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The Impact of Cultural Differences on Interpreting Situations

If you travel to a new country and stay there long enough, you will probably go through three stages of acculturation. Stage one we may call *confusion*. The language you hear is a jumble of sounds. The behavior of others might seem arbitrary. Sometimes people bow to you; at other times they don't. A policeman shoos you off the grassy lawn in a park, while dogs are welcomed in restaurants. You think you are being polite by bringing your hostess flowers, yet when she sees they are yellow, she can barely hide her dismay. It all makes little sense.

Stage two we may call *delayed understanding*. If you watch what goes on around you carefully, begin to converse in the language, and have a few friends of whom you can ask questions, things start to become a little clearer. Yet it may only be after an embarrassing moment or two that you belatedly figure out what went wrong. You arrived too early or too late. You brought a gift when you should not have or failed to bring one when you should have. You used the polite form of address when the familiar was appropriate or vice versa. Most of the time no one informs you directly of your mistake, but you grow sensitive to a raised eyebrow, a sharp intake of breath, a muffled giggle. Slowly, slowly, the pieces begin to fit together.

By stage three, you have seen the same transactions repeated so many times that you have now become capable of *prediction!* You know what behavior is expected in a range of situations and can act accordingly. These small successes mean a lot. You feel a thrill of accomplishment when you go to the bakery and actually leave with the precise item you had planned to buy. Your feeling of pride is increased when the baker's facial expression informs you that you used the appropriate greeting to the people in the store. Now you are even able to anticipate when your ingrained values are likely to clash with those of the locals, so you can prepare yourself mentally beforehand.

As sign language interpreters, we face a similar challenge. Since the majority of us learned ASL as adults, we went through the same three stages as the foreign traveler described above when we entered the Deaf community. Our job now, however, is to be bicultural mediators, so we had better operate as often as possible on a stage three—prediction—basis, foreseeing the inevitable cross-cultural clashes that lie in wait for us. If we are still in stage two—delayed understanding—we won't be able to do anything except commiserate with our Deaf or hearing consumers over the rudeness of the other.

With the goal of prediction in mind, let me offer the following scenarios. The following are examples of culturally influenced miscommunications. In order to focus on the points of cultural difference, I will not attempt to represent the exact signs used by the Deaf consumers either by gloss or by any written version of ASL. For the sake of flow, I am assuming that an interpreter was present and translated the statements back and forth in a literal manner without making any cultural adjustments. They take place in settings familiar to most interpreters: the doctor's office, the classroom, and the workplace. I will try to cover common exchanges that we are likely to encounter daily. I am sure that you will be able to add your own experiences to the list. So much the better! The more thoroughly we anticipate the cultural misunderstandings that are likely to come our way, the more successfully we can plan our strategies for dealing with them.

The Medical Appointment

Scenario 1

Hearing Doctor: Hi. How are you?

The doctor is probably expecting a general introductory statement grounded in the present. Perhaps something like, "Not too well. The last few mornings, I've been feeling quite dizzy." Then it's up to the doctor to further question the patient about what led up to the current state of affairs.

Deaf Patient: Well, that first pill you gave me last year was awful, made me itch all over, then the blue one made my headache worse, and this one made me feel dizzy in the morning....

Deaf patients often begin their discussion with the doctor by relating their relevant medical history starting at whatever point they consider to be the beginning, probably to give the doctor enough context with which to view the present situation. In ASL discourse the present moment does not hang isolated in space but exists on a timeline connecting past, present, and future. Depending on how far back the narrative is started, the doctor may become impatient waiting for the patient to get to the point.

Scenario 2

Hearing Pediatrician: I'm sorry, I have some bad news. Our test results show that your baby is deaf.

Deaf Mother: Hurray!!!

This scenario is just one example of the numerous misconceptions that hearing people hold about deafness and Deaf people. Many hearing people see deafness as an affliction. A significant number of Deaf people, on the other hand, are proud to be Deaf and would not change it even if they had the choice. So while the doctor in this example may pity the Deaf woman for having a child "with the same condition," the Deaf mother feels happy at the thought that her child will be a continuation of her family and culture.

Scenario 3

Hearing Doctor: How many hours of exercise do you get a week?

The doctor is expecting the answer to come in the form of a number and assumes the patient will do the necessary mental calculations and come up with an average estimate.

Deaf Patient: Well, Monday I went bowling, Tuesday I was sick, Wednesday I was supposed to play softball, but I had to help my friend John with his car, Thursday...

Again the answer takes the form of a chronological narrative and includes more specific details than the doctor wants to hear. The Deaf patient might very well calculate the hours for this particular week after having finished his recitation, but the doctor will probably interrupt him out of frustration first.

Hearing Doctor: Wait a minute, didn't you understand my question?

Deaf Patient: (thinks) Why doesn't he let me explain?

Scenario 4

Deaf Patient: My friend told me she has glaucoma too and she used a blue bottle of drops that made her vision blurry, but then she got a red bottle of drops that made her eyes feel better...

As noted in chapter 3, the peer group often acts as the primary source of information as well as the authority to be trusted.

Hearing Doctor: Never mind about your friend.

The doctor tends to view each patient as an individual and he or she may be concerned about the danger of a patient's using someone else's medication, even if his or her medical condition had the same diagnosis. Discounting the patient's concerns, however, conveys an attitude of disrespect.

Scenario 5

Hearing Doctor: (looking at his watch and walking toward the door) Okay. That's all for today. Bye.

As mentioned in chapter 3, there is a difference in the pace of leave-taking in the American Deaf and hearing cultures. In hearing culture most leave-takings tend to be brief. Additionally, in today's health care environment, the doctor's time is commonly broken down into ten- to fifteen-minute sessions. He or she, therefore, is probably already behind and wondering how to make up the extra time that was spent working through the interpreter.

Deaf Patient: (repeating what has already been established) So I will take these pills three times a day—at breakfast, lunch, and dinner—with a glass of water, three pills a day. But I didn't tell you about my foot problems, and should I still take those other pills when I can't sleep, and when should I come to see you again?

The Deaf patient may not expect an abrupt end to his or her appointment, because of the longer leave-taking process in Deaf culture. He or she may want several repetitions of the instructions regarding medication to make sure that no communication problem has led to a misunderstanding. The physician, who may have broken off eye contact with the patient and is walking to the door while checking his or her wristwatch, thinks a clear nonverbal signal has been sent that the appointment is over, a signal to which the Deaf person seems oblivious. What is happening, however, is that they are operating within different value systems. The time pressure felt by the doctor is not shared by the Deaf person, to whom face-to-face communication is of paramount importance. Compartmentalization applies, in this instance, not only to time but to area of specialization as well. The Deaf patient may feel that this is a good opportunity to discuss all of his or her physical complaints with a doctor, not realizing that in many HMOs one must usually make a separate appointment to deal with each part of the body.

Educational Settings

Scenarios 1 and 2 take place in a college classroom.

Scenario 1 (the first day of class)

Hearing Professor: (noticing interpreter sitting at the front of the classroom) Oh no! This will never work. You will have to move to the back of the room.

The front of the classroom is the teacher's territory and seat of control (much the way a judge controls the courtroom from the raised bench). It is not surprising, therefore, that often a teacher's initial reaction to having a deaf student and interpreter invade his or her space is a negative one.

Deaf Student: But I have to see you, the board, and the interpreter clearly.

In Deaf culture it is of the utmost importance to establish proper sight lines before beginning a meeting or event. Whatever time is necessary will be taken and many opinions will be sought, until a solution is found that ensures everyone a clear and comfortable view of the proceedings. In fact, if a problem with seeing the speakers or participants develops midway through a Deaf-run event, everything will stop for however long it takes until every person again has clear visual access.

Hearing Professor: No no. It's too distracting.

The professor's ultimate response to this new situation may hinge on his or her personality. Although there has not been a study made to unequivocally support this theory, it seems that some teachers may be open and adaptable to new experiences, while others are not. Some may feel that the interpreter's signing is too intrusive and will distract hearing students. Others may be reacting out of insecurity and/or a fear that the interpreter constitutes competition.

Scenario 2

**Hearing Professor: So who can tell us why XYZ is important?
Please raise your hands.**

First Hearing Student: (blurts out) ABC....

**Hearing Professor: Yes, that's right, but there is something more.
Anyone have an idea?**

Second Hearing Student: (blurts out) DEF...

Hearing Professor: Right, very good. Now let's move on. Yes?

**Deaf Student: (who has had his hand up from the beginning)
DEF...**

Hearing Professor: Well, I think that was already established.

Probably the biggest problem in classroom discussions is one of timing. There is often a quick back-and-forth Ping-Pong match of comments between the teacher and students, all of whom rely on paralinguistic cues to judge when they can jump in, ask a question, or raise a new point. The interpreter, by necessity, will always be at least half a sentence behind the discussion, after which the Deaf student must digest the information, which puts him or her even further behind. Although the professor may repeatedly request that the students raise their hands so that turn taking can be regulated (something which if truly practiced would help the deaf students appropriately time their comments), in heated debate hearing students blurt out, chime in, and talk over each other, without raising their hands or being called on. All these factors put the deaf student at a decided disadvantage in terms of class participation.

Scenarios 3, 4, and 5 take place in the professor's office.

Scenario 3

Hearing College Professor: Tell me, which high school did you attend?

Deaf Student: I attended the State Residential School for the Deaf in Pleasantville.

To many Deaf people, the state residential school is a focus for fond memories and positive feelings. It is the place where they may have first acquired sign language, developed a sense of Deaf culture, found a community of Deaf people who held similar values and who could act as role models, experienced a feeling of identity and belonging, and made lasting friends and contacts.

Hearing Professor: Ohhhhh, I see....

To most hearing people, the idea of a state residential school conjures up a whole different set of images, more like being in a mental institution—remote, cold, harsh, impersonal, a depressing place where children are forced to live away from their parents.

Scenario 4

Hearing College Professor: If you did not understand this key concept when we first discussed it in class weeks ago, why did you wait so long to tell me about it?

To overgeneralize: Americans are impatient. If we don't understand something, we want clarification *now!* We feel we have a right to understand and the assertiveness to ask for an explanation immediately. We may even blame the teacher or professor for not being clear in the first place. As opposed to many other cultures, we feel no shame in admitting we don't know something. In fact we respect people, even those in positions of authority, who honestly admit their ignorance of a certain word or concept. The professor assumes that the Deaf student holds the same set of values as the majority of American students and therefore should, from the professor's perspective, have been more aggressive in seeking clarification earlier on.

Deaf Student: Well....

There are many possible reasons why the student did not promptly bring his or her confusion to the teacher's attention, including feeling uncertain or embarrassed about admitting that he or she did not understand something, having a different time frame for needing or desiring to obtain clarity, feeling less uncomfortable with ambiguity, or pursuing other avenues to resolve confusion. Perhaps Deaf people are more accustomed to not understanding everything because of the many linguistically inaccessible situations in which they find themselves. They also may have different ways of clearing up confusion: waiting to see if the information becomes clear over time, getting notes from another student, checking with a tutor, learning on their own through printed materials, or asking a friend for clarification.

Scenario 5

Hearing Professor: I am glad you came in to discuss your paper. Hmmm...your choice of topic is fine, you have a few good examples...but I do have some concerns about your thesis.... I'm not sure it is strong enough to support a paper of this length.

The professor will organize his or her comments in this feedback session using the common American "sandwich approach." In this technique, one introduces and concludes one's critical remarks with positive statements that are supposed to make the negative comments sandwiched between them easier for the recipient to swallow. In this first comment, the professor, after making a couple of positive comments, pinpoints a major fault of the paper: if the thesis is not strong enough to support the rest of the paper, the entire essay will fail. The professor assumes that the student will easily detect the "meat" of his crucial criticism underneath the faint praise in his opening "slice."

Deaf Student: You mean, make the thesis statement longer?

The student is unsure of where he or she stands. Deaf culture is more direct and one may very well start off a

discussion with a precise description of what needs to be changed. Also, the value of starting a discussion with a broad introductory statement is not always shared in the structure of Deaf discourse.

Hearing Professor: Well...that certainly is one option, but I would really like to see some restructuring. So play around with the thesis statement and let it inform the rest of your paper. Oh, and you need to clean up your punctuation.

The first statement is an extremely subtle way of saying that it takes more to improve a thesis than just making it longer. "Play around with the thesis" is a vague but ominous statement that only hints at the possibility that the entire paper may have to be redone.

Deaf Student: Oh, the punctuation, yes, I know I have trouble with commas and semicolons. Sure, I will work on that. So you think the rest of the paper is okay?

The student finds it helpful to hear a concrete example at last (this one regarding punctuation) but is still unsure if the professor's basic take on the paper is positive or negative.

Hearing Professor: Uh...let's just say it's on the right track. Tackle these things I've mentioned and I'm sure your paper will be fine.

The second positive "slice" of the feedback sandwich.

Deaf Student: (to interpreter after professor has left) Whew! I'm relieved! He thinks my paper will be fine.

The student seems to be leaving with a very different feeling about the paper than the professor thinks he or she has communicated.

The Job Interview

Scenario 1

Hearing Interviewer: Why do you want this job?

Although this seems like a simple, straightforward question, it is all part of the game we play when we participate in a job interview. Employers are not necessarily

looking for honest answers, but they do expect applicants to try to present themselves in the best possible light. Ideally, applicants are expected to compliment the employer while describing their own abilities and virtues. For example, "I believe that this company, with its deep commitment to saving endangered animals, would give me the opportunity to use my secretarial skills to benefit our natural world."

Deaf Applicant: I need the money and you have dental insurance. I have to get a couple of crowns.

Deaf applicants may not be aware of the rules of the game. Of course we all want a job for the salary and benefits we would receive, but in a typical job interview, no one would admit that up front. The interviewer's seemingly direct question elicits this honest, direct answer, which is not at all what he or she is expecting.

Scenario 2

Hearing Interviewer: Why do you feel you are the best qualified candidate for this position?

The interviewer is expecting the answer to be in "outline form" (i.e., introduction, supporting examples, summary). Also, the interviewer is not only interested in a recitation of the facts but is also waiting for the interviewee to present a compelling argument about why he or she would be the best choice to fill the vacancy.

Deaf Applicant: Well, my first job was as a secretary, my second job was as a claims adjuster, and my third job was as a supervisor.

The Deaf person answers in time-sequential narrative form, assuming that the sum of the details is sufficient and does not need to be elaborated upon. Even though the job history demonstrates advancement and increasing responsibilities, the applicant fails to highlight these important features, thus missing an opportunity to "sell" him- or herself to the prospective employer.

Scenario 3

Hearing Interviewer: Do you have any experience with the XYZ software?

Deaf Applicant: No. None at all.

A direct, honest, negative response will not win many points in a job interview. Applicants are expected to try to turn any question into a chance to laud themselves. The interviewer will be surprised if the applicant does not attempt to dress up a negative answer, as in the following response: "Not with the XYZ software specifically, but I do have five years' experience with the ABC software, which, I believe, is quite similar. And I am sure I could pick it up very easily. I'm a fast learner."

Scenario 4

Hearing Interviewer: Since I just asked you about your strengths, I need to ask also about your weaknesses. What are some of them as they relate to this job?

The classic trick question. The employer does not expect a full disclosure of the applicant's shortcomings, foibles, and bad habits. Instead, he or she wants to see how the applicant can turn this tough question into another positive statement.

Deaf Applicant: Well, I guess I haven't used that accounting software before, and my last accounting class was ten years ago in college, and sometimes it takes me a little while to catch on to a new program.... Is that what you mean?

Advice commonly given to job seekers encountering this question is to cite a positive trait in disguise. Two examples of traditional answers to the classic trick question are these: (1) I get so wrapped up in my work that sometimes I forget to take a break or (2) I tend to expect everyone to work as hard as I do. If the Deaf applicants are not aware that they are participating in the "job interview game" with all the rules this implies, it is not surprising that they answer the question literally.

In the next chapter we will examine our role as interpreters/bicultural mediators and the scope of our responsibility in relation to cultural differences such as those above. In chapter 8 we will consider some techniques to help us deal with these cultural contradictions. This would be a good place, however, to analyze a distinction exemplified in some of the previous scenarios. Let us call it a *cultural set*, or, more fully, a cultural set of assumptions.

Cultural Set

Cultural differences that manifest themselves in interpreting situations can be broadly divided into two categories, form and content. In interpreting with a focus on form, we adjust for differences such as active versus passive voice, amount of detail, and general versus specific statements. These challenges certainly warrant much discussion and preparation. At this point, however, I would like to focus on the second category, content, which involves the much more complex factor of cultural set.

This content factor comes in two varieties. The first relates to unspoken, yet pervasive, cultural assumptions (i.e., the importance of the group or the preciousness of time); the second involves assumed cultural knowledge of the sets of rules which govern certain types of transactions, that is, cultural sets.

An example of a conflict regarding cultural presuppositions was illustrated in Medical Scenario 2, when the Deaf mother expressed her joy at the thought of having a Deaf child. The doctor's reaction would probably have been surprise or disbelief, because he saw the situation through a different set of assumptions regarding what it means to be deaf. In order for the doctor to truly understand her "Hurray," he would have to be willing to give up his unenlightened view of deafness and learn to understand this woman's set of feelings, assumptions, and beliefs. The only way for this to happen would be if the doctor entered the conversation with a curious and open mind. We hope for this to happen, although we know from experience that all too often it does not.

Similarly, in the third educational scenario, the teacher did not understand the feelings of loyalty, love, and cultural connection that the Deaf student associated with the mention of residential school.

The job interview, as a whole, is an excellent example of the second content factor, the cultural set, in which all American job seekers are expected to know the implicit "rules of the game."

The Cultural Set of Job Interviews

In contrast with most medical, educational, and other business situations, which vary with each encounter (although they contain certain repetitive elements and routines), almost all job interviews in mainstream American culture follow the same basic pattern and have definite underlying cultural precepts. Usually these conventions are not formally taught in high school or college. If we grew up in the United States, we generally absorbed them through books, TV, movies, or in discussion with others. There are many books and workshops available, however, on how to interview, for people who may not have had much formal education or who wish to practice these techniques so they can hone their job-seeking skills and present themselves to their best advantage.

So what are the rules of the job interview game? In poker, we learn that our advantage is not in the strength of the cards we actually hold in our hand, but in what we can make our opponent think we have through bluffing. Similarly, in a job interview, the point is not to recount our previous positions, education, or skills but to present ourselves in a positive way so as to convince the employer to hire us. (This may or may not necessitate bluffing.) "Positive" seems to be the key word in interviewing well, according to the authors of *Interview for Success*, who use the word in almost every piece of advice they offer (e.g., "Turn what appears to be a negative into a positive." "Use positive form. This means avoiding negatives by presenting yourself in as positive a light as possible." "Present your strengths, skills and accomplishments in a positive way." "Always phrase your answers to questions in a positive manner") (Krannich and Krannich 1982, 87, 119, 121, 123).

While playing Scrabble, good players do not volunteer information about their position that would disclose their weaknesses (e.g., "Darn! I've got all vowels"). Similarly, in job interviewing a cardinal rule is not to disclose any negative information which has not been specifically asked for. Or in the words of the author of *Job Interviews for Dummies*, "Never should the unnecessary be volunteered by the unwary for the unforgetting" (Kennedy 1996, 68).

The job interview is like a game of chess; it begins and ends almost formally with moves chosen from very limited sets of possibilities. The question with which it often begins, "Did you have any trouble finding our office?" is offered as an icebreaker and

assumes a short neutral or positive response. It is *not* an invitation to expound on the terrible traffic or lack of available parking. Similarly, the last query the interviewer often poses, "Do you have any questions?" is not an open-ended request to satisfy one's curiosity about the company's quirks or inquire about irrelevant topics, but one last opportunity to sell oneself.

That job interviews are routinely conducted according to a set of procedures not unlike those that govern football, checkers, or Monopoly can be inferred from this quote from *Interview for Success*:

Like it or not, employers play by these rules. Once you know the rules, you at least can make a conscious choice whether or not you want to play. If you decide to play, you will stand a better chance of winning by using the often unwritten rules to your advantage. (Krannich and Krannich 95)

The Game Has Different Rules in Other Cultures

Naturally, the rules of job interviews vary in other cultures. In Japan, for example, interviewees are not supposed to brag about themselves. When asked why they are applying for the position, the appropriate response, after complimenting what the company has given to society, is to state, "I hope I can humbly make my contribution to this company." As the saying goes in Japan, "An able eagle hides its claws."

Similarly, Yao Wei in his essay "The Importance of Being KEQI [modest, humble]" describes Chinese immigrants' difficulties with the assertiveness required in American job interviews. When asked to show his woodworking abilities at a job interview, an accomplished Chinese carpenter may downplay his talents by saying, "How dare I be so indiscreet as to demonstrate my crude skills in front of a master of the trade like you?" If the employer persists in his request, the carpenter would probably respond: "If you really insist, I'll try to make a table. Please don't laugh at my crude work." Finally the carpenter may put the final touches on a "beautiful piece of art in the shape of a table" (Wei 1983, 72-74).

In the essay "Performance and Ethnic Style in Job Interviews," the authors, F. Niyi Akinnaso and Cheryl Seabrook Ajiroto (1982), describe the job interview "as an interrogative encounter between someone who has the right or privilege to know and another in a

less powerful position who is obliged to respond..." (119–20). The interviewer uses his or her power to start the interaction, introduce new topics, change the topic, and terminate the conversation. However, "miscommunication and negative evaluation often arise when participants do not share the same cultural and linguistic background..." (124). The authors stress the importance of discovering underlying patterns of expected responses. One of the most important challenges for the interviewee is that the interview questions

are mostly indirect, relying upon the interviewee's ability to infer the type of answer wanted.... The interviewee's ability to go beyond the surface, pick the relevant cues, infer the intended meaning, and effectively negotiate an acceptable relationship between questions and responses is an important measure of his/her success. (127)

In the job interview scenarios described earlier in this chapter, we saw that Deaf applicants, not versed in the unwritten rules of the American job interview game, repeatedly violated the interviewer's cultural expectations, thereby not presenting themselves to their best advantage, though they may have been eminently qualified for the position. I do not mean to imply, however, that Deaf people never interview well. Of course they do, and they also get hired for many jobs in the hearing world regardless of the fact that they may follow a different set of cultural rules. It is true, however, that Deaf people as a group are underemployed (Schein and Delk 1974; Crammate 1987; Jacobs 1989). I would posit that this results not only from discrimination, fear, and hearing people's lack of information but also from a lack of knowledge on the part of some Deaf people about the cultural set of the job interview. One place to alleviate this lack of information would be in the residential school, where ideally after studying their own Deaf culture in depth, a class in hearing culture, as a contrast culture, should be offered, including a unit on "Cultural Assumptions in a Hearing American Job Interview." I am pleased to report that this idea seems to be catching on in several schools. Let us hope that this enlightened trend will continue.

Dealing with Cultural Sets

While interpreting job interviews or other situations rich in cultural sets, can we as interpreters make up for our clients' lack of knowledge of the cultural rules of the game? Even if we believe it is our responsibility to do so, it poses quite a challenge, especially when the underlying meaning of a comment is diametrically opposed to its surface form, or if the point of the whole exchange is so connected to the cultural value system that one cannot separate an utterance from the beliefs that have necessitated it. We could argue that American job interviews simply exemplify many features of American culture: one sells oneself like our advertisements sell soap and soda pop, by hyperbole. The incessant positivity endemic to these interviews is also akin to our national optimism, but is it our responsibility to explain the whole culture while interpreting?

An example of a cultural set from another country may help to clarify this idea. When I asked a Japanese/English interpreter what he felt was his responsibility in the face of major cultural differences, he gave me this example. He had interpreted for an American businessman who presented an offer to a Japanese businessman in Japan. At the end of the discussion, the Japanese businessman's closing statement was, "We will consider your proposal with a positive attitude." "Of course that meant no," the interpreter confided to me. I asked the interpreter if he had conveyed that underlying meaning to the American businessman in his translation. "Oh no," he replied. "If an American comes to do business in Japan, he had better learn certain basic things about Japanese culture first, such as the fact that we say no indirectly."

Speaking on the Telephone as a Cultural Set

Speaking on the telephone is indeed a hearing cultural set because of the unspoken rules regarding such things as length of silence permissible, degree of formality required, and information processed through vocal inflections. Let us pause to take a deeper look at this example.

From the clink made by the pay telephone as it digests its first coin to the vocal intonation in the receptionist's "Okay" that excludes finality, interpreting telephone calls between a Deaf person and a hearing person ranks as one of the most challenging and frustrating tasks we ever perform. Thank goodness for the spread

of telephone relay services (state-run programs where specially trained operators translate spoken messages into typed messages that deaf people can read on their TTYs and vice versa).

Why is telephone interpreting so difficult? Because speaking on the phone is a cultural set based totally on sound, and since deaf people have no access to backup modes of acquiring information (such as the facial expression or body language of the person to whom they are talking), they must rely totally on the interpreter.

In telephone behavior there are many unspoken and untaught rules regarding silence, such as how long a silence is tolerated and in which situations, and how to alleviate these silences through phrases and nonverbal sounds. There are protocols about how much and what information to give the other party in different situations. For example, when calling to check on the time a movie starts or to inquire if a store carries a certain item, giving your name at the beginning of the call is inappropriate, yet your name is expected or even required when checking to see if your dry-cleaning order is finished or when calling to renew a prescription. And we are only too well aware of the difficulties involved in complicated electronic call-routing systems, for example, "For international flights, press 1 now!"

Hearing people converse on the phone many times a day without a thought as to how much information they pick up from the length of silences and the range of vocal intonation they experience. To appreciate the aural intricacies involved, imagine that you are calling a local bookstore to see if they have a certain title in stock. After you explain your request to the clerk there will usually be a period of silence followed by an affirmative or negative answer. Judging by the length of the silence and by background noise, you will make an educated guess as to whether the clerk (a) punched the title into the computer, (b) asked a coworker if he or she knew of the book, or (c) actually walked to the appropriate aisle to look for the book in question. Suppose that in all three instances the clerk responds, "We have it." Each of the possible scenarios listed above would color the same three words with a different vocal inflection, which you might interpret to mean (a) "Well, it shows up on the computer," (b) "Fred, here, thinks we have it," and (c) "Eureka! I found it for you!" Using all those clues, only in the last case might you decide it would definitely be worth a trip to the store.

Another factor that adds to the difficulty of interpreting telephone exchanges is that most interpreters, as most hearing people, are totally unaware of the cues we pick up and the inferences we draw based only on sound. For examples, we can hear strain in the clipped words spit out by a harried receptionist and know it is time to end the call. We can detect from the airline reservation agent's monotone that she or he is following the rules as written and is unable to grant our request (so we need to ask for a supervisor who has the authority to make an exception).

There is an interesting parallel when deaf people engage in TTY conversations. They know it is hard to tell if the words moving across a screen are serious or sarcastic without the help of facial expression, so a convention has developed to make up for the missing emotional affect not visible in a typed sentence. Clues such as SMILE, SIGH, or HAHA are added to help the reader correctly interpret the typed message.

How do we hearing people know all the rules, procedures, and etiquette for conversing over the telephone? We have never taken a class in it, so we probably pick it up as part of the culture. Telephone protocol varies, of course, in different countries, sometimes to the amusement or consternation of unsuspecting callers. In Germany, for example, one always answers the phone by identifying oneself, usually by last name only: "Schmidt here." The caller then invariably identifies him- or herself before asking to speak to someone. I know several Germans who have lived in the United States for many years but still find it extremely rude that in this country callers do not feel obligated to identify themselves, but immediately ask, "Hi, is Jane there?"

The cultural set of American job interviews could be studied and mastered, but what about the complex conventions of telephone conversation? Could we even explain that in such and such a situation, it will take five seconds of silence to try the caller's patience, while in another situation three seconds is the polite limit?

Twenty years ago, in an interpreting course, I was instructed that while interpreting phone calls, if the hearing person became frustrated with the long silences and hung up, we should do nothing to prevent it, even if this happened repeatedly! "That way the Deaf person will learn how to use the phone," the instructor told us. It didn't take too many hang-ups before I figured out that just a little "umm" on my part would alleviate the problem. Interpret-

ers can add “umms,” “uhhs,” “wells,” and phrases like “Just a minute. Let me check my calendar” to let the hearing person know why there is a long silence.

Some deaf people realize they will never master all the ins and outs of telephone etiquette and leave it up to the interpreter to set up the call, giving the caller’s name when appropriate to do so, and so on. That way the hearing cultural set will be taken care of by the interpreter and the deaf person can focus on the content of the call instead of its form.

Cultural Sets in Deaf Culture

We began our discussion of cultural sets with a distinction between two common types: assumptions about cultural values and the rules of the game that apply to specific situations such as job interviews and speaking on the telephone. Although we cited some examples of Deaf cultural assumptions, we have not yet examined a situation from Deaf culture with its own rules of the game. There are many situations such as parties, Deaf club gatherings, school plays, sports events, and international conferences where sets of unwritten rules dictate the norms of appropriate behavior. An uninitiated hearing person attending such an event would undoubtedly violate many of these cultural rules. Given the fact that the hearing are in the majority, the Deaf in the minority, however, most often it is the Deaf person who must venture into the hearing world to work, obtain medical services, or otherwise transact business. If we were more frequently called upon to interpret for hearing people as they came for a job interview at an all-Deaf business or sought treatment from Deaf doctors and nurses at an all-Deaf hospital, we would examine these situations from the opposite perspective. As it is, the situation is distinctly lopsided.

Different Frames for Understanding the Interpreting Event

So far in this chapter we have focused on the different sets of cultural expectations held by our two consumers, Deaf and hearing. At this point we need to add ourselves to the equation. Let us examine how we view the very act of interpreting, by virtue of our hearing American cultural upbringing. Then we will see to what extent our perspective is shared by our Deaf consumers.

First and foremost, to professional interpreters the interpreting event is our work. And what does "work" mean in our culture? As we saw in chapter 4, it defines our identity. Not only the way we earn our money, it gives us a sense of value through accomplishment. Our self-esteem is tied to visible, measurable indicators such as our college degrees, interpreting certificates, or amount of money earned.

The term *professional* seems to be a key to understanding how we see ourselves in the interpreting role. Many times we use this word with pride. At other times, however, we use it in a slightly defensive manner when hearing consumers assume that (a) we are related to the Deaf consumer, (b) we are volunteering our time, or (c) we have no training in areas such as confidentiality or ethics. Professionalism connotes neutrality. As one of the tenets of the RID Code of Ethics states, "Interpreters shall not counsel, advise, or interject personal opinions." As models of interpreting have changed, so has our collective self-image. We do not see ourselves as helpers or machines anymore. We pride ourselves on our professionalism and believe that it entitles us to the same respect accorded other professionals such as doctors and lawyers.

The concept and sign PROFESSIONAL carries a very different connotation in the Deaf world. "While it is sometimes a neutral designation, it is never a compliment...to be identified by others as *professional* is sometimes negative, connoting a cool, standoffish, or elitist attitude, someone who attains to principles rather than people" (Smith 1996, 111).

Do Deaf people see the interpreting event in the same way that we do? There are several avenues we can pursue to gather some data on this question. First, let us take a historical perspective and look back before there were "professional interpreters." The Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf was established in 1964. Prior to that time (and doubtless continuing to the present day in many situations), when Deaf people needed to communicate with hearing people, they either did the best they could with lipreading and writing notes, or they enlisted the aid of a neighbor or family member who could hear and speak. Often these were the hearing children of Deaf parents who had learned ASL in the home. There was no formal code of ethics followed by these family "volunteers." They were part of the reciprocal pool of skills in the Deaf community. Were they "professional interpreters" in the sense of the term today?

In the book *Mother Father Deaf*, author Paul Preston, himself a child of Deaf parents, examines the past and present impact that having Deaf parents had on the 150 informants he interviewed. Almost all of these now grown children remember interpreting for their parents in encounters with the hearing world. Asked about which behaviors and skills constituted these childhood interpreting tasks, his informants mentioned the following: "helping," "connecting," "mediating," "bridging," and "caretaking" (Preston 1994).

Is this what Deaf consumers want and expect from "professional" interpreters today? Many Deaf people desire to be in control of their own lives and do not want interpreters to make decisions for them. On the other hand, the complete rejection of the helper model may not take cultural habits and preferences into account.

In her telecourse entitled "The Socio-Political Context of Interpreting as Mediation," esteemed interpreter and educator Anna Witter-Merithew interviews several Deaf consumers of interpreting services regarding the qualities they most value in an interpreter. They confirm the conviction that "a good attitude" is of number one importance. One of the Deaf consumers, Larry Smolik, says that he has seen many Deaf people express a preference for interpreters who have only adequate signing skills but possess a good attitude over those who have exemplary signing skills but an inappropriate attitude. Elements that constitute an interpreter's good attitude include sensitivity to cultural norms, such as making sure there is enough time to talk with the consumer before and after the assignment, clear communication, honesty regarding one's skills and limitations, adherence to the RID Code of Ethics, and a friendly, personable rapport with the Deaf consumer (Witter-Merithew 1996).

In another example that supports the same point, the head of the special services division of a leading university recently surveyed the Deaf students a few weeks after the beginning of the semester to assess if they were satisfied with the interpreting services they had received thus far. Not one student mentioned anything about the skills of their interpreters. Instead they focused on how "friendly" and "helpful" they had been.

Articles and letters to the editor written by Deaf consumers often reveal their feelings, complaints, and preferences when it comes to interpreters. One article, which appeared in the March

1997 volume of the RID monthly newsletter entitled "Free Enterprise: A Euphemism for Greed?" was written by a Deaf regional RID representative who also works as a relay interpreter. In it the author criticizes the view of interpreting services as a "commodity subject to the rules of economics." He cautions interpreters to stay in touch with the humanistic roots of the profession and states that there are two important elements necessary for quality service: "linguistic/translating skills and personal relationship (or 'attitude' as some deaf consumers call it)" (Teuber 1997, 31).

In a GLAD (Greater Los Angeles Council on Deafness) newsletter article, its outspoken executive director, Marcella Meyer, expressed her belief "that many of the interpreters twenty years ago were much better than the present ones. They seemed so much more flexible and sensitive to what WE had to say and were our friends." In contrast, Meyer sees most interpreters today as "over-educated, overtrained and overpolished and misguided professional robots...." Several of her criticisms regard "interpreters who pull a 'Houdini Act' after an assignment" by leaving at their scheduled time, before an event is actually over, interpreters who "price their services through the roof," and those who are "taking control of our communication away from us." She laments the fact that "interpreters rarely befriend deaf persons" nowadays (Meyer 1994, 5).

In an article which appeared in the *Silent News*, a Deaf publication, the author reports that some members of the Deaf community have been expressing anger against interpreters. The issue appears to be that these Deaf people feel it is unfair that interpreters should be privy to so many details regarding their lives without sharing intimate information from their own lives in return (Schwartz 1996).

Taking a different tone, a newsletter article written by the executive director of the NorCal Center on Deafness in Sacramento, California, is entitled "Sign Language Interpreters: Something Positive." The author reports, "When you ask deaf people what it is they cherish or admire in an interpreter, the response generally points to the willingness of some interpreters to stay and help out in times of crisis without worrying who is going to pay them." She also expresses gratitude "to interpreters for encouraging and respecting the need for deaf and hard-of-hearing persons to be in control in deafness-related situations..." (Mutti 1996, 13-15).

Taken together, these comments from Deaf consumers seem to paint a different picture of the ideal interpreter, one in which the “humanness” of the interpreter is most valued. Clearly, there can be great differences between the way hearing interpreters tend to view our job and what Deaf people perceive as our role in their lives.

Assuming Alternative Cultural Roles

A useful parallel may be seen in the field of cross-cultural counseling, which seeks to train counselors to be sensitive to differing worldviews of clients from other cultures and to modify their therapeutic interventions accordingly. For example, in traditional forms of Western therapy, clients are encouraged to make their own decisions, because individuation is a hallmark of maturity. As mentioned previously, in the majority of the world’s collectivist cultures, in contrast, to make decisions on one’s own (without the input and guidance of the family) is a sign of selfishness and immaturity.

So too, the role of the therapist shifts when seen through different eyes. In traditional Western psychological practice, therapists are cautioned to remain neutral and refrain from giving advice or relating their personal experiences to their clients. Clients who are members of certain non-Western cultures may be used to getting direct help with their problems from other members of the community. They may expect, therefore, to establish a personal bond with the person they turn to for assistance. To them, the very act of the help giver relating his or her own experiences engenders a sense of trust and connectedness.

The quandary of cross-cultural counselors bears a striking similarity to the situation between professional interpreters and Deaf people. What do we do about these seemingly opposing views and expectations? Can we be all things to all people? Is it possible to act in a more neutral manner with our hearing consumers and in a more personal manner with our Deaf consumers?

Why not? While it may stretch our repertoire of ways of relating to other people, it is not an uncommon shift. We do it when we relate to our own families in contrast with how we may act out in the world, so why can’t we make a similar shift in performing our work?

By accepting the designation of bicultural mediator, we acknowledge the need to switch cultural modes of interacting when

necessary, adopting the appropriate set of behaviors depending on whom we are dealing with. It seems we do this more easily in social situations. At a Deaf social gathering, for example, we readily follow Deaf norms of behavior such as telling someone where we are going when we leave the room. We probably notice that the way we describe our recent vacation in ASL differs from the way we might have told the same story in English, in terms of level of detail, presentation of time, and point(s) of view. Depending on our level of awareness of cultural differences, we may even notice that when socializing with Deaf people, we make direct comments about someone else's personal appearance and check with others before making a decision that affects the group.

Something happens, however, when we assume the role of professional interpreter. Our formerly flexible, culture-switching style becomes stiff, and we get locked into the hearing American definition of that role. The result, I believe, is that we function less effectively for all the parties involved.

One way to visualize the constant shifting of perspectives that is required of us is to liken it to using different pairs of glasses. Some of us have one pair of glasses for reading or close work and another for looking at things in the distance. Each helps us function properly in the environment for which it was designed. It would be clearly inappropriate to wear our distance glasses to do embroidery or to use our reading glasses to watch a football game from seats high in the stands.

As interpreters, our first task is to see each world clearly. Once we can see from our Deaf consumer's and hearing consumer's perspectives, our actions should follow naturally, because we already know what is expected and what is appropriate behavior in each worldview.

Since we have to switch perspectives so rapidly and repeatedly in the course of our daily work, the best guiding image to keep in mind might be an excellent pair of bifocals.