

## **LSA Guidelines for Using Sign Language Interpreters**

### **Skills required of interpreters**

Interpreters need to be skilled in interpreting in both directions - from English to ASL and from ASL to English. For lectures given in English, most interpreting will obviously be from English to ASL, but ASL-to-English interpreting skills will be needed for Deaf participants' questions and contributions in discussion. For lectures given in ASL, the reverse holds.

It is highly desirable for interpreters to have experience interpreting linguistics and to have some knowledge of the material they are interpreting. This can prevent mistakes like the following, which occurred in a talk in which Head Movement was being discussed:

Speaker: If you move a Head,...

Interpreter in ASL: If you progress,...

Such interpreting errors are embarrassingly frequent.

### **Dealing with technical terminology**

No matter how skilled interpreters are, or how familiar they are with linguistics, technical terminology and/or proper names that the interpreter is not familiar with are bound to crop up. The following procedures should help in dealing with this problem:

1. In advance of a lecture, the lecturer should provide the interpreters with copies of handouts, lecture notes, or anything else that would familiarize the interpreters with the content of the lecture. If possible, technical terms should be highlighted or identified in some way.
2. In advance of the presentation, time should be provided for the interpreters to ask the lecturer questions about the materials.
3. For lectures in English, the interpreters should be able to meet with Deaf attendees for a few minutes beforehand if possible. This time can be used to agree on translations or abbreviations for some of the technical vocabulary.
4. For signed lectures, the lecturer may need to inform the interpreters in advance how s/he will sign certain terms.
5. Interpreters should be told they can interrupt a lecturer to get clarification of a new or unfamiliar term.

### **What is required of those whose lectures will be interpreted**

1. As indicated above, lecturers should provide the interpreters with copies of handouts, lecture notes, etc. before the lecture. Time should be allowed for the interpreters to ask the lecturer questions about these materials before the lecture.

2. Lecturers may need to slow down their speed to accommodate interpreters. Interpreters should be told they can interrupt lecturers if they are going too fast.

3. Lecturers should be reminded that people following an interpreted lecture need to keep their gaze focused on the interpreter. Consequently, lecturers cannot keep talking at the same time that they do something else that requires the listener's visual attention.

Example 1: Lecturers should not continue to talk while pointing at things on the blackboard; a Deaf person cannot look at the blackboard and the interpreter at the same time. In particular, lecturers should avoid use of deictics (here, there, this, that, these, those), since their reference will be unclear to someone watching the interpreter.

Example 2: A lecturer who demonstrates something should first say something like: "...as I will now demonstrate," and then cease talking during the demonstration. This gives Deaf people time to get what the lecturer said from the interpreter, and then shift their gaze to the lecturer to see what is being demonstrated. After the demonstration, when the lecturer resumes talking, eye gaze can shift back to the interpreter.

Use of handouts

Use of handouts is strongly encouraged for three reasons:

1. A handout makes the main points and data available in visually accessible form.
2. A handout can be taken home and therefore reduces the amount of note-taking required. Unlike a hearing person, who can continue to listen to the lecturer while taking notes, a Deaf person's visual attention is split between note-taking and watching the interpreter.
3. A handout gives Deaf people access to the terminology that is being used in English.

A lecturer should not continue to talk while directing attention to a handout since a Deaf person cannot look at the handout and the interpreter at the same time. A lecturer who directs attention to a handout should remain silent while people look at the handout, after which s/he can resume talking.

### **Use of slides, transparencies, Power Point, and other audiovisual materials**

These modes of presentation are encouraged because, like handouts, they bring out important points in visually accessible form, thereby making a presentation easier to follow. However, they present two potential problems.

The first has already been mentioned above in connection with handouts and demonstrations; since Deaf people need to watch the interpreter, a lecturer who directs attention to a screen should not resume talking until they have had a chance to take in what is relevant on the screen and shift their gaze back to the interpreter.

The second potential problem concerns the level of lighting in the room during such audiovisual presentations. There needs to be enough light so that Deaf people can see the interpreter.

## **Seating arrangements**

The interpreter(s) should be seated in the front, facing the audience. The seats immediately in front of the interpreter(s) should be reserved for Deaf individuals so that they can have an unobstructed view of the interpreter(s).

## **Number of interpreters required**

Interpreting is intensive and tiring work. For a lecture of 50 minutes or so, one interpreter may be able to do the job. An interpreter cannot be expected to interpret two such lectures in a row without a break. For a lecture longer than 50 minutes, a team of two (or more) interpreters should take turns. The question period after a lecture must be included when computing the overall length of the session. For question periods, the interpreter(s) must be prepared to interpret both from English to ASL and from ASL to English.

Interpreters may indicate the maximum length of a lecture they would be willing to interpret alone. Anything longer will require a team of two (or more) interpreters.

## **Functions of an interpreting coordinator**

It is a good idea for one of the interpreters to serve as interpreting coordinator. This person will act as liaison between interpreters, Deaf participants, lecturers, and organizers of the event. S/he should be clearly identified both to Deaf participants and to those giving interpreted lectures. Among the functions of the interpreting coordinator will be:

1. Ensuring that interpreters get sufficient information such as abstracts and handouts for lectures they will be interpreting
2. Ensuring that there is sufficient time before a lecture for interpreters to ask questions of the lecturer and to confer with Deaf participants
3. Ensuring proper seating arrangements for interpreters and Deaf participants
4. Ensuring that there is proper lighting in the room

If several interpreted lectures take place simultaneously, some of these functions may have to be delegated to individual interpreters.

## **Working with interpreters in general**

The most important thing to bear in mind when working with interpreters is to make them feel as welcome as possible. The job is stressful for them as it is, so they will appreciate anything that can be done to make their job easier. This includes allowing enough time for them to meet both with Deaf participants and with the lecturer in advance to go over handouts and other materials, and assuring them they can interrupt if there is something they do not understand.

## **An asymmetry in interpreting**

When an interpreter does not have much linguistics background, some aspects of what is said may come through in somewhat muddled form. Many Deaf people with knowledge of ASL, English, and linguistics and with experience getting classes and lectures through interpreters have become quite good at figuring out what was said, even when it comes through in muddled form.

Most hearing people, however, are not accustomed to having access to what is said only through an interpreter and are not so good at figuring it out when there are flaws in the interpreting. Consequently, what a Deaf person says may come across to hearing people as sounding as though the Deaf person does not know the linguistics well, when in fact it is the interpreter's weak or nonexistent knowledge of linguistics that is causing the problem. This problem is particularly acute when a Deaf person gives a lecture, but it can also arise in ordinary discussions and question periods. Further, the Deaf person is most likely unaware of how what s/he said has come across.

Hearing parties should be made aware of this problem. When a hearing person is confused about what was said, s/he should repeat what the interpreter said so that the Deaf person will know what was said in English and can make corrections or clarifications.

### **Determining the demand for interpreting services**

Publicity about the event should state clearly the date by which interpreting services must be requested and should include enough information about the sessions to be offered so that Deaf participants can decide which they wish to attend and inform the event organizers by the interpreting request deadline.

### **Finding interpreters**

The National Registry of Interpreters of the Deaf maintains a web site with information about sign language interpreters. Entering "sign language interpreters" in a good search engine will yield a variety of sites. It is necessary to remember, however, that finding interpreters with experience interpreting linguistics is considerably more difficult. For this it may be helpful to consult those who have provided interpreting services at previous Linguistic Institutes, at annual meetings of the LSA, or at conferences that have a good track record in providing interpreter services, such as the conference on Theoretical Issues in Sign Language Research and the Boston University Conference on Language Development.

### **Comparison with spoken-language interpreting**

Modality imposes a few special considerations on interpreting because one cannot watch an interpreter and a blackboard, screen, or handout at the same time. Most of the other considerations discussed here, however, concern interpreting in general and would be the same for interpreting from one spoken language to another.

### **Dissemination of these guidelines**

The contents of these guidelines, once adopted, should be made known to the LSA membership, perhaps through publication in the LSA Bulletin. They should also be made available to interpreters, to those giving interpreted talks at annual meetings of the LSA, and to those teaching interpreted courses

at Linguistic Institutes.

Considerations Unique to the LSA Annual Meeting

### **Interpreters at special lectures, symposia, and other special events**

Provision should be made for interpreters at special lectures, symposia, and other special events even if Deaf attendees do not request them.

### **Reserving interpreters**

The LSA is encouraged to reserve three interpreters on "courtesy hold" for the entire length of the conference well in advance, e.g. in September. If there are no requests for sign interpreting by 15 November, the courtesy hold can be cancelled. If interpreters were booked only in late November or December, there could be insufficient time to get qualified interpreters who are not already booked or to allow them to prepare for the conference, especially with the holidays occurring right before the conference.

### **Interpreters for interactions other than talks and symposia**

One advantage of booking interpreters for the entire length of the annual meeting is that it allows flexibility for everyone. Interpreting can be available for situations such as these:

1. Last-minute events not on the schedule, e.g. a party honoring a linguist
2. Hearing participants may want to talk with a Deaf participant, especially after his/her presentation
3. One-on-one interactions between participants, such as during the reception after the Presidential Address, or on other occasions

These situations bring out the fact that interpreting is for the benefit of hearing as well as Deaf participants.

### **Considerations Unique to Linguistic Institutes**

#### **Covering the cost of sign interpreting services**

Depending on the number of lectures and special events to be interpreted, sign interpreting services can represent a considerable expense. Therefore, Linguistic Institute directors should indicate in their budgets how the cost of sign interpreting services will be covered.

In most cases, the host institution will already have policies in place that cover sign language interpreting for Deaf students and faculty members at the host institution. Where Linguistic Institute courses are offered as courses of the host institution, the policies in place will apply. In some cases this may mean that the host institution will cover interpreting expenses.