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“It’s not what they say but the way they say it.”
A content analysis of interpreter and
consumer perceptions of signed language
interpreting in Australia

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Abstract

This paper presents findings of an innovative study, which involved the thematic and content analyses of discussions held by deaf people, hearing people and interpreters about signed language interpreting in Australia. Six focus groups yielded eight hours of data, which was analyzed to identify themes that emerged about participants’ perceptions about interpreters and interpreting. Examples are given to compare how participants view the signed language interpreting profession, and to discuss the expectations of all parties of signed language interpreter-mediated encounters. The focus of analysis is on key themes that were evident from the most frequently used words/signs. The findings provide a clearer understanding of the relationship between consumers and interpreters, and attitudes towards signed language interpreters and interpreting in Australia.

Keywords: sign language; interpreters; consumers; perceptions; focus groups; attitude.

1. Introduction

Notions of community interpreting as a situated social practice have evolved, and our understanding of this communicative event has changed (Angelelli 2000). The “conduit” non-participatory role of the interpreter is now considered out of date, with recognition of the multi-layered complexity of the interpreting task (Apostolou 2009). Community interpreting, by its very nature, requires a level of interaction between participants, whereby interpreters are also participants and their presence can impact on the nature of the interpreted encounter (Wadensjö 1998; Metzger 1999; Roy 2000; Angelelli 2004a). Community interpreting often occurs in sensitive situations, placing extra pressure on interpreters for the unobtainable — to become more “invisible” (Wadensjö

2001; Angelelli 2003; Napier and Cornes 2004); where as in fact, the ideal is for the interpreter to “blend” into the context (Dean 2009).

Signed language interpreting is situated as a social practice within the wider context of interpreting and translation studies, and has been acknowledged as being at the forefront of community interpreting practice, in terms of discussions concerning the role of the interpreter in face-to-face dialogic interpreted events (Angelelli 2004b; Mikkelsen 1999; Pöchhacker 1999). This study focuses on signed language interpreting, but makes reference to spoken language interpreting literature throughout the paper, as many issues are transferable regardless of the languages used. This approach supports recent acknowledgments from spoken and signed language interpreter researchers of the need for dialogue across linguistic and modality boundaries to explore commonalities (Angelelli 2004b; Pöchhacker 2004; Turner 2006, 2007; Grbic 2008).

One of the key issues for signed language interpreters is that they have a different relationship with their clients; they are not typically members of the minority group as would be expected for spoken language interpreters (Gentile et al. 1996), as they can hear and therefore are “outsiders” (Napier 2002).

For this reason, the notion of trust between signed language interpreters and consumers is crucial, but is often implicit in the relationship. The attitude that an interpreter has towards their work can affect the rapport that consumers feel with their interpreters; which can have a significant impact on the outcome of the interpreted event. Yet what does it mean for an interpreter to have a “good attitude”? Are consumer and interpreter attitudes towards interpreting the same? How do we determine what people’s attitudes are towards interpreting? What language do interpreters and consumers use to discuss signed language interpreting and interpreters?

Signed language interpreting research can still be considered as an emerging sub-discipline of interpreting and translation studies (Napier in press). There is a growing body of research, and the range has been eloquently captured in Grbic’s (2007) bibliometric analysis of signed language interpreting research from 1970 to 2005, which places the research in the context of wider translation studies. As with community interpreting more generally (Hale 2007), signed language interpreting research has adopted qualitative and quantitative approaches to the majority of research studies: (i) a discourse analytic approach (transcriptions of naturally occurring data); (ii) focus groups, interviews, or ethnographic field observations; (iii) survey research (questionnaires); or (iv) an experimental approach.

Only a few discourse analytic studies have been conducted on signed language interpreter-mediated interactions, which predominantly draw on interactional sociolinguistics as the analytical framework (Metzger 1999; Roy 2000; Bélanger 2004; Hoza 2007).

No studies have dissected the practice of signed language interpreting from a narrative perspective — exploring the perceptions of practitioners or consumers of signed language interpreting. No studies have used linguistic frameworks to analyse the perceptions of such social practice. Turner and Harrington (2000) have asserted that any interpreting research should be “on, for and with” stakeholders (i.e., those that the research affects or who have a vested interest in the outcome), in order to account for the various agendas of event interactants; and to ensure that knowledge is shared with stakeholders.

Thus investigation of signed language interpreting from the perspective of interpreters and consumers is needed, not only to include them as stakeholders in the provision and consumption of interpreting services and to explore their agenda in terms of quality interpreting services; but also to explore interpreters and interpreting as a social behavior. Thus it is important to consider not only *what* is said by interpreters and consumers about interpreting, but also *how* they say it.

Deaf people have anecdotally discussed their attitudes towards interpreters regarding what they think makes a good interpreter, what they like and need and why (Baker-Shenk 1986; Bienvenu 1987; Corker 1997), with suggestions for best practice (Stratiy 2005) and for interpreters to be adaptable to meet the needs of the consumer according to the context (Heaton and Fowler 1997). These deaf consumer discussions are based on observations and self-reporting, and although valuable, provide little evidence to support observations.

However, are there different perspectives from different stakeholders? What makes a good interpreter or for a good interpreting experience? Research of this kind provides evidence for what consumers and signed language interpreters instinctively know and discuss about the relationship between deaf people and interpreters, whether positive or negative.

By collecting information from interpreters and consumers themselves, a more accurate picture about their perceptions of interpreting can be created, developing a better understanding of interpreting as a social behavior; and issues for signed language interpreting practitioners, educators and researchers to consider and explore. In order to place this study in context, it is worthwhile providing a brief overview of the existing literature concerning research conducted on perceptions of both spoken and signed language interpreting.

2. Research-based perceptions of interpreting

2.1. Notions of quality

Various papers have discussed notions of quality in interpreting, which is an emerging theme in interpreting studies (Shlesinger 2009). Garzone (2002),

Kalina (2002) and Pöchhacker (2002) have all discussed interpreting quality and norms. Grbic (2008) explores quality in translation and interpreting as a social construct and asserts that perceptions of quality are relative to the context in which the concept is being discussed — namely training, professional practice and interpreting research. Hale (2005) agrees, arguing that interpreters face pressures and competing demands from the *institutional sphere*, the *professional sphere* and the *interpersonal sphere*. Of particular interest to this paper are the interpersonal demands, which can influence the relationship between interpreters and their consumers.

2.2. Interpreter perspectives

In her discussion of dialogic interpreting, Wadensjö (2004) states that it is important to distinguish between interpreters' *professional ideology* and lived *professional practice*. Various authors have surveyed interpreters in order to develop a picture of ideology, practice and quality in relation to interpreting (e.g., Angelelli 2004b; Chesher and Slatyer 2003; Chiaro and Nocella 2004; Hale and Luzardo 1997; Martin and Martí 2008; McKee 2008; Salaets and Van Gucht 2008; Tate and Turner 1997). However, as mentioned earlier, there have only been few empirical studies of consumer perceptions of interpreting in both the spoken and signed language interpreting fields. From those that exist, they have typically sought to answer questions such as: What do consumers expect from interpreting services? How much do consumers understand of interpreted renditions? Are consumers satisfied with interpreting services they receive? What are their experiences of working with interpreters?

2.3. Consumer perspectives

Edwards et al. (2005) explored the experiences of minority ethnic people living in two major cities in the UK, who need interpreters to gain access to, and use of, a range of services in the community. They determined that personal character and trust are important in people's understandings of good interpreting, leading them to prefer interpreters drawn from their own informal networks (i.e., family and friends); and the fact that trust may offset any concerns that the consumers may have about bilingual competence and ability to accurately convey the message.

In the last five years there has been a mini-explosion in the number of discussions of interpreting from the deaf consumer perspective, including: interviews with British deaf community members regarding notions of quality (Stone and Allsop 2007); a panel discussion with four Australian deaf univer-

sity students about their perceptions and preferences of Auslan interpreters' translation style in the university context (Napier and Barker 2004); interviews with deaf students about their educational experiences, and their perspectives on the role and responsibilities of interpreters in that context (Kurz and Langer 2004); a survey of deaf leaders' attitudes towards interpreters and interpreting (Forestal 2005b); and a diary survey of deaf Australians about their actual experiences of working with interpreters over a 6 week period (Napier and Rohan 2007).

The fundamental issues identified across all studies are as follows: the status of the interpreter in the community (belonging); trust between the interpreter and minority language user client; familiarity between the interpreter and minority language user client; the level of comfort for the minority language user client and the interpreter; professionalism of interpreters; linguistic skills of interpreters; flexibility of interpreters; and interpreters having a "good attitude".

Typically the focus of these studies has been on the minority language user, and their experiences of working with interpreters. But, so far we have not answered the question: what about the perceptions of the majority language user?

2.4. *The other consumer perspective*

A few studies have attempted to explore interpreting from the different perspectives of all stakeholders, including the majority language user. For example on signed language interpreting, focus groups with American stakeholders, including interpreters, interpreter educators, interpreting students, deaf people, employers and policy makers (Witter-Merithew and Johnson 2005); discussion of the deaf and hearing professional consumer perspective of signed language interpreting as practice profession (Dean and Pollard 2005); a survey of GP and patient perspectives on the nature and extent of communication problems with deaf patients (Smeijers and Pfau 2009); and focus groups with deaf people, interpreters and signed language interpreter booking agencies in Australia (Blyth 2009).

On spoken language interpreting, two examples include a survey of medical and legal professionals in Australia (Hale 2007); and a survey of legal professionals and court interpreting practitioners (Lee 2009), which revealed a statistically significant gap between the perceptions of these two groups.

Thus it can be seen that although various surveys and focus groups have been conducted with spoken and signed language interpreters and consumers, none have yet used discourse analysis to delve deeper and try and unpack the perceptions of these different perspectives. Discourse analysis has been used to analyse aspects of the interpreter's role (e.g., Angelelli 2000), or examples

of interpreter-mediated interaction (e.g., Mason 2005, 2006), but none have used content or discourse analysis to explore how people actually talk about interpreting.

3. Method and analysis

This study was designed based on the following research questions:

1. How do we determine what people's attitudes are towards interpreting?
2. Are consumer and practitioner attitudes towards interpreting the same?
3. What does it mean for an interpreter to have a "good attitude"?
4. How do deaf and hearing consumers and interpreters talk about interpreting?

In order to answer these questions, a qualitative study was conducted to elicit information from deaf and hearing consumers and interpreters, and present a content analysis of discussions held by these people about their perceptions of interpreters and interpreting.¹

As a methodological approach, it was decided to conduct focus groups with the various stakeholders, in order to allow for free flowing discussion of issues related to signed language interpreting. A focus group is "a carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment" (Kreuger 1994; cited in Myers 1998). Focus groups are used:

... as a way of finding opinions and underlying attitudes, but they can also lead us to reflect critically on what opinions are, and what people do with them ... focus groups do produce an interaction in which participants respond collectively and collaboratively, are aware of a common purpose, and reflexively act in terms of that purpose. (Myers 1998: 106–107)

In interpreting studies, focus groups have been used to analyse the perceptions of medical spoken language interpreters about their code of ethics (Angelelli 2007) but not to explore consumers' attitudes.

The focus groups were held in Sydney over a period of several months. A flyer was sent to personal contacts of the researcher; via distribution lists of various interpreting agencies, the peak body representing deaf signed language using people, and various organisations providing services to deaf people that rely on signed language interpretation services; calling for expressions of interest (EOIs) to participate in focus groups to discuss interpreters and interpreting. Those people that submitted EOIs were contacted by the researcher to determine availability, and focus groups were organised in the evenings or weekends at dates and times to suit the majority of respondents.

Finally, a total of six focus groups were organised (2 per stakeholder group): with a total of 10 deaf consumers, with discussion conducted in Auslan (Australian Sign Language); 8 hearing consumers and 10 interpreters, with discussion conducted in English. Each focus group was balanced wherever possible for gender and age. Deaf participants were also balanced for native and non-native signers; hearing participants were balanced for level of experience working with interpreters; and interpreter participants were balanced for level of interpreting accreditation.² Table 1 provides details of the participants in each focus group.

Although only 20% of interpreter participants were male, this is an accurate representation of the ratio of female: male accredited signed language interpreters in Australia (Napier and Barker 2003; Bontempo and Napier 2007).

All participants were sent a list of prompt questions one week before their allotted focus group, in order to get them thinking about various issues related to signed language interpreting. The facilitator in each focus group began the discussion by asking participants to introduce themselves, their experience in the field and by asking the first prompt question. The facilitator only intervened in the discussion for the following reasons: (i) to clarify a comment from a participant; (ii) to link a comment to that of another participant; (iii) to allocate a turn to a participant if needed; and (iv) to bring the discussion back to the point of signed language interpreting. The facilitator did not ask each prompt question, they were referred to as a guideline for monitoring the discussion to ensure that the range of themes were covered. After 1.5 hours, the facilitator informed participants of the time, and ask them to wrap up the discussion. Some groups immediately drew the conversation to a close, where as others continued for a further 30 minutes until the facilitator interjected once more and thanked everyone for their input and ended the meeting. A total of eight hours of data was elicited in this way.

The prompt questions were the same for the deaf and hearing focus groups, and touched on a range of issues, including what they like or dislike about working with interpreters, the benefits and challenges of working with interpreters, what makes the ideal interpreter, best and worst interpreting experiences, interpreter preferences, criteria for using interpreters in different situations, whether interpreters should attend training/professional development, and whether they considered signed language interpreters to be professional.

The prompt questions for the interpreter groups followed similar themes, but were adapted slightly to elicit information about how the participants felt about their interpreting experiences. Questions covered topics such as what they liked most or least about their work, the easiest aspects and challenges of the job; notions of the ideal interpreter, ideal deaf client and ideal hearing client;

Table 1. *Focus group participants*

	Age group	Gender	Occupation / Level of interpreter accreditation
Deaf group 1			
1.	20–29	M	Professional
2.	30–39	M	Professional
3.	40–49	F	Professional
4.	30–39	M	Professional
5.	30–39	F	Paraprofessional
6.	40–49	M	Professional
Deaf group 2*			
1.	30–39	M	Professional
2.	30–39	F	Professional
3.	30–39	F	Professional
4.	50+	F	Paraprofessional
Hearing group 1			
1.	35–44	F	Audiologist
2.	55–64	F	Teacher
3.	45–54	F	Disability advisor
4.	45–54	F	Manager
Hearing group 2			
1.	35–44	M	Manager
2.	35–44	F	Audiologist
3.	45–54	M	Counsellor
4.	45–54	M	Academic
Interpreter group 1			
1.	35–44	F	Professional
2.	45–54	F	Paraprofessional
3.	35–44	M	Professional
4.	35–44	M	Paraprofessional
5.	35–44	F	Paraprofessional
Interpreter group 2			
1.	25–34	F	Professional
2.	25–34	F	Paraprofessional
3.	35–44	F	Professional
4.	35–44	F	Paraprofessional
5.	35–44	F	Professional

* Note. Deaf group 2 should have had 5 participants, but one cancelled at the last minute due to illness.

perceptions of the concept of “attitude”; favorite and worst interpreting assignments, adherence to the Code of Ethics, membership of the professional association; thoughts on the signed language interpreting profession in Australia; and perceptions of interpreters as professionals.

3.1. *Analysing the data*

The data from each focus group conducted in English was transcribed to enable analysis. As the focus of interest was the content of the discussion, rather than any other linguistic features, such as overlap, pauses, etc., the transcription followed standard orthographic principles. The Auslan focus group data was translated into written English by an independent, professionally accredited, interpreter, and checked by the researcher for reliability and validity. All participants were de-identified using a coding system to indicate the type of focus group (deaf, hearing, interpreter), focus group number, participant number and facilitator. (1) is an example of a hearing person in focus group 1, having an interchange with the facilitator.

(1) Example of coding

H1.4 Can you repeat your question? Sorry.

HF.1 It's . . . what has been your best interpreting experience?

H1.4 Oh . . .

(Note: Hearing [H], Group [1], Participant [4]; Hearing [H], Facilitator [F], Group [1].)

In relation to the key themes consistent across other research-based perception studies, a list of key lexical items was put together to assist with a quantitative thematic analysis of the data. The list comprised of 15 lexical items: attitude, challenge, problem, trust, comfort (comfortable), understand, need, professional, flexible, quality, standard, communication, language, culture, role. Using N-Vivo discourse analysis software, frequency counts of the lexical list gave indications of areas requiring further qualitative content analysis.

4. Results and discussion

Before providing details of the thematic and content analyses, an overview of the key themes for each participant group are presented.

In sum, deaf participants like interpreters who: relate to the client; convey everything that goes on; work with the client to establish common and preferred signs, protocols and procedures; ask for feedback; appropriately ask for repetition/clarification; are tactful; are punctual; are not controlling; are prepared for assignments; who communicate the way deaf people do; are discrete and do not draw attention to themselves. However they do not like interpreters who: do not get along with each other as this creates tension; do not change-over smoothly with their team interpreter; do not prepare beforehand; apologize too much for making an error; use incorrect signs or do not ask for a repeat; are not clear — so clients have to “re-interpret” the meaning; are not able

to work into both Auslan and English confidently and accurately; are not receptive to feedback; do not stay in role; want attention. Deaf participants stated that the ideal interpreter: is flexible enough to switch between interpreter roles; is the deaf person's ears and eyes to facilitate communication; is professional; has had training; is knowledgeable about communication pragmatics (e.g., register, introductions, turn taking); does not interject their own opinions or reactions; wants to work in a team with the deaf person; someone who is human and not a robot; has a good attitude.

Hearing participants commented that the benefits of working with interpreters include: increased confidence in facilitating a two-way interchange between persons who are deaf and those that can not sign; gives impression to deaf clients that their mode of communication is accepted; interpreters can be used as a political statement; nuances are given and received using an interpreter. They also noted that there are challenges: it takes time to become accustomed to using an interpreter effectively; lack of direct eye contact with deaf client;³ need more time to build trust with client when relying on an interpreter; need to adapt their own presentation style to meet the needs of the interpreters. Hearing participants noted that the ideal interpreter is: someone quite clever; responds to the needs of individual clients; adaptable to a changing environment; punctual and prepared; relaxed; prepared to offer advice about the situation; offers referral advice about deaf support providers; possesses strong cultural ties to the community; is confident and able to seek the information they need in order to do a good job; does not "color" the translation with their own beliefs or values; highly skilled; non-judgemental; does not have a strong tie with the deaf client and who is familiar with the context.

Interpreters felt that positive aspects of interpreting include: the variety and versatility of the work; flexibility; job satisfaction; connecting people through communication; providing access; being part of a vibrant community; positively challenging. Negative aspects, however, include: no job security; irregularity; no career structure; amount of travel; stress; being your own harsh critic; powerlessness as an interpreter; lack of professional consideration from others; lack of support from the deaf community; being "tested" by deaf people as to their motives for being an interpreter; lack of available preparation. Interpreters highlighted a range of interpreting challenges, encompassing: deciding on interpreting style (free/literal); identifying sub-text in messages; diversity of sign language styles; being a mind reader; managing linguistic and cultural sensitivities; recognising and accepting own limitations; a young and evolving profession; lack of consistency among practitioners; deaf people's lack of awareness about interpreting skills; lack of understanding of role of interpreters. The ideal interpreter was described as someone who: is linguistically skilled and not over-confident; has broad general knowledge and is intelligent; has good comprehension skills; is a "people" person; is flexible and assertive; has good

prediction skills and good negotiation skills; and considers the preferences of deaf people. They also gave a picture of their ideal deaf consumer as someone who: works *with* the interpreter; recognizes that the interpreter is human (not a robot); trusts the interpreter; understands that interpreting is challenging and why interpreters ask for preparation material; recognizes that two very different languages are being used; recognizes that interpreters need breaks and why.

Although an overview of what the participants had to say is interesting and informative, and confirms views reported in other data, this is a somewhat superficial analysis from a linguistic point of view. Thematic, and more detailed content, analyses provide further insight into the discussion and attitudes of participants. One way to determine people's attitudes towards interpreting (research question 1) is to identify the most common themes that they refer to when discussing interpreters and interpreting.

4.1. *Thematic analysis*

Frequency counts revealed that the three stakeholder groups focused on different themes in their discussions of signed language interpreting. Deaf participants covered six themes, including: *attitude, knowledge (know), understanding, needs, professionalism, and language*. Hearing participants concentrated on only four issues of *knowledge, needs, professionalism, and language*. Interpreters talked about the most themes (8), including *attitude, knowledge, challenges, trust, understanding, needs, professionalism and language*. Table 2 illustrates the breakdown of the frequency counts, indicating how many times each lexical item was used in total and within each focus group.

It is interesting to note that only five topics were discussed by all participants: *attitude, knowledge, needs, professionalism and language*. Only the hearing and interpreter participants referred to *challenges*; only the deaf and interpreter participants discussed *understanding*; and only the interpreters talked about *trust*. These results begin to give us a picture of the values that the different participants have about interpreters and interpreting.

4.2. *Content analysis*

Given the range of lexical items used, for the purposes of discussing attitudes towards interpreting, the focus of the content analysis discussion here will be on those items that were most frequently mentioned. Those items were: *understand* (145), *need* (209), *professional* (159), *language* (160), and *attitude* (72). In order to unpack participant attitudes, extracts will be provided here to

Table 2. *Frequency counts*

Lexical items	Frequency counts			Total
	Deaf	Hearing	Interpreters	
Attitude	35 (18/17)	1 (1/0)	36 (13/23)	72
Challenge	3 (3/0)	1 (0/1)	32 (28/4)	36
Problem	18 (6/12)	14 (2/12)	8 (2/6)	40
Trust	13 (12/1)	8 (7/1)	29 (4/25)	50
Comfort/comfortable	22 (5/17)	10 (8/2)	4 (3/1)	36
Understand	77 (33/44)	24 (14/10)	44 (39/5)	145
Need	90 (42/48)	43 (30/13)	76 (32/44)	209
Professional	63 (24/39)	46 (19/27)	50 (40/19)	159
Flexible	10 (4/6)	0	4 (0/4)	14
Quality	3 (3/0)	2 (2/0)	0	5
Standard	12 (6/6)	2 (1/1)	1 (0/1)	15
Communication	17 (6/11)	9 (8/1)	19 (10/9)	45
Language	43 (17/26)	66 (33/33)	51 (19/32)	160
Culture	0	2 (2/0)	5 (5/0)	7
Role	7 (2/5)	13 (10/3)	15 (4/11)	35

elucidate further on how these lexical items were used, and to provide further insight into not only what they said but how they said it.

4.2.1. *Data extracts: understand.* In relation to the use of the lexical item *understand*, deaf participants, used the term the majority of the time in relation to comprehension and possible communication breakdowns due to lack of understanding; and in passing to their understanding of interpreters' professional behavior or role (see example [2]).

(2) Deaf participants' use of *understand*

D1.1: I think it depends on the situation. Perhaps because of my educational background, or because of the courses I have chosen to study, I'd have to say that for 90–95% of the time, I have to work to *understand*, I have to re-interpret things myself. I've become used to it. Because of my high level [of understanding], I constantly want challenge and sometimes the interpreter can't meet that same level. They don't *understand* what is being said, but they keep conveying the information. [comprehension]

D1.2: To answer your question (points to DF1) about what I find comfortable, I don't like it when the interpreter keeps stopping to refer to the presenter. I want them to just keep going. I *understand* that they are human and it is natural to miss some words, but if they keep asking their partner or looking to the presenter, they end up missing 30 more words. [behavior]

D1.2: It's more about the deaf person *understanding* why the interpreter is there. In a situation where there is a contract to sign, the deaf person might not know it is appropriate to ask questions. They assume that they should follow what the interpreter says. So it's about *understanding* the role of the interpreter. [role]

Hearing participants also spent a lot of time discussing comprehension, and particularly the fact that they themselves have arrived at a point of understanding the interpreters need to comprehend information in order to interpret it; and that an interpreter's job is harder if hearing consumers do not understand issues for the signed language using deaf community. Example (3) illustrates examples of such discussion points.

(3) Hearing participants' use of *understand*

H2.1 I think that situation of the interpreter *misunderstanding* what I had said taught me that um, in spoken English when you're talking with somebody who is born and raised in Australia, they've got the whole idioms and every thing you can be as florid as you like and they're going to *understand* what you're saying but in any situation be it sign interpretation or foreign language interpretation there is a tendency I think not necessarily to dumb down but to simplify what you're saying so that there isn't the potential for *misunderstanding* and I think sometimes in that process some of the detail will get lost. [comprehension]

H1.2 What I particularly like, is that the most — many interpreters, not most but many interpreters that I have worked with have also been CODAs⁴ which has meant that I they can give a great link to the community so not only have you got the language but you've also got that other additional emphasis on the cultural background and a depth of *understanding* beyond just any surface *understanding* of what's being said. It's been particularly helpful and useful for myself. [community understanding]

Interpreters, however, used the term when discussing how people understand the process of interpreting itself, or to consumers' understanding of the role of the interpreter; examples of which can be seen in example (4).

(4) Interpreters' use of *understand*

I1.2: It's interesting, the ideal deaf client question. Part of me thinks, "Hmm I'd like my deaf client to *understand* that interpreting is challenging and what makes it challenging". But on the other side of the coin it's probably from the old days of interpreting. I don't have the expectation that my client *should* know. I kind of think It's not their concern. *I'm* the interpreter, it's *my* job, they shouldn't have to *worry* about how hard it is. They shouldn't have to *think* about how hard it is or how easy it is, or anything else, to be quite frank. [process]

I1.3: Or when you ask for preparation materials. I want the deaf person to know that that is actually a sign that I want to do the best job that I can. I don't want them to think, "Oh God, she must be pretty crap". And so I don't expect deaf people or hearing people to *understand* the ins and outs of things of everything I do, but I am there, I'm present and I expect that to be recognized and that I'm not a robot, I'm human and if I interpret something that's really sad, I might get a bit sad. [role]

These examples all reveal that for all parties, comprehension is crucial and highly valued; although there seem to be different attitudes with regards to understanding of the interpreter's role.

4.2.2. *Data extracts: need.* Deaf participants balanced their discussion of *need*, in relation to interpreters' needs or their own needs as deaf consumers (see example [5]). They also mentioned the need for deaf people to be educated on how best to work with interpreters.

(5) Deaf participants' use of *need*

D2.1: The interpreter *needs* to be able to . . . the interpreter certainly *needs* good language skills, and at the same time they also *need* excellent interpersonal skills, just to help everything run smoothly. [interpreter need]

D1.1: The best interpreter, the absolute best interpreter can match anyone's *needs*. They are not fixed. If I know an interpreter is fixed [rigid], I'd rather avoid them and go with someone else, who is more flexible and can match what I want. And if they are a good person, I'd go with that. [deaf need]

D1.1: I was thinking: yes, it's true we are all professional people here, we are aware and have the ability to look at this from all perspectives, but there are people out there who have no idea, they only see things from their point of view. They *need* education. How can we be successful in getting to the grass-roots members of the community, who have no idea how to use an interpreter properly? Interpreters get training and improve their skills, but there are deaf people who haven't got a clue. Interpreters may find that really frustrating and we could lose them because they leave the job. [deaf education]

Interestingly, hearing participants considered the needs of all parties in interpreter-mediated interaction — deaf and hearing participants and interpreters, as illustrated in (6).

(6) Hearing participants' use of *need*

H1.1 I think it's quite interesting if the deaf person refuses to use an interpreter but you the hearing person *need* an interpreter. What do you do because the interpreter's not there just for the deaf people. [hearing need]

H1.2 Responsive to the *needs* of the individual client you know the student or whoever it is that you're working with you know can understand who they are and where they're coming from. [deaf need]

H2.4 That actually that brings us back to one of the points we were talking about before about what are some of things we like about some interpreters and I think one of the things that really stuck out in my mind is those interpreters who are confident, not only in their skill but confident in dealing with me if I'm the person who's engaged them, for them to be confident and say either I'm not confident with this, the background, the language can you make sure you send me something before hand so I'm prepared. Somebody prepared to say within a meeting "Can we please stop?" I *need* some time to do this. Or someone who's competent to saying where they're going to sit, where I'm going to sit, what they want me to do etc. I've had some situations where I think the interpreter's been a bit shy in coming forward and the result hasn't been as effective because he's a bit too shy to say this is what we need and the client as well hasn't got the confidence as well to say "oh would you mind sitting". It's not the client's role necessarily to do that I would see that more as an interpreter's role to say this is how we *need* to set up for me to do my job properly. [interpreter needs]

In contrast, the interpreters primarily discussed the needs of the interpreter in order to do their job well or the needs of the situation, with little reference to the needs of consumers. Example (7) provides examples of such comments.

(7) Interpreters' use of *need*

I2.3: But it's a shame that other people don't recognize that we *need* something. Even when we brief them and say, "This is what I *need*" and then they don't follow through. [interpreter need]

I2.4: And I think that a broad general knowledge is really good. You *need* to have a really good broad general knowledge about a lot of things and people. [interpreter need]

I2.3: Maybe it's to be whatever's *needed*. Because in some situations, I can probably think of more situations where you *need* to be an advocate for the deaf person, just because of power imbalances . . . [situational need]

I2.5: Yeah, something. They contacted me and I thought, "Right!" (mimes rolling sleeves up) and I just sent them this three page thing because they asked me, "What are the requirements?" and I said that I needed my own TV monitor, I *needed* my own platform, I *needed* my own spotlight, that I *needed* my own ergonomic chair . . . [interpreter/situational need]

Again, this data provides us with further insight into the differing perspectives of the participants in signed language interpreter-mediated interaction. It appears that deaf consumers, hearing consumers, and interpreters all have different ideals concerning whose needs are paramount. The fact that only the hearing consumers recognised that all interactants have needs in any given situation is enlightening. It is also a concern if neither the interpreters nor deaf people give consideration to the needs of the majority language consumer. When considering the comments made by all focus group participants about professionalism, it can be seen that there are also differing opinions about what makes an interpreter a professional.

4.2.3. *Data extracts: professional.* For deaf participants, two main categories emerged from discussions about interpreters and professionalism, as exemplified in example (8). One category focused on the need for interpreters to complete formal training, and the other dwelt on professional behavior.

(8) Deaf participants' use of *professional*

D1.1: Booking agencies are responsible for fostering *professional* training for interpreters. They should book people who have completed a training course rather than an interpreter who has not done a course. [training]

D1.2: As [D1.5] says, I like it when the interpreter is involved with the deaf person in the situation, but at the same time we need to remember that not all interpreters have the same level of *professionalism*. That means that I can't always trust them being involved. I need to check things out. Sometimes I want to give the interpreter a push along, but I have to accept *professional* behavior. That means some interpreters don't intervene, they simply interpret, which is fine. Sometimes it's OK to intervene on a minor level. It's interesting, but I've learned to accept that. [behavior]

Hearing participants also discussed professional behavior. But that was the only overlap with the deaf participant discussions. The hearing participants spent more time concentrating on the need for interpreters to participate in professional development; and also on interactions with, and comparisons against, other professionals. Example 9 provides excerpts from the hearing participant data.

(9) Hearing participants' use of *professional*

H2.1 Well that's actually one of the questions do we think that Auslan interpreters should do sort of ongoing *professional* development? I think these days you have to do it in any field. [professional development]

H2.4 I suppose that's where we can only rely on the *professionalism* of the interpreter to be objective, non-judgemental [behavior]

The interpreters also discussed professional behavior and professional development. Additionally, they talked about the need for interpreters to become members of the professional interpreting association, and the lack of professional respect from other professionals; as seen in example 10.

(10) Interpreters' use of *professional*

I1.3: Also when I don't . . . the other thing that really annoys me is I guess my ego thing, when I don't get *professional* consideration from another *professional*. I find that really hard to deal with. [professional respect]

I1.5: I think with that whole thing of a profession, as yet we're not quite there and all of that. But in the same sense of being a good interpreter, you can be a *professional* at whatever you do and whether or not the rest of the people in our work type or our profession which isn't quite yet, are *professional* or not, that really doesn't matter. We can still be qualitatively *professional* and it includes all of those things, doesn't it [I1.2] that you were talking about. [behavior]

I1.1: Am I member of ASLIA?⁵ Yes, oh my Lordy, yes. (laughter). I'm so connected to ASLIA. Yeah I am and I think I know other interpreters are and I am personally because without having done any training previous, that was where I started to get some understanding. But also if we *do* want to move towards becoming a profession, then we do need to have some kind of *professional* association who can lobby and protect interpreters' interests and where we can all support each other and learn together. I think that's probably why I'm a member. [professional association membership]

I2.4: Well, for example I went to the Winter School for the first time this year and certainly, you know, that was a great example of why you would be. It was fantastic *professional* development. It's obviously a real commitment from ASLIA to really make this fantastic environment for *professional* development which . . . like I say, I haven't been doing a lot of *professional* development in the last few years, but I don't know that I've seen that many opportunities as focused and concentrated as that was. I mean that *alone* was a motivation. [professional development]

I2.3: . . . it's sort of like most of the people I know who are what I would regard as *professional* interpreters, regardless of accreditation level, tend to be members of ASLIA. So for me it's just another aspect of the *professional* approach to your work, to be a member of a *professional* body. [behavior/membership]

It is interesting to note that only the deaf participants mentioned the need for interpreters to complete formal training programs in order to be considered professionals. Although in Australia at present completion of a program is not

currently mandatory, over the last few years there has been a paradigm shift in terms of expectations — within the interpreting profession and the deaf community (Bontempo and Levitke-Gray 2009). As more deaf people become professionally qualified by accessing higher education through interpreters, they have greater expectations of interpreters, in terms of professional behavior and professional qualifications.⁶ This may explain why the deaf participants in this study placed value on completion of a formal program. In relation to the lack of mention of formal training from the hearing participants, it is only possible to postulate why this was the case. Perhaps as professionals themselves, the hearing participants assumed that all interpreters would have undergone some kind of formal training equivalent to their own professional training (e.g., teaching, audiology, etc.). In considering why formal training was not mentioned by the interpreter groups, this may have been influenced by the actual participants themselves, as the majority of them had undertaken, or were in the process of studying towards, a university qualification in signed language interpreting. Thus it is possible that it was an inherent value for most of them anyway.

Not surprisingly, another of the lexical items most commonly used by all focus group participants in discussing interpreters and interpreting, was that of *language*.

4.2.4. *Data extracts: language.* As demonstrated in example (11), deaf participants concentrated their discussions on the language skills of interpreters, domain specific language, and the ability for interpreters to adapt to meet the language needs of deaf consumers.

(11) Deaf participants' use of *language*

D1.5: Someone who, when they speak, can match the tone of the others in the situation. For example, in the government setting, they have their own *language*, which is quite formal. Some disability organizations use a simpler type of *language*. The interpreter should be aware of how to bridge those two parties on an equal footing to make us all look better. [meeting deaf consumer needs]

D2.4: As for the *language*, she was out of her depth most of the time, because there was a lot of jargon being used. She didn't understand a thing. [domain specific]

D2.1: I can also think of many work situations interpersonal skills are very, very important. The interpreter certainly needs good *language* skills, and at the same time they also need excellent interpersonal skills, just to help everything run smoothly.

Hearing participants also mentioned the challenges of interpreting terminology/jargon (see [12]). However, they focused most of their discussion on how language features within the interpreting process, by making comparisons with spoken language interpreting and the fact that some of the issues are not unique to signed language interpreting.

(12) Hearing participants' use of *language*

H1.1 I think sometimes you think it's only we think it's only sign *language* interpreters you have to explain context things but with spoken *language* interpreters it's often the same and you think it's because they're not interpreting for you what's being said but I think what they're doing is explaining the concept as well. Which can be quite disempowering for the other person, you know. Doesn't quite know what's going on and it's easier to see the concept being explained I think if you know a little bit about sign *language* than it is when you're using spoken *language* because you really don't know what they're saying. [process/comparison]

H1.1 because I had interactions with um other cultures like say with Mandarin for example where there was a very aggressive conversation about hearing aids, like really challenging. And at the end the interpreter said don't worry this is just . . . it's not — you know try to explain the cultural difference rather than the sort of — and that was really interesting. Because that is similar to what we're saying where interpreters sort of take that role. So that was a spoken *language* . . . again not so unique just to sign *language*. [comparison]

H2.1 I've had more problems with foreign *language* interpreters than I have with sign interpreters. [comparison]

Apart from discussing how they had come to learn Auslan and their own language development, the interpreters discussed the status of sign language as a language like any other, and the challenge of interpreting between two languages; as elucidated in example (13).

(13) Interpreters' use of *language*

I1.3: There was something else I was going to say. Oh yeah, about people understanding our work. Another thing I really wish deaf and hearing people would understand is that it's *two languages*. Deaf people will go, "Oh Auslan — it's completely different to (sic) English", but they don't understand the implications of what that means when they sign this (signed "HURT") you might not go "hurt". You might say "pain" or "injure" or "suffer" or whatever, and if you do that, it's OK because they're different *languages*

I2.1 I think they don't understand what goes into the job, that it's not just one *language*, one *language*, off you go.

Across the three groups, there was mutual appreciation of the value of language, although each group had slightly different perspectives on what aspects of language were important to consider. It is interesting to note, however, that only the hearing participants chose to equate signed and spoken language interpreting, and note the similarities within the interpreting process, regardless of the languages involved. This may be indicative of the perceptions that signed language interpreters and deaf people have about the nature of signed language interpreting, and the relationship between interpreters and this linguistic minority group.

Thus far, it can be seen that although consumer and practitioner attitudes towards interpreting are similar (research question 2), there are differences in the focus of their discussions. The different stakeholders offer varying perspectives on the same issues, or talk about different issues. The fact that only the deaf and interpreter participants gave over any time to talking about *attitude* symbolizes the importance of this value to this community.

4.2.5. *Data extracts: attitude.* Whenever the term attitude was used, it was used specifically to refer to interpreters having a “good” or a “bad” attitude. Both the deaf participants and the interpreters acknowledged the importance of interpreters having a good attitude. Deaf participants gave examples of what they thought epitomised a good or bad attitude in an interpreter, as seen in example (14).

(14) Deaf participants’ discussions of *attitude*

D1.5: Or if sometimes there might be a new interpreter, a fresh person that I have not yet met and they come take a seat and look haughty. I feel that the door is closed between us. Then at the end of the job, they simply leave and I’m left wondering what went on. They look like a robot and that’s the *attitude* that I don’t like. It’s too cold, distant and clinical

D1.1: Yes, training and qualifications are important, but one big difference I see is with CODAs who jump straight into interpreting, that’s a worry. I think they are some of the worst interpreters because they still have their bad old habits and *attitudes*.

D1.3: I definitely get more than if there was no interpreter. I get more than 50% generally. When an interpreter has the wrong *attitude* or arrives late, that has a negative impact on the quality of the service. Oh, it depends . . .

D2.1: Why are they good?

D2.2: They are soft.

D2.1: What do you mean by “soft”?

D2.2: Their *attitude*. They make sure the person understands.

D2.1: Well, to be professional, you have to have the right attitude.

D1.2: An example of a good attitude is when the interpreter recognizes that they are working with the deaf person in a team and they arrive at the setting prepared to work as a team. If the interpreter doesn't know the deaf person, then the task is to work out how you can get to know that person so that things work.

D2.3: Also there are just some people who have a great attitude automatically — they are just that type of person.

D2.3: It's not as though deaf people can tease out what it is, but they know straight away if they don't like someone. When they talk to other people, they label that interpreter as having a bad attitude, while the person next to them might say positive things about that person's attitude, and so it goes. It happens all the time. There is a broad range of responses to that.

In a similar way to the deaf participants, interpreters gave examples of what it means to have a good or bad attitude, and actually found it easier to describe the negative rather than the positive, as seen in example (15).

(15) Interpreters' references to *attitude*

D2.5: Yeah, I agree. I think there's something to do with respect and your attitude towards deaf people.

D2.3: It's almost easier to define good attitude by what it's not.

I2.2: Controlling. Like the interpreter, say, in TAFE⁷ or whatever and the student wants to ask a question but the interpreter goes (indicates an interpreter mouthing "No, no, no" and waving the student's hand down). That's a bad attitude. Or maybe it's not the best example, but they try and control the situation. It's not about the deaf client and the hearing person and their relationship.

Interpreters, also often referred to attitudes from within the deaf community towards "outsiders", that is, those hearing people who become interpreters but have not grown up in the community, and the lack of trust they have for those outsiders. Examples can be seen in example (16).

(16) Interpreters discussion of deaf community attitude

I1.4: Yes and definitely I know that I passed because there was a definite change of attitude when I gave the right answer. But I wonder how many people don't pass it as well because they're not aware of and they're not taught really about what's really being looked for.

I2.1: It's one thing for them to trust you, but then I can also understand that they might have a *really* good reason not to trust you. They've had years of crap basically, then I can absolutely understand where that *attitude* comes from and the person that made that comment, while it just made me see *red*, again I mean, he possibly wasn't meaning that literally. Well, I would really like to think he wasn't, but I can see why he possibly was saying that. Sometimes you just think, "It's not about you, it's about me. I'm the client here".

I2.3: I was just going to say probably for me what I think some of the *attitude* labels sometimes what they stem from is the fact that we are not *all* professional, or not all professionals in the way that *we* would like to see it. So a lot of deaf clients have had *bad* experiences with a bad interpreter. I've heard about it and I've seen it, so we know that it's out there, even though *we* don't practice that way. So I think it's quite easy to become offended at responses to that [bad experience], that seem to be targeted at us, but perhaps are targeted at a bad experience that they've had.

Essentially, it seems that notions of an interpreter having a good attitude center around trust and acceptance (research question 3). The deaf community trusting that the interpreter has the right intentions in wanting to work with the community, and thus accepting them into that community. It also seems to refer to the behavior of interpreters in being professional yet flexible enough to meet the needs of deaf people and ally themselves with the deaf community. These discussions essentially validate the fact that a conduit model of an interpreter is not what is wanted by linguistic minority group members, and the move to the "interpreter as participant" model has been justified.

In-depth analysis of how deaf and hearing consumers and interpreters talk about interpreting (research question 4), exposes the fact that perceptions are more complex than would initially seem from summarised lists of key items of discussion (as is common in some studies).

5. Limitations of the study

Some aspects of the current research may limit the interpretation of the results, particularly in relation to the nature of the participants. (i) All participants were self-selected, and thus more highly motivated to discuss issues related to interpreting. (ii) The majority of interpreter participants were studying in, or had completed, the only university training program for signed language interpreters in Australia — at the university of the author. Thus they may have had a natural bias in their discussions to display a certain attitude towards their work.

(iii) The majority of the deaf participants were university educated and working in professional contexts, and therefore had very clear ideas of what

they wanted from interpreters and why. These participants were also highly bilingual between Auslan and English, and also bicultural between deaf and hearing culture, which may have influenced their perceptions of interpreters and the role of interpreters. There is no certain explanation why the majority of respondents to the EOI were deaf professionals. It is likely that deaf professionals may have a better understanding of the value of research as they have studied at university. It may also be due to the fact that the call for EOIs was sent out in English in the form of a flyer. Although it was written in plain English, many deaf people may have seen it as something not relevant to them. Also the majority of respondents were in the 30–39 age bracket, and therefore of the generation who have accessed their university education through interpreters and also use interpreters in their workplace; as compared to most other deaf people who will only use an interpreter for medical appointment perhaps once a year. This has a bearing on the results as it means that they will likely have different experiences of working with interpreters as compared to members of the wider deaf community.

(iv) The hearing participants were also all professional people, who have only interacted with deaf people in their professional capacity, meaning that they would potentially have a limited view of deaf people and interpreters. (v) Although the deaf focus groups were held in Auslan, they were facilitated by the hearing researcher. Having grown up with deaf parents in the community means that the researcher is a native sign language user, so has a deep affiliation with deaf people. Nonetheless, the observer's paradox in having a hearing person present should be acknowledged.

6. Conclusions

This qualitative focus group study of deaf and hearing consumers and interpreters talking about interpreters and interpreting has enabled a probing analysis of not only what they say about signed language interpreters and interpreting, but also how they say it. Six focus groups yielded 8 hours of data, and initial thematic analysis revealed that the lexical items *understand*, *need*, *professional*, *language*, and *attitude* came up most often during the focus group discussions. More detailed content analysis of these items provided further insight into the perceptions that these stakeholders have towards signed language interpreting as a social practice. In concluding discussion, it is worth revisiting the research questions:

1. How do we determine what people's attitudes are towards interpreting?
Participants revealed their attitudes towards interpreters and interpreting in their linguistic choices, and the key themes on which they chose to concentrate.

2. Are consumer and practitioner attitudes towards interpreting the same?
Overall, each participant group agreed on the fundamental aspects of interpreting, in relation to the need for interpreters to be linguistically competent, professional, adaptable and considerate of the context and consumer needs. However, the priorities given to interactant needs differed between the three stakeholder groups. Of particular interest was the amount of time dedicated by deaf participants and interpreters to talking about interpreters have a “good attitude”, when this was not touched on at all by hearing (non-interpreter) participants. This implies an implicit trait of interpreters that is culturally valued within the deaf community, that it is essential for signed language interpreters to be aware of, and embrace.
3. What does it mean for an interpreter to have a “good attitude”?
When deaf and interpreter participants referred to interpreters having a “good attitude”, they typically referred to behavioral aspects of interpreters in making people feel comfortable, and that interpreters were flexible and willing to “give something” to the community.
4. How do deaf and hearing consumers and interpreters talk about interpreting?
In her discussion of interpreting as a practice (as opposed to a technical) profession, Dean (2009) refers to the concept of dialectics to encourage stakeholders to openly discuss what actually happens in interpreter-mediated interaction. The aim of dialectics is to study reasoning and argumentative methodology (Makins 1994), and ultimately search for truth. She asserts that in any search for truth there are always two profound truths — that is, that there is always more than one perspective on the truth, and therefore on what actually occurs in interpreter-mediated encounters. In fact, this qualitative analytic study confirms that there are in fact *three* profound truths: deaf consumers, hearing consumers and interpreters all have their own perceptions and interpretations of their interpreting experiences.

7. Recommendations

In light of the results and discussion presented here and echoing results of previous studies (Angelelli 2008), it is recommended that more dialogue needs to take place between consumers and interpreter practitioners, between practitioners and educators; and also between spoken and signed language interpreting researchers, educators and practitioners, in order to further our knowledge and understanding of the interpreting profession, ideology, and social practice.

In particular, more detailed analysis is needed of the concept of “good attitude” for signed language interpreters and deaf people. At present, a Systemic Functional Linguistic (SFL)⁸ analysis of the same data is being carried out, using *appraisal theory*, to dissect participant utterances in more detail and provide further insight into the attitudinal values surrounding this concept.

If this study were to be replicated, two key recommendations are made to improve the robustness of the data collected: (i) In recognition of the fact that every interpreter may behave differently in varying contexts, depending on the environmental, interpersonal, paralinguistic and intrapersonal demands they experience (Dean and Pollard 2001), prompt questions about notions of an “ideal interpreter” would be removed, and scenarios would be presented to focus group participants, in an attempt to elicit information about interpreter attitudes and appropriateness of behavior. (ii) Two further focus groups would be added to include booking agencies as consumers/clients of interpreters, and interpreter practitioners who are deaf themselves (who typically work between, for example, Auslan and another signed language),⁹ to provide additional perspectives to consider.

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Notes

1. The funding for this study was provided through a Macquarie University Postdoctoral Research Fellowship (2004–2006).
2. Signed language interpreters in Australia are accredited by the National Accreditation Authority for Translators & Interpreters (NAATI) at either Paraprofessional or Professional level. Accreditation at Professional level implies greater ability to handle complex assignments with more highly sophisticated linguistic skills. See www.naati.com.au for more information.
3. Deaf people need to maintain eye contact with the interpreter as they need to watch the interpretation into signed language. Hearing consumers often find this unnerving as they are used to having direct eye contact with people with whom they are conversing.
4. Children of Deaf Adults (CODA) — an acronym often used to describe people who have deaf parents and thus have grown up in the deaf community using sign language. Many CODAs become signed language interpreters. For more information see Preston (1994) or Bishop and Hicks (2008).
5. Australian Sign Language Interpreters Association
6. For an overview of deaf professionals and their working relationships with interpreters see Hauser et al. (2008).
7. Technical and Further Education college
8. For an overview of SFL and appraisal theory, see Halliday (1994) or Martin and Rose (2002).
9. For discussions of the role and function of deaf interpreter practitioners, see Boudrealt (2005), Forestal (2005a) or Turner (2006).

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