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SELECTION, EVALUATION AND CLASSIFICATION OF INTERPRETERS

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There is a critical shortage of trained professionally qualified interpreters for deaf people. Depending upon which authority one reads, there are from 270,000 to 800,000 profoundly deaf individuals in the United States, and from 4.5 to 6.8 deaf children being born each year per 10,000 births. To serve this population, there are fewer than 1,000 self-selected interpreters for deaf people registered with the national Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf.

Many qualified workers with deaf people agree that: (1) interpreters for deaf people are needed in many situations if deaf persons are to benefit from the wide variety of services available to those with normal hearing; (2) interpreters are in extremely short supply, and among the known interpreters the range of competence varies widely; and (3) at present, there are no means of insuring that an interpreter selected from the available registers will be fully qualified to interpret in a given situation because there are, as yet, no methods of evaluating an interpreter's competence and classifying him according to his interpreting ability.

Part of the problem of evaluating and classifying interpreters for deaf people lies in the lack of distinct standards of performance which would differentiate among levels of competence. At present, the only method of evaluating an interpreter's skills is subjective evaluation by experts, either experienced interpreters of recognized ability or deaf persons with extensive experience in using interpreters and with insight into the problems and requirements of an interpreter. This, naturally, requires that a prospective user of an interpreter's services must either be an expert in the area himself, or have recourse to the opinions of such an expert, if he is to select a fully qualified interpreter.

Basic to the problem of establishing standards of performance is the lack of knowledge about the specific skills which collectively constitute the complex operation known as "interpreting for deaf people". There has been much speculation about, but no systematic research into, the reasons for the differences among interpreters for deaf people in:quality of interpreting; the time required to achieve their current levels of competence; and the types of experiential backgrounds which produced them. One important matter for investigation is whether there is a particular pattern of perceptual, psychomotor, cognitive, and affective traits, and commonalities among the familial and experiential backgrounds of interpreters for deaf people which predispose them or influence them in the direction of a certain level of achievement in interpreting skill.

The purpose of the project is to develop an effective, easily-administered, and comprehensive method of evaluating interpreter competence which would also permit

re-evaluation and re-classification as competence increased; and to discover whether or not specific characteristics or combinations of characteristics can be identified which are associated with the attainment of specific levels of interpreting competence. By studying methods of evaluation and classification, it is hoped that it will be possible to specify standards of performance which will facilitate certification of interpreters for deaf people. By studying the characteristics of interpreters, empirical knowledge might be gained about how an interpreter evolves, and this might make possible the development of more effective and comprehensive curricula for training interpreters.

Methodology

Thirty interpreters from eleven states were brought to the University of Illinois for testing. The sample was selected in such a way as to insure equal distribution of males and females and a wide range of ability in interpreting. Every effort was made to insure representation in 5 competence categories: Outstanding, Very Good, Average, Fair and Poor. This was accomplished by the project staff with the help of a five-member advisory committee composed of nationally recognized experts in interpreting. Most interpreters who had been selected as first choices for the Outstanding, Very Good, and Average categories accepted the invitation to participate, thus requiring replacements with alternates only when subsequent unforeseen conflicts arose that precluded participation by two or three individuals. It proved to be quite difficult to obtain a sufficient number of subjects for the lower two categories. Eventually, however, a mixed group of "Fair" and "Poor" interpreters was recruited. Subjects from these two categories might reflect a lack of experience rather than a lack of basic interpreting skill.

Additionally, three interpreters were selected to serve as pilot subjects in order to pretest all materials and to modify the procedures where necessary.

Expressive and receptive tasks. Since it was desired that the expressive and receptive skills tasks would match the life situation as much as possible, and that maximum performance be obtained from all subjects, the materials chosen for the tasks were of the type that most interpreters were likely to have had experience in interpreting or translating in the past.

For the translating task a short (17 minute) lecture on communication was chosen, with material ranging from minimal difficulty, which would permit the poorer subjects to show what they could do, through rather complex material which would challenge the skills of the most capable subjects. The interpreting task was a lecture on children's development of language, with the major portion of the lecture consisting of a story about a little boy, as told by another child. The story was chosen because it offered subjects an opportunity to display their true interpreting skills, since considerable dramatic skill could be used in relaying the story. Both expressive tasks were audiotaped by a graduate student majoring in speech, who had the ability to pace himself and to modulate his voice so as to keep the interest at a high level. The first 6½ to 7 minutes of the speech were delivered at 130 wpm (words per minute), the next 4½ to 5 at 150 wpm, and the following 4½ to 5 at 170 wpm. For the remaining minute the speaker spoke at his "normal" speech rate which was 163 wpm for the more technical translating task and 193 wpm for the less technical interpreting task.

The reverse-translating tasks consisted of three videotaped stories, told in Manual English, with the difficulty based on the speed of the signing and complexity of the material. The first story was a relatively simple story delivered at a moderately slow rate of signing; the second was a moderately paced story of slightly more complex content; and the third was a semi-professional lecture delivered at the deaf person's normal rapid rate of signing with considerable fingerspelling. The reverse interpreting

tasks also consisted of three videotaped stories ranging in difficulty from a simple, repetitive story delivered in Ameslan, to a more complex story (also in Ameslan), to a very difficult story delivered in highly pantomimic Ameslan.

All performers for the receptive skills task were deaf individuals selected for the clarity of their signing and fingerspelling. The videotapes were in color and all performers wore sweaters of a medium royal blue in order to enhance the contrast and clarity of the hands and fingers for maximum "readability" by the subjects.

Pantomime. The pantomime task was developed in an effort to separate expressiveness from technical skill in the language of signs, because fluency in the language of signs might be mistakenly assumed if an interpreter was particularly expressive (or vice-versa); and by separating the expressiveness from sign language, information could be obtained about the relationship between the two dimensions as well as the relationship of each to the overall interpreting performance. The task consisted of a series of 10 short situations which were typed on 3 x 5 cards and presented to the subject one at a time. After reading the card, the subject was to act out the situation using no formal signs.

Psychological tests. The psychological testing of the subjects was conducted to provide information about the characteristics of interpreters that might be related to interpreting skill. The testing focused on four major areas: cognitive abilities, perceptual abilities, psychomotor abilities, and affective characteristics.

Cognitive Abilities. The process of interpreting would appear to have a large cognitive component, as it requires not only the ability to process information and store it, but to recode it and reproduce it as well. The processing may be either auditory or visual, depending on the situation. The recoding task implies a person must be verbally and conceptually fluent, as a good interpreter must be able to find synonyms and conceptual equivalents that match the comprehension level of the deaf audience, and must find these equivalents under time pressure, and do it continuously for considerable periods of time. To measure cognitive abilities the following standardized tests were used.

The Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale (WAIS) is a highly reliable measure of overall adult intelligence. In addition to providing an estimate of overall intelligence, it provides information on memory, perceptual organization, and verbal skills. The Modern Language Aptitude Test (MLAT) was used to investigate auditory memory and information processing. It uses language samples and thus provides a more accurate picture of verbal memory function than the memory subtests of the WAIS. The Christensen-Guilford Fluency Tests were used to assess word, ideational, associational, and expressional fluency, which might be related to the ability to find the right signs and synonyms.

Perceptual Factors. The testing of perceptual factors was most relevant for reverse interpreting, because in this situation the interpreter must deal with visual input, often in non-standard English and must reproduce it in good, clear English.

The Minnesota Paper Form Board was used to measure ability to visualize and manipulate objects in space. The Memory for Designs Test was used to measure perceptual-motor coordination based on immediate memory.

Psychomotor Abilities. The assessment of psychomotor abilities has usually been done best by a "job sample" type of task. However, it was helpful as a check on the accuracy of observers' judgements to have supplementary measures of motor coordination which could be more objectively evaluated. The Purdue Pegboard was selected because, unlike most tests of manual dexterity, it required no tools, but still provided reliable information on both gross motor movement and fine motor skills. It also provided a test of two-hand coordination. The Embedded Figures Test (EFT) was used to measure ability to look at complex configurations and to respond to parts. It also has extremely high correlations with measures of bodily orientation.

Affective Factors. Affective factors might be important because the interpreter is not a machine which simply recodes and transmits information. The attitudes and emotions of interpreters could conceivably affect the accuracy of interpretation. The California Personality Inventory (CPI) was used because it has a straightforward empirical approach and is not theoretically biased. It measures 15 different personality traits, including a person's tendency to lie about himself. The test has been widely acclaimed as one of the best currently available.

Personal History questionnaire. The personal and family history questionnaire was developed by project staff to obtain information on the early history of each interpreter and his family, and his background and experiences with deaf people.

Collection and Analysis of the Data

Survey questionnaire. In order to develop the techniques for evaluation of interpreters' performances it was desirable to obtain additional information concerning the component skills which make up the interpreting process. A survey quesionnaire was designed and distributed to approximately 300 of the participants at the convention of the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf in Long Beach, California, in August, 1972. The questionnaire asked for ratings of aspects of the interpreting situation, and for considerable information concerning the respondents familiarity with interpreting and the interpreting process.

Perhaps the most interesting finding in the analyses of the ratings of the component skills was the difference between the deaf and the hearing respondents. It would seem that accuracy and adaptability were of primary concern to the hearing respondents, while the deaf respondents felt that clarity of signs and fingerspelling were more important. This difference in opinion probably reflects a difference in orientation between the two groups which might be more understandable when one remembers that a deaf person has to be able to understand the signing and fingerspelling before he can even begin to understand the concepts being signed and fingerspelled. It might be that the hearing respondents assumed that accuracy in transmission of concepts would be possible only if accompanied by clarity in signing and fingerspelling, and by awareness of the language level of the deaf audience, and therefore responded on the basis of that assumption. But it would seem that the deaf respondents made no such assumption. They appeared to feel that *technical* understanding had to precede *cognitive* understanding — and responded on that basis. These results point up the importance of the deaf consumer in the evaluation of interpreters, as they tended to have a different viewpoint than the hearing interpreters. Both viewpoints are necessary to construct adequate standards and appropriate evaluation panels for the evaluation of interpreters.

For more detailed information on "The Component Skills of Interpreting As Viewed by Interpreters" by Brasel, Montanelli, and Quigley, I refer you to the January, 1974, *Journal of Rehabilitation of the Deaf.*

Judges

Three five-man panels of experts in the area of interpreting will be recruited from the Southern Californian Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf with the assistance of the National R.I.D. Two judges on each panel are to be deaf persons with extensive knowledge and experience in the area of interpreting and interpreters for deaf people. Each judge will be an expert reverse-translator and reverse-interpreter, with experience in observing interpreters for deaf people in action.

Each panel will make two evaluations of each subject in the study — one on the subject's translating ability, and the other on the subject's interpreting ability. There

will be three different approaches to the use of rating scales to measure the performance of the subjects in translating and interpreting. In all approaches, the judges will be shown the videotaped performances of each subject on the two tasks, but the method whereby each of the three separate panels of judges will be required to evaluate the subject's performances will differ.

1) Rating scale method #1: Each judge of the first panel will be required to evaluate overall competence only, and assign the subject a score of from 1 to 5. In addition, each judge will write a brief justification of the assigned score.

2) Rating scale method #2: Each judge will rate a different specific skill, such as fingerspelling, on two dimensions, speed and clarity.

3) Rating scale method #3: This is similar to the scales currently used by the R.I.D. The judges of the third panel will evaluate each subject on speed and clarity of each skill, and assign a score of 1 to 5 on each dimension of each skill. The judges will be required to rate the subject's overall competence on a scale of 1 to 5; and to justify the assigned scores in writing.

Once the evaluations are completed, the project staff will transcribe the videotapes for word and concept analysis and errors of omission and substitution. These results will be compared to the results obtained with the rating scales.

Application of Findings

We hope the results of this study will be useful for improving current evaluations and that they will prove beneficial to groups such as the R.I.D. who have established or wish to establish certification procedures and criteria for certification of interpreters. The techniques developed here and the criteria for performance which will evolve can be used in educational settings in initial selection of candidates for interpreter training and in the evaluation of training programs.