

Power down



Socio-ethnic homogeneity in the sign language interpreting profession risks it becoming institutionalised and limits its capacity to serve deaf people. **Akbar Sikder** reports

Those who work in the signed language interpreting (SLI) profession may have observed that interpreters are not very ethnically diverse. ASLI's 2011 survey on fees and working conditions revealed that 9% of 297 respondents were not classified as White British. This is in spite of 1 in 5 deaf people (Oxford Policy Management 2016) and 13% of the total UK population (2011 Census – Office of National Statistics) coming from an ethnic minority.

The data suggests that sign language interpreters do not reflect their deaf and hearing service users in terms of ethnic diversity. However, this is perhaps just the tip of the iceberg, since other minority groups, such as deaf-parented interpreters, are also underrepresented in the interpreting profession. If interpreters are overwhelmingly representative of a single socio-ethnic group, how can we begin to understand the impact of diversity on interpreting practice?

Deaf people, SLIs and ethnic minority

ASLI's 2011 survey didn't provide a further breakdown of ethnicity, so we don't know how the 9% of non-White British interpreters is further divided into specific ethnic groups,

such as Black and Asian. The 2011 survey appears to be the only one to consider ethnicity. Despite all the surveys conducted on the SLI profession, there has still not been a single study on its ethnic diversity in the UK.

It is worth noting that no reliable estimates of the deaf population exist and the figures quoted here are drawn from the 2011 census. These figures still provide an indicative sample, suggesting that the interpreting profession is just slightly more White than the UK average (91% to 87%), but considerably more White than the deaf BSL population (91% to 80%).

Around 1 in 5 BSL users live in London (OPM 2016), where the average non-White British population is 40%, a much higher

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proportion compared to the UK average. As a result, geography is an important factor in considering whether diversity in the SLI profession really is disproportionate to that of its service users. We know that over 80% of all people from ethnic minority groups live in urban areas (ONS 2011), so we can assume a similar trend for the 20% of deaf people of non-White British ethnicity.

Moreover, of the 20% non-White British deaf people, 1 in 2 are of Asian origin (OPM 2016). No data exists on what proportion of the 9% non-White British interpreters are of Asian origin, but my own tentative guesstimate would be around half. This means around 4.5% of interpreters could be of Asian heritage, based on 1,416 registered and trainee interpreters (NRCPD 2019) and the ONS (2011) figure of 15,483 deaf people. People of Asian origin represent 7% of the total UK population – the largest ethnic minority. It is therefore unsurprising to see the deaf community mirroring this trend, although it is concerning that, in spite of this huge Asian population, there are so few Asian interpreters.

Majority culture

Yet the lack of ethnic diversity in the sign language interpreting profession is perhaps symptomatic of a much bigger problem. It could be argued that interpreters who have grown up inside the deaf community are significantly underrepresented in the profession too, since 'most BSL/English interpreters are British nationals with English as a first language and are adult learners of BSL' (Stone 2010).

Mapson's 2014 survey on the demographics of sign language interpreters (which also didn't consider ethnicity) revealed that 13% of interpreters are

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deaf-parented, ie understood as coming from the deaf community. As a result, a pattern emerges here between ethnic and social diversity, with only 9% of interpreters coming from an ethnic minority group and 13% from the deaf community. Although deaf-parented interpreters make up a slightly higher proportion of the interpreting population compared to ethnic minority interpreters, it is clear that both groups account for an insignificant proportion of interpreters, suggesting that the SLI profession isn't just overwhelmingly White, but is also overwhelmingly representative of the powerful majority culture, even though its deaf and hearing service users are increasingly diverse.

Why is diversity relevant?

Interpreters can be seen as gatekeepers to the powerful institutions of the majority culture, granting the minority community access to these institutions. This minority community could be an ethnic minority, such as the Asian community, or a social minority, such as the deaf community. Scollon (1981: 4) defines 'institutional gatekeeping' as 'any situation in which an institutional member is empowered to make decisions affecting others'. The gatekeeping metaphor sums up the problem of institutional discrimination and

its power in our society to affect people's lives; interpreters often find themselves adopting powerful gatekeeping positions.

When gatekeepers look and talk like members of the institution, this affects how the minority group perceives and experiences the majority culture; minority groups may then view the interpreter as an ambassador for the powerful institution. For example, Ahmad et al's 1998 study on the experiences of deaf people from minority ethnic groups found that 'for many [hearing] parents deaf culture was simply an extension of White culture' (ibid: 2) and that ethnic minority deaf people and their families felt marginalised in a number of ways, including because 'SLIs were often not aware of certain cultural practices' (ibid: 3).

These findings suggest that experiences using interpreting services have a hand in forming perceptions of self and other. Cronin (1995), who looks at translation into minority languages, argues that the way in which translators translate, ie the translation process itself, can reinforce how majority and minority groups perceive each other. This is because translators who belong to the majority culture and translate from their native dominant language into their second minority language might default to a translation strategy that produces a 'foreignised' (Venuti 2008) target text, reflecting the full otherness

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of the dominant language and socio-ethnic group. This doesn't just undermine the status of BSL as a minority language; it also reinforces the minority status of the deaf community, thereby impacting on perceptions of self and other.

If the SLI population is overwhelmingly homogeneous, this could restrict its worldview and so it risks becoming less sensitive to particular cultural differences. This has very tangible repercussions. For example, Gumperz's (1982) study on job interviews found that Pakistani applicants did not recognise contextual cues for a narrative explanation, instead providing a statement of personal preference and leading to a communicative breakdown.

Similarly, a restricted worldview and lack of sensitivity to minority groups could restrict the profession's understanding of its own role in managing gatekeeping relationships. Erickson & Schultz (1982), in a study on counselling relationships, found the extent of social similarity (and co-membership) influenced the degree to which the counsellor acted as 'advocate' (representing the interests and helping) or 'judge' (representing the institution's interest to possible detriment). The distinction between 'advocate' and 'judge' is rooted in co-membership and social similarity, which indicates that 'a person's upbringing greatly affects how they understand different situations and shape their expectations as they provide a service' (Angelelli 2010: 97). The lack of these experiences is concerning for a profession that exists to serve increasingly diverse service users.

Cultural competence

A growing body of literature supports the idea that 'it is important to recognise and

value the expertise that [brokers] have and the "real life activities" that they have engaged in from their experience of growing up in a minority community, which is comparable to the experiences in minority ethnic communities' (Napier in press: 22). Again, this touches upon the issue of cultural competence and suggests that an interpreting profession that is overwhelmingly representative of the majority culture is 'left working to recognise and comprehend language oppression and the inherent privilege of non-deaf people' (Cokely 2012); although Cokely refers specifically to 'non-deaf people', we can understand this more generally to mean the majority culture.

Being born into a minority group 'enables a different kind of decision-making about how best to facilitate the articulation of necessary information' (Kent 2012:17). For example, Harris and Sherwood (1978) observed that interpreters who come from the minority language speaker's community are 'more conscious of culture switching than of language switching [...], whereas much emphasis is put by professional translators on remaining absolutely faithful to the grammatical and syntactic structures of utterances during translated events'. Similarly, Davidson (2000) found selective and patterned (non-random) decision-making. He hypothesised that this could be an attempt to 'insulate the physician, and thus the institution of the clinic, from patient challenges to its authority' (ibid: 391).

These studies on gatekeeping situations across spoken language communities mirror experiences of deaf-parented interpreters (Napier, press). This suggests that culture-brokering experiences are fundamental to our understanding of how interpreting works. Research has only focused on differences

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either between spoken language communities or between deaf and hearing communities, never both. This has produced a binary perspective of the interpreter as a bilingual, bicultural conduit.

Roy (1993:7) was an early critic of this binary perspective, arguing that the 'bilingual, bicultural label did not take us away from a basic conceptual notion of interpreting as relaying text'. In other words, the bilingual, bicultural model doesn't really help in understanding cultural competence and decision-making. It seems more sensible to look at this through a multifaceted, multicultural lens, recognising the complexity of culture brokering not just between deaf and hearing cultures, but between White, Asian and Black cultures too. As a result, the notion of 'diversity' offers a much broader framework for understanding the interpreter's behaviours and decision-making, and can include all culture brokering experiences. This means both ethnic minority and deaf-parented experiences can be considered together, allowing interpreters to think about how diversity in general impacts on their practice.

Our profession's socio-ethnic homogeneity limits its ability to challenge institutional perceptions of self and other, to consider its own sensitivity to the cultural practices of its service users and to move

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away from binary models of interpreting. It is perhaps only by adopting a multicultural, multifaceted perspective of interpreting and

by encouraging more diversity within the profession that the impact of diversity can be fully explored. Until then, a profession that is overwhelmingly representative of a single socio-ethnic group risks becoming institutionalised, where the norms of the powerful majority culture become the established and ruling norms, and therefore increasingly out of touch with the people it exists to serve. 

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