The Real Value of Interpreting

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I am excited to talk with you today about the real value of interpreting, which is communicating pluralingual relationships into the future. Now, that’s quite a word, pluralingualism, but all it means is two or more languages used at the same time by people interacting with each other.

I’ve been thinking about interpreting in terms of history since the late 1980s, which is when I met Deaf people and began learning American Sign Language. At that time, the American Deaf Community was in the midst of an empowering movement for social change. The Bilingual-Bicultural movement included criticism of signed language interpreters. The criticism focused on what Deaf people called “the machine model” of interpreting. When the profession was established in 1964, it had quickly become dominated by interpreters with weak or no ties to Deaf culture.

I traced signed language interpreting back to its professional origins in Europe and observed the system of simultaneous interpretation at the European Parliament.

The model used in the Parliament came from the famous trials in Nuremberg after WWII. The technology for simultaneously transmitting human voices along different audio channels had existed and been used in a few situations before this, but the event of the War Crimes Tribunal brought “the IBM Translation System” to the world stage.

The idea, the role, and the function of the interpreter was developed and solidified in this intense stew of political, media, and legal pressures, all mixed up with morality and trauma. These social pressures combined with the thrill of engineering to force the interpreter to perform as an impersonal extension of the electronic technology: as a component of the machine.

This model spread throughout the system of interpreting in Europe and all the way to United Nations. Its most extensive use today is at the European Parliament. The Deaf community reacted vigorously against this model; their protest was at a peak when I entered the field.

This uprising from the Deafworld inspired my curiosity: What do people find so hard about communicating with interpreters? Why is it difficult? What’s going on?

In search of an answer, I began to compare community interpreting and conference interpreting. In each setting there is a discourse about interpreting among all of the people who are being interpreted and the people who are doing the interpreting.
In community interpreting – especially involving the Deaf – the discourse centers around identity and understanding. In conference interpreting – especially at the European Parliament – the discourse centers around information and speed. These themes are repeated in each field whenever people talk about interpreting. These repetitions are rituals: as rituals, they generate a kind of shared identity that patterns behavior.

In both cases the patterning is cultural, and shows a preoccupation with control. What is interesting is that the goal or target of control is different. People in both settings talk about the dangers and risks of misunderstanding and mistakes. They have different opinions about what is lost during interpreting – few people mention what is gained.

Concern with control in the conference model leads to the attempt to do “oral translating” even if they use the word “interpreting.” In contrast, the Deaf community actually expects interpreting, proper.

Please understand, I am not demonizing conference interpreting – some of my best friends are conference interpreters! I’m trying to do what good engineers do, which is to look at the points of failure to see what there is to learn.

The “IBM system” in the European Parliament works astonishing well! But it breaks down during voting (which is too rapid) and relay interpreting (which is considered too slow).

In community interpreting with the Deaf, the “IBM system” breaks down during turntaking between speakers of spoken and signed languages. The shift in medium from sound-based language to sight-based language is a variation that the machine model can’t handle.

Relay interpreting, however, works fine with the Deaf because in signed language relay interpreting, interpreters are given permission to "hold time" (Kent, 2012) and ensure that everyone understands each other.

In fact, in the machine model generated by the IBM System, interpretation itself is considered noise. The social failure to adapt to difference is not questioned. Within community interpreting, that supposed noise is understood as a shifting center. It seems that the rate of interpretation deemed socially acceptable is what erases or preserves cultural difference.

Every day in the European Parliament, some 1200 interpreters interpret over twenty languages for simultaneous social interaction among hundreds of elected Members from 27 different countries. One very experienced politician said:

“Normally people do not understand the difference between interpretation and translation. Translation remains there; interpretation is to allow people to communicate."

Notice that the crucial distinction between translating and interpreting is in the dimension of time.

I invite you to think about this in terms of culture and control.

- To interpret is to interact in the present
- To translate is to fix a meaning for the future
- Interpreting is the stuff of ritual
- Translating is the exercise of power
- Rituals are the substance of relationships
- Power reduces relationships to one dimension, we need
- Relationships to sustain society, and we know
I am not saying translation is bad! We need it! What is “bad” is when we use the label of translation to refer to the social activity of interpreting. The reason this is bad is because it hides the real values of simultaneous interpretation….which are that it makes time visible. Because interpreting makes time visible, it makes culture visible. Because it makes culture visible, interpreting makes power visible. Because interpreting makes time, culture, and power visible, it can help us learn how to use language together, in social interaction, to re-design society.

In other words, the potentials of interpreting are to show us how all social interaction is meaningful; which means we can use interpreting to create possibilities for

- Social change
- Cultural equality
- New economies, even
- Reducing violence, and promoting
- Human survival

So if we whip through those two discourses about interpreting again, we can see that oral translating with its emphasis on speed and information leads to homolingualism while real interpreting (Turner, 2005), with its emphasis on identity and understanding, leads to pluralingualism.

This is why we need we to separate translating and interpreting as distinct activities—because they do orient us differently to time.

Homolingualism seeks to establish and maintain the illusion that we are all speaking the same language, while pluralingualism establishes and maintains the social reality of difference while still allowing us to connect.

Instead of the machine model, we can now understand interpreting as a form of stewardship that protects the integrity of difference while promoting relationships. From this view, ‘mistakes’ & ‘misunderstandings’ are evidence of social reality not incompetence, interpretation is not ‘noise’ but the ‘engine’ of communication, and what everyone says in any language is the ‘fuel.’

A pluralingual view brings the downside of homolingualism into focus. The need for speed demands that interpreters make assumptions. This is a trade-off with the machine model: if you insist on speed, you inhibit innovation because the system rejects investments in building mutual understanding. The machine model also inhibits creativity in general because it seeks one size fits all solutions.

After decades of criticism from the Deaf community, the machine model construction of the interpreter’s role is being replaced with the concept of a multidimensional role space (Lee and Llewellyn-Jones, 2011). The three axes of social interaction in role space challenge the machine model reduction of communication to linguistic units of meaning. The role space axes — of alignment with participants, advocating for professional performance needs, and managing tricky parts of the interpreting process — engage the realities of social dynamics so that interpreters can protect the integrity of each participant in the communication process.

Authorizing relational autonomy (Witter-Merithew, Johnson & Nicodemus, 2010) for the interpreter in role space is profound because of the implications for interpee. If you are being interpreted, you have to learn to be flexible with each other’s different needs for identity expression and read how that balances with the desire for information exchange. This is a special kind of listening.
You also have to learn how to adapt to a punctuated rhythm of communication. When the communicative flow is interrupted, the disruption you experience is the loss of homolingualism, or—more accurately—the loss of the illusion of homolingualism. You’re not speaking the same language! How can you expect it to feel the same as if you were?!

These very disruptions to the continuity of your own conscious existence are the intimate substance of democracy. There is nothing more democratic than allowing yourself to be interpreted by another and working through the differences that will inevitably arise.

This is the kind of democracy that leads to social justice, because it is as local as it gets. During interpreted interaction, you are communicating with The Other—someone whose consciousness is organized in an entirely different way than your own. Which is why participating in simultaneous interpretation is a strategy for social resilience: the more people who become skilled at working with an interpreter (rather than against us or in spite of us), the sooner humanity can collaborate to address the monumental challenges of our age.

In other words, the skillful and strategic use of interpreters is a practical way to cultivate widespread and collective strategic foresight. Humanity is at a crossroads and many of us know it. Do we continue to choose the homolingual illusion or do we adapt?

As a profession, interpreters are trained to care about the integrity of your communication, to express your voice and not our own. We are drawn to the field because of our language skills; those who are most effective apply a high degree of empathy. We are not in control of communication any more than you or anybody else, but we are ready to play our part.

Author's note: This is the script for a presentation given on June 15, 2013 at Interpret America's 4th Annual Summit in Reston, Virginia. View the powerpoint slides here.

Stephanie Jo Kent, CI, PhD, combines action research with two decades of experience as a sign language interpreter. Steph considers interpreting as a form of stewardship—a site where language and social interaction calls the future into being. Currently working as a consultant in the field of emergency management with Readiness Consulting Services, LLC. Steph is also a member of the RID Task Force on Emergency Management Interpreting. Read her weblog, Reflexivity, and follow @stephjoke on Twitter.

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