Transliteration: The Consumer's Perspective

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INTRODUCTION

Steven Fritsch Rudser cites Joseph Youngs (1965), whom in 1965 drew a comparison of interpreting and transliterating, stating that interpreting is an *explanation* of another person's remarks through signs, gestures, or pantomime, while translating (as it was known then) is a *verbatim* presentation of another person's remarks through signs and fingerspelling (Rudser, 1986). Notice the reference on the one hand to "explanation" and to "verbatim" on the other. Consumers today make the same distinction.

The professional lives of many people who are deaf, late-deafened, or severely hard of hearing, are dependent on the services of well-trained transliterators. For example, Bailey (1997) reports that:

> "The Washington, D.C., area has, perhaps, the highest volume of consumers wanting and requesting transliteration services in the country. They feel strongly in their desire to know the 'words' being used in their meetings. Some want conceptually accurate signs while others prefer exact-word glosses. But, they all want ... clear, understandable, transliteration." (p. 1).

Unfortunately, there is very little material published on the subject. Especially needed are materials to guide the training of transliterators, especially material that is grounded in—and responsive to—the needs and expectations of consumers. Is there congruence in consumers' stated expectations and in transliterators' training and capability? Are expectations realistic?

As a daily consumer of transliterating services around the country, the lead author, a consumer, has been increasingly exasperated by the effort required in order to find properly trained and

qualified transliterators. Two real-life incidents are offered here to illustrate this point:

a. "You want everything?" asked one certified interpreter incredulously.

b. Another "transliterator" signed and said, I KNOW YOU WANT ME TO MOUTH THE WORDS WHILE I SIGN LIKE THIS with greatly exaggerated mouth movements.

The RID's explanation of the Certificate for Transliteration is short and straightforward. But in actual practice, there is frequent evidence of misunderstandings and some contradictions between what consumers need and expect and the information available in the field, and presumably by interpreter training programs. All too often, there is very little distinction made, even in interpreter convention workshops and publications, between interpreting and transliterating. What is appropriate in interpreting does not necessarily hold true for transliterating.

REVIEW OF TRANSLITERATION LITERATURE

In examining the literature, there is almost no documentation of consumer views of transliteration. The one article most commonly referred to in discussions of transliteration is, "Transliteration: What's the Message?" by Elizabeth Winston (1989). This 10-year-old paper "describes some of the features of the signed forms in relation to the strategies used to produce a message match in the target language" (p. 148). However, it must be remembered that the study Winston describes is, in her words, " ... the form of a transliterated message that occurred in one setting with one transliterator and one consumer" (p. 152). The fact that Winston had to use a case study of one individual to set the standard for the field points up the fact that the field itself has not effectively dealt with the issue of transliteration.

There is, however, one unpublished paper that is helpful: "Transliteration - The Old-Fashioned Way," by Janet Bailey (1997). Although she refers to her study as "totally unscientific," Bailey conducted an informal survey in the Washington, D.C., area of an unspecified number of consumers and asked them to rank the importance of 11 components of transliteration (p. 2). Table 1 shows the percentage of the consumers in her study who ranked the importance of each of the 11 components as "high."

Table 1
Ranking of 11 Components of Transliteration*

Clear mouth movements	92%
Conceptually accurate signs	67%
English word order	62%
Facial expression	50%
Processing time	46%
Affect	36%
Natural gestures	33%
Verbatim translation	33%
Use of space	27%
SEE Signs	25%
ASL Signs	17%

*Extrapolated from Bailey, 1997.

Notice that speech reading is more essential to transliteration than sign language!

NATIONAL SURVEY OF CONSUMERS

Inspired by Bailey's study and by discussions with a number of consumers, a comprehensive survey was conducted by the lead author. National in scope, the study was designed to survey consumer requirements and expectations in regards to transliteration services nationwide. As a first step, in February 1999, a draft of the survey was sent to 15 consumers around the country via e-mail. All 15 consumers completed and returned the survey. Some questions were then rewritten for clarification, and in March 1999, the survey was sent via e-mail to 80 individuals. Respondents were given the opportunity to return their answers via e-mail, fax, or regular mail.

The survey asked for demographic information such as gender, age, marital status, hearing status of spouse/partner, education, current job titles, type and age of onset of hearing loss, presence of other disabilities, professional consumer organization affiliations, and age respondent learned to sign. The research questions addressed issues such as 1) what respondents hope to achieve when using a transliterator, 2) how consumers would describe their needs when requesting transliterating services, and 3) how consumers would define "a good transliterator."

The survey also examined how respondents rated their own receptive and expressive communication skills, the extent to which expectations for communication support are met, and the

extent to which respondents defer to ASL consumers if only one interpreter can be provided for an occasion involving more than one consumer. They were also asked about their need for other types of assistance from the transliterator, such as feedback on the appropriate volume of the consumer's voice, the need to speak more distinctly, and conversational turn-taking in group meetings.

Most questions in the survey required brief answers, but respondents were encouraged to write freely and at length at any time. All respondents were assured absolute confidentiality. The 61 completed surveys included two respondents from Canada and 59 from the United States. Their opinions are illuminating; some are disturbing. But the respondents want the profession of interpreting to know who they are and what they need.

ANALYSES OF DEMOGRAPHICS

The demographics demonstrate how much diversity exists among consumers who prefer transliteration. The numbers do not always total 61, as some chose not to answer some questions.

Gender, Age, Marital Status/Hearing Status of Partner: Of those responding, 32 were female and 29 male. The present age range was 27-78 years, with the average age at 49 years, 4 months. Marital status included 30 who were married or with a partner, 21 single, and 2 who were widowed. The hearing status of spouse/partner shows a strong tendency for the spouse or partner to have normal hearing, with 16 spouses/partners hearing, 9 deaf, 3 hard of hearing, 2 late-deafened, and 1 deaf with a cochlear implant. Having a hearing, hard of hearing, or late-deafened spouse is a strong indication that such respondents have a social life that includes (but is not necessarily limited to) people for whom English is a first and only language.

Self-description of Hearing Loss: When asked to describe their own hearing loss, a 59% majority of the respondents (36/61) indicated that they were unable to hear and understand speech; 24.5% (15/61) indicated they had difficulty hearing and understanding; 10% (6/61) indicated they could hear and understand with the use of a hearing aid; and 6.5% (4/61) reported they could hear and understand with a cochlear implant (see table 2).

Taken together, the later age at onset and progressive hearing loss groups indicate that a very significant number of respondents had the advantage of experiencing hearing and language during their formative and grade school years. This characteristic fits what might be expected of consumers who use transliterators. However, it is the one-third who are prelingually deaf whose responses may be unexpected, and these findings serve as a reminder that this population is diverse in terms of age of onset of hearing loss.

In regard to other characteristics, six respondents had deaf parents. Asked if there were other disabilities that had an impact on expressive or receptive communication, four said yes. Two had Neurofibromatosis Type II, one was was deaf-blind, and one had uncorrectable distance vision impairment.

Education Completed: These people were well educated, with 74% (43/58) holding an advanced degree. Of the 58 respondents, 1 obtained a high school diploma, 4 obtained an A.A. degree or equivalent, 10 obtained a B.A./B.S. degree, 30 obtained an M.A./M.S. degree, and 13 obtained an Ed.D, Ph.D., or J.D. degree (see table 5).

Table 5
Education Completed

Educational Level	No.	Percent
High school diploma	1	2%
A.A. degree or equivalent	4	7%
B.A./B.S. degree	10	17%
M.A./M.S. degree	30	52%
Ed.D/ Ph.D., J.D	13	22%
TOTAL	**58**	**100%**

Current Job Title: The field of transliteration is an evolving one, affected largely by the greater diversity in opportunities and occupations being sought by deaf people. Communication demands increase as one moves upward in one's field of employment. The survey asked for the respondent's current job title if employed. The results indicate that many people who use transliterators are in management and executive positions and tend to interact more and more often with people who hear and cannot sign in mainstream settings (see table 6).

Table 6
Respondents' Current Job Titles

System Engineer
Trader
State Program Manager
Computer Specialist
Computer Systems Analyst
Executive Director
Career Counselor
State Relay Administrator
Advocate
Graduate Student
University Instructor
Speaker
Psychologist
Social Worker
Director
Statewide Program
Retired Federal Government
   Manager
University Administrator
University Department Director
Associate Professor
Coordinator of Information and
   Training
Outreach Specialist
Statewide Program Coordinator
Content Editor
Retired Branch Chief
Federal Government
Executive Director
Director
State Mental Health Services
Deaf
Retired State Program Manager
Chief Executive Officer
Relay Account Manager
Director
Consumer & Regulatory Affairs
Research Analyst

Vocational Rehabilitation
   Counselor
Residential School Counselor
Federal Program Specialist
911 Dispatcher Trainer
Regional Director
Psychologist and Professor
Self Employed Motivational
   Speaker
Assistant Professor
Rehabilitation and Mental Health
   Counselor
Self Employed Therapist
Senior Computer
   Programmer/Analyst
Executive Director
President/Founder Motivational
Technical Services
Librarian
Management/Technology
Consultant
Community Liaison Coordinator
Sociologist
Rehabilitation Counselor
Manager
Corporate Development
Associate Director
Associate Executive Director
University Counselor
Graduate student
MIS Project Manager
Vice President
University Professor
Assistant Professor
Senior Analyst
Manager
Policy and Research
Retired Educator

Age Respondent Began To Learn Sign Language: Of particular interest was the age at which consumers of transliteration services began to learn sign language and where that occurred. Thirty respondents learned to sign *after* completing high school, most fre-

quently while attending college and while socializing with other people who are deaf. Twenty-two learned to sign before completing high school.

Professional and Consumer Organization Affiliations: Also of interest are the organizations to which these people belong. Sixteen organizations were listed on the questionnaire, and respondents were invited to add others. All except one of these 61 people were members of at least one organization that relates to deafness; most belonged to two or more (see table 7).

Table 7
Professional Affiliations

National Association of the Deaf	45
Telecommunications for the Deaf, Inc.	28
Association for Late-Deafened Adults	21
American Deafness & Rehabilitation Association	17
Self-Help for Hard of Hearing People	14
Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf	13
American Sign Language Teachers Association	5
Convention of American Instructors of the Deaf	5
National Fraternal Society of the Deaf	5
Oral Hearing Impaired Section, A. G. Bell Association	4
Cochlear Implant Club International	3
Conference of Educational Administrators of the Deaf	2
National Black Deaf Advocates	1
World Recreation Association of the Deaf	1
World Federation of the Deaf	1
American Association of the Deaf-Blind	1
Canadian National Institute for the Blind	1
World Federation for the Deaf-Blind	1
Toronto Association for the Deaf	1
Ontario Association of the Deaf	1
National Congress of Jewish Deaf	1
International Catholic Deaf Association	1
National Asian Deaf Congress	0

Goals When Using Transliterators: Respondents were asked, "What do you hope to achieve when you go into a meeting with a transliterator?" One answer is typical of many others:

> "I want to learn the language my (hearing) peers
> are using so that I can respond in-kind. If I reply
> using their language, my peers know that I under-
> stand them. It also lessens any negative percep-

tions they may have about my ability to function
with hearing people."

Another respondent said she hopes to prove that she is

" ... competent, witty, intelligent, and absolutely
adorable...but it doesn't always get across! Joking
aside, I want the other participants to relate to me
as an equal and forget the transliterator is even
there."

There were two questions that required longer written respons-
es, and the comments shared by respondents provide helpful
descriptions of how they define their needs. It is interesting to
note that the primary concern is knowing and understanding oth-
ers, rather than being understood.

Written Research Question 1:

**"When you request the services of a transliterator for
the first time from a referral agency, how do you
describe your needs and preference?"**

Twenty-nine respondents referred to "signed English," and "ver-
batim" was such a frequently used descriptor it is worth repeating:
Verbatim! Ten respondents were very explicit in specifying both
signed English and clear mouth movements.

Respondent Sample Replies:

- "This is a request for 2 terps with high tech expertise...I do
  not care if they are certified because not all certified terps
  have high tech skills."

- "...high level skills. Preference is stated in terms of need of
  high level professional skills that can handle technical and
  regulatory jargon."

- "Verbatim, word-for-word transliteration...and that they
  should mouth and fingerspell (to the best of their ability)
  those words for which they do not know the sign equiva-
  lent."

- "Signed English interpreter with good lip movement. No ASL
  allowed."

- "I request someone who will lip sync in English and put signs in English word order. What percentage of the time is this responded to appropriately? Never!"

- "I want a mature/seasoned transliterator, CT or QA 5, and prefer that the interpreter have taken some graduate level courses and have a very sophisticated speaking vocabulary. I prefer an interpreter with some knowledge of Latin, Arabic, Greek, German and French (enough to either fingerspell or mouth accurately) and with a background in Western analytic philosophy. I speak for myself so voicing skills are not important. Be sure to have good understanding of ethical issues and appropriate behavior and dress for an academic setting."

- "A transliterator who can follow Signed English and who can make out my voiced expressions."
      "Generally...sign supported oral
-

- "I've become very demanding (and make no apologies for it). I request specific interpreters by name and expect to be informed if none of them is available. If none is available, I will reschedule a meeting or not attend."

- "PSE, I will voice for myself."

- "I was not born deaf and I need someone to sit close to me so I can speechread. I want someone who can mouth words (good lip movement) and can sign for me the words that are being mouthed. I do not want ASL word order, rather English word order."

- "I am late-deafened, I want a verbatim transliterator with clear mouth movements, and will speak for myself."

- "I explain that I am skilled in understanding both ASL and signed English. I prefer signed English for most university-related meetings. Otherwise, it's too risky—interpreters tend to, well, "interpret" the information. I prefer to obtain exactly what is said, then make my own mental interpretations—just like they do, smile."

In considering the above comments, some consumers may not be clear about what constitutes "transliteration." For example, to say that there be "no ASL" overlooks some aspects of ASL that are key components of transliteration.

CONSUMER VIEW OF THE PRODUCT OF TRANSLITERATION

Moving further into how consumers perceive the product of transliteration, respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed (strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree, no opinion) with explicit statements about transliterating:

1. Almost 100% of the respondents agreed that the words to be mouthed should be the same words used by the speaker rather than the English equivalent for the sign used or paraphrasing thereof.

2. Almost 100% of the respondents agreed that someone who can do ASL interpreting is not automatically also able to transliterate.

3. The majority of respondents felt it is very possible for a skilled transliterator to fully convey the grammatical/syntactic information of the speaker.

4. Respondents felt very strongly that the transliterator should not omit portions of the spoken message, or paraphrase it.

Written Research Question 2:

"What is your definition of a good transliterator?"

This question asked how they would define "a good transliterator." Several responses clearly or subtly reflect unhappy experiences having to do with attitudes:

*   "As humanly possible, an undistorted reproduction of 'what's out there.' Non-judgmental delivery of information."

*   "Someone who signs clearly and can keep up with the speaker. I don't want people who will summarize or pick out what they feel is important because they aren't the experts in the subject. I work with the system and we need the details."

- "Excellent command of the English language, college graduate proficiency. Expansive vocabulary, able to pick up on new words/usages. Able to 'fill in the blanks' where auditory reception is problematic. When voicing for a deaf or hard of hearing person, able to reflect that person's exact word choices/usage. Does not say or do anything that will interfere with the deaf or hard of hearing person's accessibility rights. Receptive to constructive feedback from deaf and hard of hearing persons."

- "All words that appear on the mouth are exactly as spoken; no transposition of words or terms; extremely well read/well versed in sophisticated academic jargon; not flashy; able to fingerspell unfamiliar words more or less accurately (Greek or Latin helps here), have knowledge of several Western languages. I have found that those with one or more years of graduate education seem to do best. Does not think that she or he is smarter than the client and does not try to teach the client about his/her field. (This tends to be newer interpreters.) Able to keep own feelings apart from the job; acts professionally in keeping with the professional setting; able to mirror speakers' prosody/inflection. I really dislike it when the interpreter tries to explain a term to me; odds are that I know the term."

- "Sometimes when I'm at a meeting somewhere and a 'purist' ASL interpreter is being used, I get sick to the stomach and have to ask them never to use that interpreter again when I'm around! I can live with ASL signs in English word order, and even in 'shorthand' if it's necessary to keep up with the speaker, but I resent an interpreter trying to tell me what he or she thinks the speaker is trying to say! I want the flavor and exactness of the speaker himself, not the translation of the interpreter!"

- "Someone who isn't showing off his/her ASL skills; someone who is actually trying to help me (know) what is being said; someone who moves his/her mouth and is expressive."

- "Able to convey to me the exact word choices and shadings the speaker is using, allowing me to make my own interpretations of the meaning."

- "(someone who has the) ability to quickly get into the role,

be expressive, patient, and aggressive enough to ask the hearing participants to slow down or repeat."

- "I require positive attitudes toward deaf and hard of hearing people who use other forms of sign language besides ASL. The transliterator must respect the deaf person's request and space."

- "Someone who trusts my ability to understand the nuances of the English language enough that they will not change a word of the discourse (why should they do that?) when transliterating the message...I want the source language, English, not a paraphrase of it."

- "Someone who gives me the same words used by the speaker. Why change, edit, delete, restate, clarify, explain, or paraphrase when I've requested you to transliterate?"

Others referred to structure in the transliterating process:

- "Repeats exactly what the speaker is saying, with no changes in English constructions."

- "A good ASL interpreter who can sign in English order using ASL concept signs and ASL markings where appropriate, and can mouth the spoken words, in the spoken order."

- "Is extremely knowledgeable about ASL and can incorporate spatial and grammatical aspects appropriately into signed English structure so that the interpreted discourse is accurate, and as lively or dull as the speaker."

There is also much concern for an excellent vocabulary. For example:

- "Verbatim" comes up again repeatedly as does "every English word" and "high IQ, versatile vocabulary."

- "A professional who has excellent English language skills and vocabulary...who can deal with complex subjects as well as highly specialized terminology across the board (rehab, psychology, technology, economics, politics, education, etc.) and is equally fluent in unobtrusive 'mouthing' of the message along with signing."

In fact, transliterators often find themselves in situations that involve highly specialized vocabulary known and understood by the deaf person but not by the transliterator. By working together as partners, the consumer will often provide appropriate signs to the transliterator, if they exist, and if not, then the transliterator will have to rely on fingerspelling.

DISCUSSION

Earlier, it was stated that too often there is not enough distinction made between "interpreting" and "transliterating." In fact, too often the term "interpreter" is used as a generic word to include both. In this regard, consider a discussion of the need for an "interpreter to bridge two culturally rich realities" (Cokely, 1999). Unless there are strong indications to suggest otherwise, a transliterator should assume that the deaf person who specifies a request for "transliteration," is sufficiently acculturated or bicultural to negotiate successful communication and cultural interactions.

Consumers may balk at the suggestion that a transliterator might omit, paraphrase, or restructure the message. There are consumers who fear this means wholesale deletion of words and phrases, perhaps in an effort to just keep up. Stauffer & Viera (elsewhere in this volume) describe techniques that may enable the consumer to determine whether the transliteration is faithful to the spoken message. Findings of this national research study make the case that considerable training of potential transliterators is needed and that transliteration requires skills that are very different from ASL interpreting. In addition, the findings show that skills in ASL interpreting do not automatically render one skilled in transliterating; ignorance of that reality can be the downfall of untrained interpreters who take on transliteration assignments without the necessary prior training.

One respondent had a comment about preparing for a transliteration assignment: If the services of a transliterator are requested by the deaf person, the interpreter should not make contact with the hearing party in advance of the assignment *without the consumer's permission*. This respondent stated there are times when the consumer may not have informed the other party of his or her deafness and the fact that a transliterator will be present. Some consumers choose to save explanations until the start of the assignment, when the consumer is better able to project personal and professional competence and not be concerned about stereotyped thinking on the part of the other individual(s).

In conclusion, the results of this survey of deaf, late-deafened,

and severely hard of hearing consumers who use transliterators, indicates there is extensive diversity in this population. It also strongly points to and articulates their demands for communication service that is distinctly different from ASL interpreting. Transliteration is an area that requires considerable training of potential practitioners. This survey supports the contention of most consumers that skill in interpreting does not automatically render one skilled in transliterating, and these misconceptions can be the downfall of untrained interpreters who attempt it.

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