

TRANSLITERATING:
THE INTERPRETING NO ONE WANTS TO TALK ABOUT
 by Karen Malcolm

Since the 1960s, as sign language interpreting has developed as a profession, distinctions have been made between interpreting and transliterating. Although transliterating is seen sometimes as a specific form of sign language interpreting (Winston, 1989:147), it has been treated in many ways as a separate task from interpreting. The Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf currently offers two certifications for interpreters, the Certificate of Interpretation (CI) and the Certificate of Transliteration (CT), which are represented as equal in status. In contrast, AVLIC chose to develop a certification system which tests for interpretation abilities, based on the philosophical view that good interpreters are also good transliterators. While the term "transliteration" has receded from widespread usage within Canada, it is nonetheless still used within our profession, both in RID's certification system and in much of the professional literature. Therefore, a reexamination of the nature of transliteration seems warranted, with a view to increasing our understanding of the mental processes we engage in when interpreting or transliterating.

The first task in examining transliterating is to define it. The difficulty in defining it, however, is one of the reasons that I refer to transliterating as "the interpreting no one wants to talk about." RID defines transliteration as performing one or more of the following services:

Spoken English to Manually Coded English/Pidgin Sign English
 Manually Coded English/Pidgin Sign English to Spoken English
 Spoken English to Paraphrased Non-audible Spoken English
 (RID Code of Ethics)

AVLIC defines a transliterator as one who "...facilitates communication between persons who share the same language but not the same language mode" (AVLIC Code of Ethics). Nancy Frishberg describes the process as providing the viewer with English "...in a visually accessible form" (Frishberg, 1986:19). [She also provides some insight into the derivation of the term: "transliteration refers to the transcription of a written text from a non-Roman print or script form to Roman letters" (Frishberg, 1986:18).]

In various means, these definitions are all describing a kind of interpreting where the target language is somewhere along the

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ASL-English continuum, in the area that has been variously described as PSE/MCE, foreigner talk, or learner grammar. For my purposes, I will use the term "interlanguage" to describe the target form being produced, by which I mean that various features of ASL and of English are combined to greater and lesser extent in a given interpretation. My discussion will exclude forms of coding, where words are broken down into constituent parts and represented with an arbitrarily designed signal. Instead, I will examine the nature of "meaning-transliteration" (Singer, 1991), where the interlanguage form is comprehensible to the viewer.

A final note in defining; my discussion is focused on the task of transliterating English into an interlanguage form, rather than the other direction. Since English is a recognized language with established rules of usage, the guidelines for conveying a message presented in interlanguage into spoken English are relatively clear. No such standardization exists to aid the individual taking a spoken English message and rendering it in a signed form. This is not to imply that taking a message signed in an intermediate sign variety and conveying it in English is simple. In fact, the potential for misunderstanding is high, due to the lack of grammatical and syntactical information that is present in any natural language, such as ASL or English (McIntire, 1986). It is simply easier to consider the mental processing the interpreter undergoes when examining the signed form produced.

Whenever we interpret, we go through a mental process of understanding before we are able to produce an equivalent message. This mental process is affected by a number of factors; background knowledge and preparation, competence in the source language and culture, competence in the target language and culture, our own emotional and physical states, and ability to manage the process of interpreting. These factors will influence how big a piece of information we wait to receive before beginning to interpret. This concept is familiar to us as lag time or decalage. In the accompanying diagram titled "Depth of Processing," Betty Colonomos outlines the different levels at which an interpreter may be analyzing information.

At the very top, "***" is the level previously referred to as 'coding.' An example of this is the word "butterfly," broken down into but-er-fly, and signed BUT / -er (the comparative form, such as used in COLD-COLDER) / fly (like an airplane). Again, this form of transmitting information is not addressed in this discussion.

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Depth of Processing

** In CODING, the unit of processing may be the morpheme

Lexical The unit of processing is a lexical item (word, idiom, phrasal verb)

Phrasal The unit of processing is a phrase (NP, VP, PP)

Sentential The unit of processing is a sentence or more than one sentence (complete thought)

Textual The unit of processing is the entire text (includes goal/purpose, discourse, structure, speech act, genre)

Betty M. Colonomos, The Bicultural Center (1989)

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Next is the lexical level, where the interpreter waits for a complete work or phrasal verb (e.g., "Look up the phone number"). The next deeper level is the phrasal, where the interpreter processes a noun phrase (e.g., "The boy with brown hair), verb phrase ("ran quickly and quietly) or prepositional phrase ("to the store).

At the sentential level, the unit of processing is the sentence or a complete thought. (The boy was running to get to school on time. Just before he got there, he was hit by a car.) Finally, at the textual level, the interpreter is relating to the entire text, conveying the speaker's goal, genre, style, and affect along with context.

Interpreters will move through the levels of processing for a number of reasons. A list of numbers or names, for example, requires the interpreter to process lexically or retain specific items. A presentation which the interpreter has previously heard may make it possible for the interpreter to process on a textual level. If the speaker is reading a document rapidly, the interpreter will find it difficult to process even as deeply as the sentential level. It should be evident that the higher up the scale the interpreter processes at, the more the form of the source language English will be retained. The retention of the source language form is one of the major features of the interpreting which we call transliterating, and there are several factors that may influence an interpreter's decision, whether conscious or unconscious, to interpret at the lexical and phrasal levels.

It may be that these levels are the only possibilities for processing that exist for them, that they form a kind of default. The interpreter may lack the ASL skills or cultural skills to work textually; or the interpreter may have the language and knowledge abilities, but lack the ability to manage the interpreting process effectively. Unfamiliar material, rapidly delivered, may also lead to processing at more lexical and phrasal levels. As well, fatigue will often lead to the interpreter moving up the processing scale.

The levels of processing described by Colonomos do not pertain only to signed language interpreting, but are also true for spoken language forms. I have listened to interpreters working from spoken French into spoken English, and have been able to retrieve the meaning even though the form was not like the English I, as a native speaker, would use. My knowledge of

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French was sufficient to recognize that the interpreter was working phrasally, so that French linguistic structures were shaping the English message. I have also listened to interpretations, from both French and Spanish into English, which were virtually meaningless to me due to the retention of the form of the source language. I heard English words which I recognized, but I could not piece together how they related to each other, or what the overall message might be.

Yet spoken language interpreters do not employ a term such as transliterating for this occurrence. It is described as an interpretation which retains the source form, or, if the message is lost, as poor interpreting. These two descriptions can also apply to signed interpretation. However, they are not completely descriptive of the interpretative demands for visual language interpreters due to the existence of interlanguage forms within the deaf community.

Interlanguage forms have existed for many years in deaf/hearing interactions. Many of them arose from a mistaken devaluing of ASL, and a lack of understanding of ASL as a complete, natural language. It was only in the 1960s that linguistic proof was presented which supported deaf people's intuitive understanding that ASL was a language. Some educators and school systems have imposed communication methods on deaf students which have denied them access to their first language. Societal attitudes on the part of the majority hearing group took a pathological view of deaf people and their language as deficient, leading to statements such as "Sign language is just broken English."

These attitudes and beliefs have led to interpreting which retained much of the source form, which deaf people would in turn reinterpret to retrieve the message. If the interpretation was phrasal, and they had some knowledge of English, they, like me with the French interpretation, could probably figure out what was being discussed. If the interpretation was lexical, and they were less familiar with English forms, they were lost, presented with a group of signs but no meaning.

Thus, when we transliterate, or rather interpret, retaining many of the features of the English source, we do a disservice to Deaf people who use ASL and want ASL interpretation. If an interlanguage form is mandated by a school system or by a hearing consumer such as a defense lawyer who insists on a "literal translation," we do a disservice to our consumers and our

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profession if we do not speak out and insist on our right to do our job, and interpret meaning.

There are times, however, when the deaf consumer will request transliteration, and we need to have the skill to process effectively at the lexical and phrasal levels. People who have become deaf later in life and who have English as their first language will often prefer a more lexical or phrasal interpretation. As well, with the expansion of mainstreaming, some deaf people are now only exposed to some interlanguage form rather than to good ASL models, and will use an idiosyncratic method of communication. I believe that all deaf children should have the right to study ASL and to develop their abilities. Given the present day realities, however, it is also important that I, as an interpreter, have the flexibility to move along the processing scale and to adapt to consumer preference.

Working at the textual level is a challenge for all interpreters, and requires continual learning in the areas of language, culture and interpreting skills management. Generally, interpreters who can successfully work at the textual and sentential levels can also function at the lexical and phrasal levels. This in no way implies, however, that the interpreting task is easier at those levels. It is true that less attention is focused on form because much of the source language form is retained. But the interpreter who is transliterating is faced with constantly deciding whether to maintain the form extant or to modify it in order to produce a meaningful message. As well, decisions must be made about mouthing, and if mouthing is appropriate, whether to mouth the English source lexical item or to use a gloss word commonly associated with the signed lexical item. The mental activity required is no less taxing for the interpreter working into an interlanguage form than it is for the interpreter working into ASL, and the skill should be recognized and respected.

However, respect is not necessarily accorded to successful transliteration. Some interpreters who can work effectively from English into a more interlanguage form are reluctant to do so. As ASL gains recognition and status, and as interpreters develop the abilities to work between languages, a negative reaction to working into an interlanguage form, or transliterating, may develop. Even with a deaf consumer who requests a more English-like interpretation, the interpreter may either consciously decide that ASL is better, and interpret into ASL, or may unconsciously revert to what feels most familiar, and work more textually than the consumer prefers.

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This is as great a disservice as the interpreter who retains the form of the English source when the deaf consumer wants ASL interpretation. I find myself working appropriately into an interlanguage form at times, yet I feel embarrassed if a colleague enters the room, or I find myself inappropriately shifting more into ASL. A number of times I have heard skilled ASL/English interpreters state that they "don't know how to transliterate", or "aren't sure they know what to do." I suspect the subtext of these statements is, "I don't want to do that kind of interpreting," or perhaps even "I don't think that kind of interpreting is any good." If in reality an interpreter does feel unskilled working into an interlanguage form, I would suggest that it should become their next focus for professional growth. Our goal must be the development of the ability to work within all levels as appropriate, and to respond to deaf consumers' wishes without judgement. There is a long history of hearing people making decisions about language use for deaf people. While this has usually involved the devaluing of ASL, it is equally oppressive when directed towards deaf people who request transliteration.

The skills required to successfully transliterate, or interpret at the lexical and phrasal level, are both valuable and necessary within the field of visual language interpreting. RID has recognized the value of this ability by designing a Certificate of Transliteration. While I support the recognition of the value of transliteration, I do not support the concept of separate certifications. Because the target language produced is not standardized, it is extremely difficult to determine what a successful transliteration should be. For example, the kind of transliterating I would do for an adult deaf person who grew up speaking English and lost his hearing at the age of twenty is likely very different from that which I might produce for a culturally Deaf computer specialist who has requested transliteration during a training seminar as a means of acquiring new terminology in English. The greatest concern is the lack of understanding on the part of the general hearing public who may be responsible for hiring an interpreter. As people unfamiliar with ASL and inexperienced with the field of interpreting, they have no resources for determining if a particular interpreter can successfully provide the services appropriate for a given deaf consumer. In fact, the majority of deaf people are unfamiliar with the differentiations we have defined between interpreting and transliterating. When the standard for certification is stringent, such as occurs with the Canadian Evaluation System,

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the interpreter will possess the skills necessary to adapt to a wide variety of preferences.

This does not imply that uncertified interpreters should not work! As stated earlier, there are many situations where an individual skilled at working at the lexical and phrasal levels is very necessary. Rather than granting a blanket certification which is not easily understood, a consultant familiar with the interpreting task could assess an interpreter's ability for a specific task, in a specific setting, with specific consumers. For example, a college in a northern city seeking an interpreter for a specific student in a specific program could employ the services of either a private consultant or a provincial interpreting organization for assistance in determining an interpreter's abilities for the assignment. I recognize the difficulties in implementing a procedure such as this. The consequence of not doing so, however, is the appearance of providing interpreting service while in reality denying it.

The term transliterating still holds significance for us in the field of visual language interpreting. It serves a purpose of describing interpreting that produces an interlanguage form, and which is usually processed at the lexical and phrasal levels. Let us, however, refer to "transliterating" rather than "transliterators," because to me, the person who produces a meaning transliteration is an interpreter. Using the term "interpreter" will be clearer to the general public, as well as accurately paralleling the terminology used by our spoken language colleagues. Perhaps in addressing the question of transliteration by continuing to examine the processes which the interpreter undergoes, our field will more readily confer respect for the abilities needed, and encourage every interpreter to refine their abilities at each level of processing. In this way, transliterating can perhaps change from "the interpreting that no one wants to talk about" to "the interpreting which is an important component of every interpreter's skills."

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