McIntire and Sanderson). Marina L. McIntire and Gary R. Sanderson describe a shift away from a paternalistic view of Deaf people as needing the help of interpreters to understand nondeaf people. Indeed, the name of the US professional organization for ASL-English Interpreters, the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (founded in 1964), reflects this view (emphasis added). Also, interpreting was seen as primarily one-way, from spoken English into ASL: something done to or at Deaf people, not with them. At the time, the term for interpreting from ASL into English was "reverse interpreting" because it was perceived to happen less, reflecting the view that Deaf people were the receivers of most interpreting. As Deaf people increasingly wanted not help but rather access to the majority language, the practice model of interpreting switched more to a conduit approach, similar in some ways to conference interpreting in which there was little or no interaction and the interpreting was

primarily one-way. In this model, interpreters were restrained from interacting as themselves in any way, acting as so-called meaning transfer machines. However, as interpreters grew to understand the complexities of interaction, and thus of interpreting, the perception of the interpreter as machine has evolved toward an idea of interpreters acting as bilingual or bicultural mediators. This shift has included the recognition that interpreting involves not just languages but also associated cultures and intersectional identities in order to facilitate meaning building among participants.

Enriching and motivating this ongoing shift in perspectives is the increasing recognition and value that established professional interpreting groups grant to Deaf people working as interpreters, and research on Deaf interpreters has grown exponentially. Historically, Deaf people have long been seen as interpreters and translators (Bienvenu; Forestal, “Deaf Interpreters” and “Emerging Professionals”; Holcomb and Smith) for one another in accessing the hearing majority languages and cultures in which they live. However, their importance and use began to wane and be marginalized as interpreter preparation shifted from relationships within Deaf communities to formal academic programs, often independent of Deaf communities since the establishment of a professional and certifying organization (Cokely; Holcomb and Smith). More recently professional interpreting groups have begun to recognize again the tremendous need for and contributions of Deaf interpreters because they work in a wide range of medical, legal, mental health, vocational rehabilitation, and educational settings, among others (Forestal, “Deaf Interpreters” and “Emerging Professionals”). Most recently in the United States, for example, the primary certification organization, the Center for the Assessment of Sign Language Interpretation (which grew out of the certification systems formerly developed by the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf and the National Association for the Deaf), has finished redesigning a new validated and reliable national certification for Deaf interpreters that considers these many changes (Furman). However, while certification has been available for hearing interpreters throughout

most of this time, the certification system for Deaf interpreters had been in a moratorium since 2013, thus severely limiting opportunities for Deaf people to gain an interpreting qualification. A new Generalist Knowledge Exam became available for both hearing and Deaf candidates in June 2022. Before that, there was a Knowledge Exam available only for hearing candidates. The beta version of the Deaf Interpreter Performance test was delayed past June 2022 with results not available until January 2023. Thus, Deaf interpreters were more disadvantaged than hearing interpreters in having access to necessary qualifications to work as interpreters.

These general shifts have accompanied an expanded understanding of the ways that interpreters, as active communicators, need to make decisions about how, where, and when they interact. As we noted above, even with the changing views of the role, interpreters have often been seen as outside the interaction, not as coconstructors of interactions or primary participants. Resisting this, some researchers have characterized the unique place of interpreters in interactions (Angelleli; Metzger, “Constructed Dialogue” and *Sign Language*; Roy, *Interpreting* and “Problem”; Wadensjö). Building on this work, the concept of role-space was developed (Lee and Llewellyn-Jones; Llewellyn-Jones and Lee, “Getting” and *Redefining*) to more accurately model what effective interpreters do. Developed from Erving Goffman’s work on conversational roles (*Forms*) and from the work of the sociologists Ralph Linton and Ralph H. Turner, a core principle of role-space is that roles are not things we have; rather, roles are what we do (Roy, *Interpreting* and “Problem”). Turner states, “Role refers to behavior rather than position, so that one may enact a role but cannot occupy a role” (317). The interpreters’ behaviors in an interaction thus create the role-space interpreters enact.

The concept of role-space builds on the idea mentioned above that we do not have a language or culture, but rather interact from our linguistic and cultural spaces. We move in and through these spaces, negotiating our understandings with others. These ideas are certainly applicable to interaction in general, but here we focus on how they

change our perspectives about interpreted interactions. Peter Llewellyn-Jones and Robert G. Lee posit that interpreters occupy both physical and metaphoric space within interactions (“Getting” and *Redefining*). This space can be best defined as an x-y-z coordinate system with three axes along which interpreters make decisions. The total of the decisions made by an interpreter in a given interaction manifests that interpreter’s role-space. The three axes are the axis of interaction management (the vertical y-axis), the axis of participant alignment (the horizontal x-axis), and the axis of presentation of self (the front-to-back z-axis).

The axis of interaction management refers to those behaviors or interventions that an interpreter uses to actively manage how the interaction is proceeding. This can range from macrolevel decisions such as interpreting consecutively (in order to receive and understand more of the source message before producing an interpretation) to microlevel behaviors such as asking for repetitions, clarifications, or elaborations on information in the source message. The interpreter must decide when and how to employ such strategies while causing minimal disruption to the interpreted interaction. The axis of participant alignment refers to how much an interpreter directs communication to, or seems to identify with, a specific participant (or possibly a subgroup of participants). On this axis, in addition, it may be that the interpreter is reacting directly to one of the interlocutors’ utterances. Participant alignment is key to establishing rapport with the primary participants and to engendering trust in the interpreter. Such trust is a vital part of effective interpreted interactions (Reinhardt). The axis of presentation of self refers to any interpreter-initiated utterances that occur during the interpreted interaction. This axis is based on Goffman’s work describing how an interpreter chooses to interact by displaying a professional self (*Presentation*). This can include how one introduces oneself and how one explains the expectations of an interpreted interaction or other interpreter-initiated utterances that are not direct renditions of the source language. For each specific interaction, the interpreter enacts the role-space by making decisions along these

axes: if (and how) they will manage the flow of communication, how they align with the participants to engender trust, and if (and how) to present themselves in an appropriate and authentic way. This reformulation of the place of interpreters in interactions is much more useful in both describing and defining effective interpreted interactions but also in explaining to interlocutors what can be expected during such interactions.

Since the concepts of constructed, negotiated meaning in interaction and of role-space and its axes have been introduced into our discussions, our communities of interpreter practitioners have been learning critical lessons about both communicating and interpreting them. Thus, practitioners applying these changing concepts and shifting perspectives note that they bring a more practical, more workable approach to interpreting, be it in the United States or in the field of interpreting in general regardless of the languages involved. The infusion of these newer concepts and practices appears to be affecting the perceptions of more participants in interpreted interactions, both interpreters and consumers. There is a growing awareness of the complexities of interaction as constructed meaning, of the interpreter as an active participant in the interaction, and of the interaction itself as fluid and negotiated.

These new paradigms promote both flexibility in interpreting, when all participants construct meaning throughout interactions, and more acceptance of accountability among the interpreters applying role-space in their interactions with participants and within teams of interpreters working together. Through our empirical observations and discussions with participants, some valuable lessons we are learning include the following:

The integration and application of role-space on teams of interpreters working together promotes clarity regarding the alignment of interactions between the team members, as well as the presentation of the team as a whole. It also helps maintain focus on the behaviors and actions of the participants. This in turn creates a shift of sharing space within the

teams as they can now perceive themselves as equals within teams. This facilitates their understanding of how intrateam dialogues can assure the efficacy of their interpretations, as well as their understanding of dialogues with the participants.

The notion of constructed meaning encourages interpreters' reflective analysis of participants' intent, as well as their uses of all aspects of their languages to communicate those intentions. This promotes flexibility rather than rigid right or wrong options during interpreting.

The language of constructed meaning and role-space, such as presentation of self, interaction management, and participant alignment, has a positive effect on interpreters' discourse when talking about the work and assessing the work as a whole.

Other transformations that seem to be appearing from the infusion of these concepts include

a shifting balance of power that promotes collaboration with all participants (of course, depending on specific settings) along with a rerecognition of the vital place of Deaf interpreters in interpreted interactions, as well as in the profession in general;

increasing levels of trust and enhanced transparency among participants; and

an increasing awareness by interpreters that Deaf and hearing participants often have their own expectations about the roles of interpreters, based on past experiences (or no experience), and thus that they need to consider how they approach participants in order to build trust and transparency about the work of interpreters.

In a nutshell, reflecting on our own transforming attitudes, perceptions, and approaches to our notions of communication and to the roles enacted by interpreters has helped us gain a clearer understanding not only of our own interpreting practices but of our own communications and interactions.

WORKS CITED

Adam, Robert, et al. *Deaf Interpreters at Work: International Insights*. Gallaudet UP, 2014.

- Angelleli, Claudia. "The Visible Co-participant: Interpreter's Role in Doctor/Patient Encounters." *From Topic Boundaries to Omission: New Research in Interpretation*, edited by Melanie Metzger et al., Gallaudet UP, 2003.
- Bahan, Benjamin. *Non-manual Realization of Agreement in American Sign Language*. 1996. Boston U, PhD dissertation.
- Bahan, Benjamin, and Laura Petitto. "Aspects of Rules for Character Establishment and Reference in ASL Storytelling." 1980.
- Baigorri-Jalón, Jesús. *From Paris to Nuremberg: The Birth of Conference Interpreting*. John Benjamins Publishing, 2014.
- Bélanger, Danielle-Claude. "Interactional Patterns in Dialogue-Interpreting." *Journal of Interpretation*, 2004, pp. 1–18.
- Bienvenu, Martina J. "Relay Interpreting." Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf Conference, Aug. 1991, Bethesda, MD.
- Brentari, Diane. *A Prosodic Model of Sign Language Phonology*. MIT Press, 1998.
- Brunson, Jeremy. "Sign Language Interpreting: Moving towards Professionalization." Embodied Workers Conference, 2004, Syracuse, NY.
- Cokely, Dennis. "Shifting Positionality: A Critical Examination of the Turning Point in the Relationship of Interpreters and the Deaf Community." *Sign Language Interpreting and Interpreter Education: Directions for Research and Practice*, edited by Marc Marschark et al., Oxford UP, 2005, pp. 3–28.
- De Meulder, Maartje, et al. "Describe, Don't Prescribe: The Practice and Politics of Translanguaging in the Context of Deaf Signers." *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, vol. 40, no. 10, Nov. 2019, pp. 892–906. *Taylor and Francis Online*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434632.2019.1592181>.
- Forestal, Eileen M. "Deaf Interpreters: Dynamics of Their Interpreting Processes." Adam et al., pp. 29–50.
- . "The Emerging Professionals: Deaf Interpreters and Their Views and Experiences on Training." *Sign Language Interpreting and Interpreter Education: Directions for Research and Practice*, edited by Marc Marschark et al., Oxford UP, 2005, pp. 235–58.
- Furman, Sean. "A Conversation with CASLI." *Contentsharing.net*, 2022, contentsharing.net/actions/email_web_version.cfm?ep=_txDTBVJgla4dA82KZHAWnmHmhW8AY9X0-fgZOCJA TzOn6K5KPicLXVxRVpAtKm1TC_-luY1Okg16hDw8npA2SO0iutfMIZiO2WbhbAsr3gm1Kkjez_N0QZ9_bdm9KfW.
- García, Ofelia, and Li Wei. *Translanguaging: Language Bilingualism and Education*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.
- Goffman, Erving. *Forms of Talk*. U of Pennsylvania P / Penguin Books, 1981.
- . *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. Penguin Books, 1990.
- Grosjean, François. *Life as a Bilingual: Knowing and Using Two or More Languages*. Cambridge UP, 2021.
- Holcomb, Thomas K., and David H. Smith, editors. *Deaf Eyes on Interpreting*. Gallaudet UP, 2018. *Project Muse*, muse.jhu.edu/book/59211.

- Janzen, Terry, and Barbara Shaffer. "The Interpreter's Stance in Intersubjective Discourse." *Sign Language Research Uses and Practices: Crossing Views on Theoretical and Applied Sign Language Linguistics*, edited by Laurence Meurant et al., Mouton de Gruyter, 2013, pp. 63–84.
- . *The Shared Mind: Perspectives on Intersubjectivity*. Edited by Jordan Zlatev et al., John Benjamins Publishing, 2008, pp. 333–55.
- Ladd, Paddy. *Understanding Deaf Culture: In Search of Deafhood*. Multilingual Matters, 2003.
- Lane, Harlan. *The Mask of Benevolence: Disabling the Deaf Community*. Alfred A. Knopf, 1992.
- Lee, Robert G. "Roles, Models and World Views: A View from the States." *Deaf Worlds*, vol. 13, no. 3, 1997, pp. 40–44.
- Lee, Robert G., et al. "Role Shift in ASL: A Syntactic Look at Direct Speech." *Syntactic Structure and Discourse Formation: An Examination of Two Constructions in American Sign Language*, edited by Carol Neidle et al., American Sign Language Linguistic Research Project / Boston U, 1997, pp. 24–45.
- Lee, Robert G., and Peter Llewellyn-Jones. *Re-visiting Role: Arguing for a Multi-dimensional Analysis of Interpreter Behaviour*. University of Central Lancashire, 2011, clock.uclan.ac.uk/5031/.
- Linton, Ralph. *The Study of Man*. Appleton-Century Crofts, 1936.
- Llewellyn-Jones, Peter, and Robert G. Lee. "Getting to the Core of Role: Defining the Role-Space of Interpreters." *International Journal of Interpreter Education*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2013, pp. 54–72.
- . *Redefining the Role of the Community Interpreter: The Concept of Role-Space*. SLI Press, 2014.
- McIntire, Marina L., and Gary R. Sanderson. "Who's in Charge Here? Perceptions of Empowerment and Role in the Interpreting Setting." *Journal of Interpretation*, vol. 7, no. 1, 1995, pp. 99–114.
- Metzger, Melanie. "Constructed Dialogue and Constructed Action in American Sign Language." *Sociolinguistics in Deaf Communities*, edited by Ceil Lucas, Gallaudet UP, 1995, pp. 255–71.
- . *Sign Language Interpreting: Deconstructing the Myth of Neutrality*. Gallaudet UP, 1999.
- Neidle, Carol, et al. *The Syntax of American Sign Language: Functional Categories and Hierarchical Structure*. MIT Press, 2000.
- Padden, Carol A., and David M. Perlmutter. "American Sign Language and the Architecture of Phonological Theory." *Natural Language and Linguistic Theory*, vol. 5, no. 3, 1987, pp. 335–75.
- Pöschhacker, Franz. *Introducing Interpreting Studies*. Routledge, 2016.
- Reinhardt, Laurie. *Swift Trust Formation: Experiences of Deaf Consumers and ASL-English Interpreters*. 2021. Gallaudet U, PhD dissertation. ProQuest, www.proquest.com/openview/4e62feae8aed8fe5b2a43b4055f622a5/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y.
- Roy, Cynthia B. *Interpreting as a Discourse Process*. Oxford UP, 1999.
- . "The Problem with Definitions, Descriptions, and the Role Metaphor of Interpreters." *Journal of Interpretation*, vol. 6, 1993, pp. 127–53.
- Shaffer, Barbara, and Terry Janzen. "Topic Marking: What Signers Know but Interpreters Don't." Association of Visual Language Interpreters of Canada National Conference, Halifax, Nova Scotia, 22–26 July 2002.
- Turner, Ralph H. "Role-Taking, Role Standpoint, and Reference-Group Behavior." *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 61, no. 4, 1956, pp. 316–28.
- Wadensjö, Cecilia. *Interpreting as Interaction*. Longman, 1998.
- Wei, Li. "Moment Analysis and Translanguaging Space: Discursive Construction of Identities by Multilingual Chinese Youth in Britain." *Journal of Pragmatics*, vol. 43, no. 5, 2011, pp. 1222–35.
- Wilcox, Sherman, and Barbara Shaffer. "Towards a Cognitive Model of Interpreting." *Topics in Signed Language Interpreting: Theory and Practice*, edited by Terry Janzen, John Benjamins Publishing, 2005, pp. 27–50.
- Winston, Elizabeth A. "Spatial Mapping in Comparative Discourse Frames." *Language, Gesture, and Space*, edited by Karen Emmorey and Judy Reilly, Psychology Press, 1995, pp. 87–114.
- . "Spatial Referencing and Cohesion in an American Sign Language Text." *Sign Language Studies*, vol. 73, 1991, pp. 397–409.