

## **Interpreting as Ideologically-Structured Action: Collective Identity between Activist Interpreters and Protesters**

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### **ABSTRACT**

In this paper, I explore the work of the American Sign Language-English interpreters who volunteered in the 1988 Deaf President Now protest (DPN). Drawing from the construct of ideologically-structured action (Dalton 1994; Zald 2000), I frame the interpreters' decision-making throughout the protest, showing how their beliefs about and relationships with deaf people shaped their actions. Further, I argue that the activist interpreters exhibited a collective identity (Polletta and Jasper 2001) with the deaf protesters, despite not being deaf themselves. I also discuss the integral role of interpreters to the protesters' mission of challenging the existing power structure. To develop my argument, I analyze interview data collected from 27 DPN stakeholders to explore how and why the interpreters volunteered their time to push the protest forward. The data reveal strong personal and community relationships that motivated interpreters to volunteer their services. Through my analysis of interview data, I offer an exploration of the work of signed language interpreters in a specific localised setting, providing new insight into how ideology and community ties may guide the actions of interpreters in times of conflict and activism in deaf community settings.

Keywords: Protest; ideology; identity, interpreting

### **1. Introduction**

Baker has argued that the act of translation “does not mediate cultural encounters that exist outside the act of translation but rather participates in producing these encounters” (2013:23-24). In this paper, I address and analyse how the role<sup>1</sup> and work of American Sign Language-English interpreters during a particular historical moment pertaining to interactions between deaf community activists and interpreters in Gallaudet University, USA produced cultural-political encounters which opened – and still open – questions and reflections on the charged power

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<sup>1</sup> For a variety of perspectives on the role of interpreters in localised community settings, see *Redefining the Role of the Community Interpreter: The concept of role-space* by Peter Llewellyn-Jones and Robert G. Lee (2014).

dynamics at play concerning high-level political decisions relating to higher education and deaf and signed language communities in their particular localised settings.

In recent years there has been increased scholarly interest in how and why activist translators participate in collective action. As Tymoczko has argued, "...translation as a successful means of engagement and social change – like most political actions – requires affiliation and collective action" (2002:201). Baker explored the work of numerous groups of activist interpreters and translators (Babels, Tlaxcala, among others), concluding that such groups are "configuring a space in which specific linguistic performances participate, however subtly, in creating new cultural situations and new balances of power" (2013:45). But how and why do activist interpreters and translators offer linguistic mediation that creates such new power balances? One activist group that provides volunteer interpretation and translation in civil society, ECOS (*Traductores e Intérpretes por la Solidaridad*, Translators and Interpreters for Solidarity) describes cultivating an ideology in which they "work for and with people who require translation and interpreting services" (Manuel Jerez, López Cortés, and Brander de la Iglesia, n.d.). All these studies relate to agents who can hear as well as speak and/or read the languages involved. To raise critical awareness of activism by interpreters working with people not speaking and/or hearing the languages involved, this paper takes as its focus the protest led by deaf people at Gallaudet University in 1988, and specifically, how the American Sign Language-English (ASL) interpreters' decisions and behaviors during this protest relate to notions of ideologies about language, interpreting, and the people for whom they interpreted.

Despite the high profile of this historical moment at the time (1988), no study has explored in depth the role of interpreting and the contributions interpreters made to the multiplicity of authorities being engaged with and challenged during this protest. In this paper, I contribute to the study of activist translation and interpretation by analysing the *motivation* of interpreters to participate, as cited by these interpreters themselves. That is, I examine the ideologies that seemed to drive particular interpreters to join this movement as well as their very participation. In other words, this study works to capture something of the *experience* of signed language interpreting in a moment of conflict as recalled and identified by the interpreters themselves. Through the analysis of a series

semi-structured interviews with a number of the interpreters actually involved in the protests, I explore in this paper the ideological standpoints of interpreters, while explicating the contributing factors and implications of their ideologies, as they are articulated by the interpreters themselves from their different retrospective standpoints. I analyse activist interpreters' articulations through the lens of social movement studies, an interdisciplinary field that draws upon the knowledge, theoretical frameworks, and methodological practices of sociology, political science, and social psychology (Johnston 2014). This paper is an attempt at extending the emerging literature on activism in translation and interpreting, using social movement studies to understand and shed light on activist interpreters' work within contentious political settings (Baker 2006; Ben-Ari 2012; Salama-Carr 2008), with a focus on American Sign Language-English interpreters in a singular historical protest.

### *1.1 Historical background to the study*

This paper explores events that took place at Gallaudet University in 1988. Gallaudet, whose charter was signed in 1864 by United States President Abraham Lincoln, is the world's only liberal arts university specifically designed for deaf and hard of hearing students. Often internationally referred to as both "the Harvard" and "the Mecca" for deaf people, Gallaudet is viewed by many as both an authority on deaf-related issues, deaf education, and signed languages, as well as the center of deaf communities, cultivating vibrant exchanges of language, culture, and identity (Armstrong 2014).

In its first 124 years of existence, six individuals had served as Gallaudet's president, and each had been hearing,<sup>2</sup> white, and male. After Gallaudet's sixth president, Dr. Jerry Lee, announced his resignation in August 1987, the university began a search for an academic leader to serve as its seventh president. Three finalists were in competition for the position, and two of the candidates were deaf (Dr. I. King Jordan and Dr. Harvey Corson). Members of the deaf community eagerly anticipated an announcement from the Gallaudet University Board of Trustees, expecting that the university would finally have its first deaf president. Instead, they learned on 1 March 1988 that the board had selected Dr. Elisabeth Ann Zinser – the only hearing finalist. Although Dr. Zinser's

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<sup>2</sup> A *hearing* person is an individual who is not deaf or hard of hearing.

selection as Gallaudet's first woman president represented a step forward in advancing leadership by women on campus, many felt it was time for the world's only university specifically designed for deaf students to be led by a deaf person. To make matters worse, Dr. Zinser did not know American Sign Language and had no experience working with deaf people or teaching deaf students. As word spread of the board's decision to appoint Dr. Zinser over two deaf finalists, students, faculty, staff, and other members of the American deaf community sprang into action. Immediately following the news of Dr. Zinser's selection, protesters launched a groundbreaking week of protest, locking down the university campus and garnering unprecedented media attention, with local and national press reporting on the events in print and on the air. Through their actions, deaf protesters sought to challenge the hearing-centric power structures within their university. During this week of protest, four Gallaudet community members emerged as student leaders, organizing efforts on and off campus. Noteworthy events during the week of protest include marches to the United States Capitol, meetings with members of Congress, and on-campus rallies. After eight days of relentless demonstrations, the protesters were successful in forcing the board to comply with each of their four stated demands: 1) Zinser's resignation as president, to be replaced by a deaf individual, 2) the resignation of the Chair of the Gallaudet University Board of Trustees, 3) a 51% deaf majority on the Board of Trustees, and 4) no reprisals against demonstrators (i.e., punishment for Gallaudet students and faculty involved with the protest). This outcome has been described as "unusually successful" relative to similar student movements, such as the 1960s Free Speech Movement at the University of California, Berkeley (Christiansen and Barnartt 1995:168). The historic week of revolt that unfolded on Gallaudet's campus and across the nation's capital later came to be known as the Deaf President Now (DPN) protest.

One critical way that DPN protesters shared their message and engaged in claims-making activities (Lindekilde 2013) was by communicating through American Sign Language-English interpreters. Deaf historian Jack Gannon (1989) reported that approximately 70 interpreters were on Gallaudet's campus during the tumultuous week. These interpreters in effect became integral part of the claims-making activities albeit at the same time, none of them took on any leadership role within the DPN activist movement, despite their relatively large numbers. In contexts of social movement studies, however, the interpreters can be considered as *movement actors* (Tarrow and Tilly 2015), or

individuals who undertake some sort of collective action. As movement actors in DPN, the interpreters directly participated in a variety of claims-making activities through the act of interpreting live and recorded media interviews, student-led rallies, altercations with the police, among other interactions.

While one might assume that protesters and interpreters joined the protest because they were united in the fight for a deaf president, a close investigation and analysis of motivations of the American Sign Language-English (ASL) interpreters is yet to be explored in contexts of social movement theory. Scholars of social movements suggest that people decide to join social movements for three overarching reasons: because they have been aggrieved, because they have the resources to mobilize into action, and because they perceive and take advantage of political opportunities (Klandermans 2001). However, these three reasons do not appear to adequately explain these ASL interpreters' participation. Neither does a "desire to change circumstances" (Klandermans 2001:276) fully explain the intensity of the interpreters' participation in these protests, or their ideological motivation. While one might assume that protesters and interpreters joined the protest because they were united in the fight for a deaf president, a close investigation and analysis of motivations of the American Sign Language-English (ASL) interpreters is yet to be explored in contexts of social movement theory.<sup>3</sup> In this paper, I thus attempt to explain how and why the American Sign Language-English interpreters were motivated to participate in the protest.

To analyze the interpreters' participation in terms of their interpreting practice, I draw from two key concepts in social movement studies: collective identity (Polletta and Jasper 2001) and ideologically-structured action (Dalton 1994; Zald 2000). First, I explore how the *collective identity* exhibited between DPN interpreters and deaf protesters emerged as the crucial factor explaining the interpreters' participation, and the ways in which they did so. In view of collective identity referring to "an individual's cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice, or institution" (Polletta and Jasper 2001:285), I explore and describe the notion

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<sup>3</sup> Although this study is the first to analyse DPN interpreters through the lens of social movement studies, Christiansen and Barnartt (1995) used social movement theory to both recount the protest and attempt to explain its organization and outcomes.

of affective ties and how the affective ties between the interpreters and the protesters drove their participation, although the DPN interpreters were themselves not deaf.

The second key concept I draw from in social movement studies is ideologically-structured action (Dalton 1994; Zald 2000), action that is inspired or guided by a particular ideological stance on the part of the social movement actor. In the context of social movements, ideology has been defined as “a system of ideas that couples assertions and theories about the nature of social life with values and norms relevant to goals that promote or resist social change” (Oliver and Johnston 2005:192). *Ideologically-structured action* therefore is social movement behavior that is influenced by actors’ ideologies. People are not only drawn to participate in movements based on their ideological systems, but their very behavior is also influenced by these beliefs. In this paper, I explicate how interpreters’ behavior in the protest can be understood as a form of ideologically-structured action (Dalton 1994; Zald 2000), and why notions of ideologically-structured action (ibid) are useful to draw on in contexts of translation and interpreting within conflict situations

To describe the perspectives of those who were on the ground in 1988, I chose to conduct semi-structured oral history interviews with key DPN participants. Interviews are a frequently used method of data collection in social movement studies (della Porta 2014). Oral history interviews are especially useful for researchers studying movements about which there may be little available archived material, as the researcher’s objective is to bring out a “thick” description from interviewees about the period under study (Blee and Taylor 2002). The notion of a “thick” description (Geertz, 1973) can be attributed to ethnographic research in which one attempts to describe the lives of a particular group of people. Because the acts of interpreting and translation are often overlooked in studies of social movements, I argue that a thick description of the lives and work of interpreters – as told by the interpreters themselves – in a particular protest will aid in uncovering truths about how interpreting in social movements ‘works.’ The interview data I explore and analyse in this paper offers rich insight into a complex dynamic that perhaps could not be explored via other means due to the fact that the protest took place over 30 years ago and that little archival information about interpreting in the protest exists. As so little is recorded about the work of interpreters in particular localised moments at the time of their occurrence and the archival

record pays scant attention to their role. From this perspective, the data gathered from interviewing the interpreters participating in this particular historical moment at Gallaudet university make an ideal case for analysis: as both archival and contemporary materials on localised contexts of interpreting, and specifically sign language interpreting in the U.S.

## **2. Method**

### *2.1 Participants*

In this study, I conducted semi-structured oral history interviews with 21 individuals who interpreted during DPN. To provide clear context to their positioning and involvement in the protest, here I provide some information I collected from the participants.

Nineteen identified as white, one identified as Asian, and one identified as being of mixed race. The mean age of interpreters' during DPN was 33, with a range of 20-48 years of age. The mean age of interpreters' American Sign Language acquisition was 16, with an age range of 0-33. Nine recalled receiving at least some form of financial compensation for their work during DPN, although 14 of the 21 identified primarily as volunteer interpreters. Note that I also interviewed interpreters who were paid, such as those who worked with the board of trustees during the protest. These interpreters provided services for press conferences, board meetings, and other events. However, in this paper I choose to focus on the roles and experiences of activist interpreters who participated in DPN by volunteering their time.

Seven of the 21 participants were faculty or staff at Gallaudet, five were contract interpreters working for the university during the time of the protest, two worked at an interpreting agency that provided interpreting services for the board of trustees, and seven had no formal affiliation to the university at the time. Nineteen were certified American Sign Language-English interpreters at the time of the protest, 18 of whom held certifications granted by the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, the national certifying body for signed language interpreters in the United States; one participant held a state-level qualification, and two held no interpreting credentials. I also interviewed five deaf protesters and one deaf member of Gallaudet's administration, bringing the total number of interviewees to 27. Although I cannot claim that the people I interviewed are a

representative sample of those who participated in and interpreted for DPN, their demographic backgrounds and relationships to the protest must not be ignored. Who they are is a part of the experiences they shared in the interviews, and their backgrounds are a piece of the puzzle that is their participation in the protest. In some cases, the interviewees shared demographic pieces of information about themselves during the interviews, suggesting that their individual biographic makeups played a role in their participation. For example, interpreters frequently reiterated their formal relationship to the protest and the protesters (e.g., Gallaudet faculty, contract interpreter, alumni) and described how their participation was shaped by such relationships.

## *2.2 Procedure*

To ensure the fidelity of the interview data collected, I followed precise procedures in the data collection phase and throughout the study. Here I explain the procedures I followed while conducting the research. This study was approved by the Gallaudet University Institutional Review Board (IRB). Before being interviewed, each participant completed an informed consent form and video release form.

To identify and recruit participants who interpreted in DPN, I consulted a list of nearly 100 interpreters' names in the Gallaudet University Archives' repository of DPN-related documents. Using the online member database of the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, I contacted the interpreters I could identify. In total, I contacted 69 people (including interpreters, deaf protesters, and members of Gallaudet's administration) to request their participation in interviews. Of the 69 individuals I contacted, 27 were interviewed, 14 declined to be interviewed<sup>4</sup>, and the rest (28) did not respond after at least three attempts to be contacted. Of the 27 interviewees, two stated that they would be more comfortable with in-person, rather than remote, interviews; to accommodate their request, I traveled and met with them both for individual face-to-face interviews.

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<sup>4</sup> The individuals I contacted cited a number of reasons for declining an interview. These reasons included lack of availability; an unwillingness to speak via videoconferencing; unwillingness to allow their comments to be recorded; inability to clearly recall the events; and feeling that they did not participate in the protest in a meaningful way (e.g., they only stopped by one day for a few minutes).

For the people agreeing to be interviewed, I scheduled to meet with them individually for an interview. Prior to each individual meeting, participants signed informed consent and video release forms, which permitted me to record our interviews so that I could transcribe and analyze the data. I used a semi-structured interview grid to guide data collection. Before designing the interview questions, I had conducted a pilot interview with an individual who had provided interpreting services in a more recent deaf-led protest on Gallaudet's campus in 2006. Using the pilot interview as a guide, I developed questions that encouraged participants to describe their experiences in the protest, specifically focusing on the role(s) they identified as assuming. Twenty-four interviews were then conducted remotely via video and saved with screen recording software (QuickTime or SimpleScreenRecorder) to preserve the data for analysis. Two interviews were conducted face-to-face and recorded using hi-definition video cameras.

### *2.3 Analysis*

To transcribe the interviews, I used both strict transcription and description, transcription in which the words produced by the participant are reconstructed as closely as possible in written language, with the addition of relevant information, such as the participant's nonverbal behavior (Hammersley 2010). I used this method to recognise that the interpreter participants in this study were all bimodal bilinguals<sup>5</sup> and sometimes exhibited codeswitching or codeblending (Emmorey, Borinstein, Thompson, and Gollan 2008), that is that they used both English and American Sign Language. To ensure analysis captured the richness of the data, I also noted instances of codeswitching when transcribing. For example, when an interview was conducted primarily in spoken English, participants would occasionally use American Sign Language to reminisce on particular moments in the protest (e.g., "I remember a march when the students signed..." and recount an American Sign Language protest chant.)

To enrich and add to the insight gained from the interpreters, I also conducted interviews with six deaf individuals:<sup>6</sup> five protesters and one member of Gallaudet's administration. These interviews

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<sup>5</sup> Bimodal bilingualism refers to the linguistic situation of having some degree of fluency with two languages that are perceived and produced in different modalities (e.g., English and American Sign Language).

<sup>6</sup> As a fluent American Sign Language user, I conducted interviews directly with deaf participants in American Sign Language. Each interview was video-recorded in order for me to carry out post-interview analysis.

were conducted in American Sign Language; that is, I asked the participants questions in American Sign Language, the same language in which they responded to my questions. As American Sign Language is not a written language, an additional challenge is faced when attempting to transcribe signed data: analyzing a written transcription of the data is in fact a *translation* of the original signed data. As noted by Hochgesang (2012), researchers must therefore be selective in determining what features to note when transcribing signed languages due to the fact that each language is presented in a distinct modality (i.e., signed or written) and phonological features do not match neatly across modalities (e.g., a particular facial expression used in American Sign Language cannot be perfectly reflected in a written description of the expression). In terms of my own transcriptions of American Sign Language data, I focused for the most part on semantic and thematic content, as opposed to phonological formations of signs. To do this, I carefully viewed each signed interview and produced a close translation, that is a written version of the video-recorded interview data in written English. After completing the translation, that is video-written transcription process, I hired a deaf, native American Sign Language user to verify my version of these translations.<sup>7</sup>

The research method included an iterative analytical process; that is, I transcribed the data and begun analyzing for preliminary themes while still conducting interviews (Bosi & Reiter, 2014). After the data collection phase, I completed the transcription, coding, and analysis of the data. To analyse the data, I used Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach to thematic analysis: 1) Familiarizing yourself with the data, 2) Generating initial codes, 3) Searching for themes, 4) Reviewing themes, 5) Defining and naming themes, and 6) Producing the report. Using the social movement studies concepts of ideologically-structured action and collective identity as an analytical framework for interpreting the data collected during my interviews, I sought to identify patterns in the data that would help to explain interpreters' participation in the protest. To my knowledge, this project is the first that merges social movement studies with interpreting studies and translation studies through thematic analysis to describe the roles of activist interpreters in contentious political settings. In this way, I aimed to learn more about how ideologies personal to

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<sup>7</sup> Securing native language users to verify translations of signed interview data is a practice frequently used by researchers who are second language learners (see Metzger 1999).

the interpreters drew them to participate and shaped their behavior throughout the protest. Specifically, I considered the experiences interpreters shared and how the data they shared could deepen retrospective understandings of their participation in the protest in 1988 as an ideologically-charged act.

### **3. Results**

#### *3.1 Motivations for joining the protest*

In this paper, I frequently quote stories and experiences shared by the interviewees. I selected these particular quotations because they are illustrative of the trends in the data I identified in my analysis. The quotations can thus be read as snapshots into the full data set, chosen as supporting examples of the themes I explored. Further, for ease of reading, I have assigned pseudonyms to the interviewees I quote in this paper.

Although each interpreter's experience was unique to them, it was clear that there were numerous points in common concerning how they first joined the protest. Most interviewees recounted their own early experiences with the American deaf community as inspiring their sense of solidarity with deaf communities. In this respect, the interpreter interviewees framed their decision to participate in the protest in terms of their beliefs and relationships with the deaf community. One interpreter who volunteered in the protest shared her experience:

There was this one particular family I worked with, and on a Saturday the dad just showed up at my house with a cake and some tools because I had mentioned I just bought a house of my own and my pipes were leaking, and I didn't know anything about that. So he just came over to fix it. The reason I mention that is that, for a lot of us, especially those of us who were really a part of that whole deaf community, there was never any question. I mean it wasn't like, "Oh, let me help the deaf people," in a paternalistic way. This was your family and your friends. This was going on. If I needed something, I had so many deaf friends that would just step up to the plate, so it wasn't even a conscious thought. So for DPN, it was like, "This is going on. This is what I can offer." So that's the motivation for me to interpret in DPN.

Angela

Interpreters interviewed also referenced their gratitude to deaf people and an immaterial debt owed to the deaf community in return for their kindness and generosity. Another interpreter who volunteered in DPN summarized her reason for participating and her connection to the deaf community in wider, rather than individual localized, frames of understanding:

I volunteered to interpret in DPN because of the community. I did not grow up in a deaf family, but I did go to Gallaudet from 1981 to 1983. I lived in the dorms. I knew a lot of the people who were involved, but there were also a lot of people I didn't know. They had given me what I was doing. They had given me language, they had given me culture, they had opened doors that hadn't been opened to me and wouldn't have been in other ways.

Nina

As demonstrated in the above two passages, these two interpreters suggested their decision to interpret for the protest was rooted in a sense of obligation toward the deaf community at large. The other interpreters, along with the two cited above, described their early experiences with deaf people, long before DPN. With these comments, interpreters portrayed deaf people as a kind and generous group who offered their language and culture to outsiders.

In comments like this, both interpreters cited above suggested that their volunteer work in DPN was a way of giving back to the deaf community. Interpreters also described future volunteer interpreting work after DPN. Although the interpreters described providing pro bono services primarily for causes that they supported, they also suggested a commitment to providing their services when interpreting might not otherwise be available to deaf people. One interpreter who volunteered in DPN discussed providing pro bono interpreting services in other settings to make his “corner of the world a little more fair” not for a cause, but because “if not for the fact that someone were willing to come, some organizations wouldn't be willing to pay for an interpreter.” The interpreter explained that while these events often aligned with his personal beliefs and worldview, his primary focus was on giving back to a deaf community that had been “very open”

with him by sharing their language. Volunteer interpreters echoed these sentiments when discussing their motivations to interpret in DPN, suggesting they recognized a need in the deaf community for interpreting services and their ability to fill that need.

This last point brings me back to why many people join social movements: the desire to change circumstances may explain why people join social movements (Klandermans 2001). For although the interpreters interviewed did not describe a strong desire to change circumstances (i.e., ensure the selection of a deaf president), their own localized participation reflects their associations with deaf people as community members and their desires for meaningful experiences. Describing deep personal connections to the deaf community, the interpreters recounted relationships that had been formed over years of friendships with deaf people. Despite not being deaf and not identifying as full members of the deaf community, the interpreters' motivations to interpret were primarily driven by community ties and group belonging. In this respect, these motivations echo two other overarching reasons people participate in social movements: a desire for group belonging, and a desire for a meaningful life (ibid.). By enjoying meaningful life experiences, I am not referring only to people in the deaf community, but also to the interpreters themselves. For example, one DPN interpreter and former Gallaudet faculty member described her decision to return to Gallaudet for DPN, within frameworks of suggesting that the protest was a significant event in her life:

I taught at Gallaudet for six years on and off. Most of that was in the English department, and at the time I had a master's degree, and I was totally immersed in the deaf world in DC. I lived with deaf people, worked with deaf people, and my friends were deaf people. At a certain point I left to go to get my PhD at [another university]. That was in 1986, so in 1988 I was two years into my PhD work, but as soon as DPN started to gain momentum I knew I had to come back. And so I came back. I wasn't there during the first day, but on the second day I was on the ground. I wasn't living in DC at the time, so I had to hop on a plane and get there. But I came back for it... I came back because I thought it was the most important thing that ever happened in my life really. I mean it was really up there with getting married and getting my PhD. It's one of those things that I would have regretted for the rest of my life if I wouldn't have

come. I was too involved with the deaf world [to not participate], and I just wanted to be a part of the events. There was no choice in the matter.

Jane

By framing DPN as “the most important thing” in her life to that point, Jane emphasizes not only her commitment to the cause, but her dedication to and relationship with the deaf community. Other interpreters shared similar sentiments, describing DPN as a watershed moment in their personal lives, comparing it to the birth of a first child. Here we read that an interpreter suggested that she had “no choice” but to return to campus because of her relationships at Gallaudet and her longtime involvement in the deaf community. Further, by explaining that she had to put her academic studies on hold and fly across the country to return to Gallaudet, she frames her commitment to the community in a strong way. Other interpreters explained their decision to similarly work in the protest within an ideological framework of alignment with the deaf community. One volunteer interpreter and Gallaudet graduate recalled his decision to travel thousands of miles to participate in the protest and interpret. He recounted watching a news program on television about the protest when he learned that the chair of Gallaudet’s board of trustees, Jane Bassett Spilman, had allegedly told the student leaders of the protest that deaf people were not ready to function in a hearing world:<sup>8</sup>

The news segment started off by explaining about Gallaudet University, and we’re watching, thinking, “That’s interesting so far.” And then a quote appeared on the screen in large lettering. It was a quote of something Spilman had said. It was just the words on the screen, without showing a video clip of Spilman saying it, conveying that she had recently said, “Deaf people are not ready to function in the hearing world.” We stared at the screen thinking, “What?!” I couldn’t believe it. [The person I was with] and I looked at each other in disbelief. “My God... She said that?!” It was beyond the pale, but the students were able to really use that to their benefit as ammunition. So

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<sup>8</sup> There is considerable debate over whether or not Spilman made such a statement. The alleged comments were made in a private meeting between Spilman, who was hearing and did not know American Sign Language, and the deaf student leaders. Spilman claims that she used a double negative and that her comments were misconstrued by the interpreter in the meeting. For further analysis of this event, see Christiansen and Barnartt (1995).

then I started thinking, “Maybe I should fly out there and join the protest and help out.”

Soon after that I booked tickets for the both of us.

Bernard

In this story, Bernard indicates alignment with deaf people and the wider deaf community. He describes being aghast at learning the chair of Gallaudet’s board of trustees would refer to deaf people in such an ignorant manner. He suggests that this attack on a community he cared for was so egregious that it motivated him to join the protest. The decision to travel across the country appears to have been motivated primarily by his opposition to an attack on the deaf community, not the specific demands of the protesters. The interpreters I interviewed described shock and horror at Spilman’s alleged comment, the board’s decision to select a hearing president, and systematic discrimination against their deaf friends and family members. Although the interpreters were not deaf themselves, their reactions to actions and decisions by both Spilman and the board are clear indications of being aggrieved, one of the key motivations for joining social movements (Klandermans, 2001).

Although, participants typically framed their decision to interpret for the protest in terms of their personal beliefs about the deaf community, one Gallaudet employee and volunteer interpreter described a personal motivation for her participation. She told the story of how she learned about the protest and then visited the campus:

I was a full-time employee of the university but not as an interpreter. I was working in the career center, and I remember that first day, that Monday morning, waking up, I had a radio alarm clock, and the alarm would go on, and it said, “Gallaudet University is closed today due to a student protest on the selection of the president.” So my sleepy ears heard, “Gallaudet is closed today,” and I kind of rolled over and thought, “Oh, like a snow day, great!” Then I was like, “Wait, what?!” [laugh] Then I sat up in bed, and I thought, “This is kind of exciting!” And for about three seconds I thought, “I could just go back to sleep and not go to work today.” Then I thought, “I am a FOMO kind of person, you know, Fear of Missing Out.” And I thought, “I don’t wanna miss the

excitement here.” So I got up, got showered, got dressed, and went to work knowing that the university was closed.

Brenda

Brenda’s story stands out from other perspectives interpreters shared of joining the protest. The volunteer interpreters I interviewed typically framed their participation in terms of a commitment to the deaf community; however, this interpreter suggests her primary reason for going to the protest was to satisfy her curiosity and sense of excitement. She is the only interpreter who suggested a personal rather than collective motivation to join the protest. However, as the week progressed, she described aligning more closely with the protesters and considering the implications of the protest for her friends and colleagues in the deaf community. Although this interpreter’s reasons for joining the protest do not perfectly mirror the motivations shared by other protesters and interpreters, her decision to participate can still be explained by social movement theory. In this respect, her response resonates with the phenomenon of individuals sometimes joining movements out of a desire for meaningful life experiences (Klandermans 2001). Most DPN interpreters interviewed thus appeared to be actively seeking out the collective meaningful life experience of challenging power structures with their deaf friends, family members, and colleagues in the protest. This particular interpreter also expressed her hope for meaningful life experiences in the protest, albeit in a slightly different way: her choice to participate was driven by a personal desire for exciting and meaningful experiences, rather than a collective desire as a part of a community.

It is noteworthy that in almost all instances, the interpreters I interviewed described to join the protest due to their own association with members of the deaf community and others in the protest. Rather than being driven by a sense of social alienation and isolation (Kornhauser 1959), these interviews suggest that DPN interpreters were drawn to participate through their involvement in a social network (Jenkins 1981), namely the American deaf community.

### *3.2 Dynamics of power during the protest – ‘slash roles’ of interpreters*

Interpreters’ associations with the deaf community explain not only the decision to participate in DPN, but also their behaviors during the protest. Specifically, interpreters’ views on role were informed by both their personal and professional ideologies about interpreting and the deaf community.

During the interviews, the interpreters typically identified themselves in relation to the protest; that is, they described falling on a continuum from activist/protester and occasional interpreter to that of an objective interpreter. Interpreters who volunteered for rallies, media interviews, and other protest events often discussed wearing multiple ‘hats’ and described some level of support for the protest, emphasizing their personal relationships with protesters above their professional obligations as interpreters. Participants often reported seeing themselves as being on the edge of activism. One DPN interpreter described juggling his personal feelings about the movement with his professional obligations while interpreting media interviews:

So when I’m interpreting for [one of the student leaders of the protest] for example I’m gonna realize that I need to kind of disappear and just kinda convey the message. But the moment that interview ends, and he turns the camera, boom! I’m back to, well, I become kinda like the advocate, you know, protest participant the moment [the student leader] turns his head and goes off to do something else.

Bernard

In this excerpt, Bernard suggests that when not interpreting, he assumed the role of a protester. As another interpreter who participated in DPN primarily as a protester opined, “I was there as a person. We were just there to march and to be there. Then somebody hearing would come in, and they would say, ‘Tell him what I’m saying,’ and I would go, ‘Oh, okay.’” Echoing this sentiment, Bernard later summarized his view of his ‘slash role’ in which he was first and foremost a DPN participant, with his identity as an interpreter as “the last part of all the slashes.” Another staff interpreter at an interpreting agency who did paid and volunteer work during DPN recalled his experience participating in a march:

The march to the hotel for [President] Zinser's resignation was amazing. That's where I kinda went, "Okay, I'm not an interpreter now, I'm a real person, and I'm with this protest." And off we marched. That was the one where they didn't have a permit, and the police were like, "Okay, we can't tell these people anything. Let's go," and so they escorted us down. That was exciting, standing outside waiting for the announcement, and when it came just the roar and excitement of that moment. It still gives me goosebumps 30 years later.

Jeremy

Here, Jeremy describes a shift in his role while marching compared to other points in the protest. This story is illustrative of many cases in which interpreters interviewed recalled navigating boundaries as professionals and wading into the waters of activism when not actively interpreting. In his comments, the interpreter describes protesters being unable to communicate with police officers, who subsequently allowed the march to take place without a permit. As an interpreter, Jeremy had the ability to step in and assist with communication between the police and the protesters. However, his decision to march – rather than interpret – further underscores his alignment with protesters and the protest. This interpreter's view of himself as a quasi-protester was a frequent – although not universal – perspective shared by interpreters. For example, another volunteer interpreter described his apprehension to act or be seen as a protester, arguing that he did not lend his "voice" to the cause:

With an event like a protest, your physical presence is often interpreted as if you're part of the protesters. You know, if we take an aerial view of the crowd, you're in there somewhere. But I think in that event, to be a protester to me means you really had to have your own voice. You had to express your ideas, your opinions, your experience, your perspective. I couldn't and didn't do that. So I think that's a real significant difference that the deaf students, the leaders, the alumni, they all had ownership in a way that no interpreter had because it's in large part about the lived experience of that group of people. I certainly can't lay claim to that lived experience and certainly can't lay claim to representing that lived experience. So, I would say that even though

philosophically and attitudinally, I was a thousand percent behind the protesters, I definitely don't think of myself as a protester.

Noam

Here, Noam demarcates the difference between his personal support for the protest and his conceptualization of the role of interpreters. He perceives his role as a hearing person as precluding him from fully understanding the lived experience of deaf people, thus rendering him incapable of being an active protester. However, he recognizes the perception by outsiders that interpreters, by their very presence at the event, were also protesters. Another volunteer interpreter described a similar perspective; however, she accepted the identity of being both an interpreter and a protester, citing the additional actions of some interpreters when not protesting. Through marching, displaying DPN signs on their personal vehicles, and other contributions, this interpreter described "a sense of being part of the movement." Some volunteer interpreters, on the other hand, saw their role more clearly defined as interpreters and outsiders.

For example, one volunteer interpreter suggested he would never have overtly participated in the protest by marching or holding a sign. Another volunteer interpreter suggested she did not engage in ancillary participation in the protest for two reasons. First, she referenced exhaustion and time constraints from interpreting so much during the week. Further, she suggested:

I felt like actively protesting might be too much of the interpreter face in the crowd. I didn't want that. I didn't want people to come up to me and say, "Oh, you did a good job interpreting." I didn't want to make it about the interpreters, so I was very careful. I wanted to be in the background. I wanted to be behind the scenes and just be there to serve.

Shirley

This comment represents how interpreters articulated respect for the protest being led by deaf people. No interpreter indicated an interest in adopting a leadership role in the protest. Instead, they suggested they did not want to be seen as taking control of a movement they argued did not belong to them. This perspective was even stronger when interpreters discussed their role as the protest

unfolded. While DPN was about self-determination for deaf people, a Gallaudet contract interpreter who volunteered in the protest suggested that DPN also helped him to better understand his role as a hearing person in the deaf community:

The most important lesson for me in DPN was to start thinking about who gets to be called deaf and how the deaf community handles that question. I don't think that's something I need to decide, but I do need to take a look and see how the community as a whole is grappling with that.

Harvey

Taken together, such comments represent a conscious effort on the part of these interpreters to ensure they did not inadvertently usurp the power of the protest from deaf people. However, the interpreters never framed this understanding of their role or position within professional standards or beliefs. When considering their role in DPN and the appropriate ways to act, interpreters referenced their relationships within the deaf community, not professional codes of ethics or norms.

Regardless of how they identified during the protest, the participants expressed experiencing little or no internal conflict over their role as interpreters working in and around the protest. In particular, the interpreters who volunteered their time for various protest events indicated that their understanding of their role was informed by expectations from protesters and the wider deaf community. As one person who volunteered to interpret during the protest stated:

I didn't feel any ethical conflicts over my role. We just went with it. We were in the community. And we were really taking our cues about what interpreters were from the community. And it may have conflicted with what I learned in class. But they were happy with the work we were doing, and that's all that mattered.

Jeremy

With this comment, Jeremy describes his understanding of his role as being based in deaf community expectations. Further, he notes that while his role in the protest may have conflicted with standard interpreting practice that he learned in school, his primary concern was meeting the

needs of the deaf community. Other interpreters echoed Jeremy's sentiments, describing no internal turmoil or ethical conflicts in their role as interpreters and quasi-protest participants. They suggested deaf community expectations about the role of interpreters – not ethical principles taught in a classroom – were the guideposts that influenced how they assumed their role.

Interpreters who volunteered for the protest shared stories of their interpreting work in which they described behaving outside the traditionally prescribed role of an interpreter. Such stories centered around interpreters unconsciously suggesting their ideological alignment with the protest and the protesters. For example, a Gallaudet contract interpreter who volunteered to work in the protest recalled interpreting a contentious encounter between student protesters and the police:

There was an encounter with students and the police, and it was at the end of a long day. I think it was probably night-time, probably 9:00 or something. It was dark. I don't remember what the issue was, but the police officers outside the gate were upset for some reason with something that some students were doing. I think there was a lot of kind of fear from the police because they couldn't figure out what was going on and didn't know how to control it. I mean they'd drive up and they'd open their trunks and they'd grab the bullhorn and try to use it, and they'd realize that wasn't gonna work. [laugh] And so they were just like, "Oh, my God." They had this elevated kind of fear factor, and that came up in some of their interactions, but there were two or three police officers I think, and a student came to me and said, "I'm having some difficulty with these police officers." And so, "Sure, I'll interpret for you." So I went and I stood next to the police officer and they started talking to me, like really yelling at me about what they were concerned about. And, and I was like, "I'm... I will interpret the information, you convey the information to this deaf person, and I will voice..." and you know. And they would interrupt my explanation, and then they'd start yelling at me again. And I would try again. I think I tried three or four times. It's like, "It's not working when you yell at me in my ear," and it was almost like, "Oh, my gosh. I'm gonna get arrested for not being cooperative!" What I said was terrible. I finally said, "Tell him yourself," and I walked away. [laugh] It was bad. But it was so ridiculous by then. Whatever they

were upset about, there was nothing that was gonna happen as a result of that. The student had already tried to say, “We’re not going to do anything, everything’s going to be peaceful,” or whatever, and the student was doing an excellent job of trying to calm down the situation. But the policeman was just really physically being a bully to me. And so I finally just said “Tell him yourself,” and I walked away knowing that he couldn’t tell him himself and that the whole thing was shut down. So the two other policemen that were with the guy who was yelling at me came running after me, and I’m thinking, “Oh, they’re gonna arrest me!” [laugh] But they said, “We’re so sorry. We’re so sorry for our supervisor, and we just don’t know why he acts like that.” So it was the police supervisor. But I’m like, “Well, you know, I guess he’ll have to write notes now.” So I walked away and no harm done, but it’s a situation I recall because I felt like I’m really on the line here in terms of getting myself in a little more trouble than I wanted to get in.

Ella

In this story, Ella has framed her experience as falling outside the norms of a typical interpreting assignment, casting aside traditional professional standards about the role of an interpreter. A professional interpreter would not generally abandon a consumer – much less a police officer – in the middle of an interaction. However, the interpreter suggests growing frustration with the officer and made the decision to discontinue communication. It is interesting to note the positive outcome of her decision, considering the pitfalls that could have befallen the interpreter. In this and similar comments, interpreters described mediating contentious interactions in which they become the subject of contention. To mediate the contention, the interpreters described considering the contextual factors and their alignment with the deaf protesters that influenced their decision-making processes.

The deaf protesters I interviewed shared varying perspectives on the role they thought interpreters should assume during the protest. One protester commented on interpreters’ role as allies in the protest: “The protest week was very organic. I didn’t look at them as interpreters but as allies... we all had our role to play in the protest. I saw interpreters as being on our team and on the same side.”

The protester described how interpreters made sacrifices to be available to interpret in a wide variety of settings “at a moment’s notice.” Other deaf protesters suggested that interpreters were full participants in the protest, describing interpreters as fellow activists and protesters. A deaf protester shared the following perspective:

There were a lot of illegal actions during DPN. But sometimes civil rights actions take precedence. Like when we marched without a permit... We also had students who illegally deflated the bus tires. They took over the campus and closed the entrances. That wasn’t safe! Now, in some situations the press would talk with a student, and the student may not have been the best communicator. I have a gut feeling that interpreters might have played a role in bluffing a little bit. They were kind of embellishing the language, playing it up.<sup>9</sup> Now keep in mind that during the 1988 protest interpreters were volunteers. So not necessarily everyone who was there was a professional interpreter. But my suspicion is the protest was very flexible, and some interpreters were like, “Fuck it!”

Malcolm

Malcolm describes seeing interpreters behave as fellow activists, suggesting they may have taken drastic actions similar to deaf protesters. Specifically, he suggests that interpreters may have skirted ethical standards that require them to interpret faithfully and instead embellished protesters’ language in media interviews and appearances. By drawing parallels between interpreters’ actions and protesters’ actions (e.g., marching without a permit, deflating bus tires), he frames interpreters as not only supporters of the protest, but as activists and protesters.

In contrast to this perspective, a deaf student leader from the protest noted that while interpreters were “friends in the community,” they were also expected to act within their prescribed roles:

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<sup>9</sup> Although an analysis of the source and target language output is outside the scope of this paper, it has been suggested by Christiansen and Barnartt (1995) that the interpreters were “embellishing” the language used by protesters in interviews, thereby strengthening the deaf protesters’ cause (Christiansen and Barnartt 1995:184).

In the simplest view, an interpreter acts as a facilitator, a translator, a transmitter, a conduit, to facilitate the message to a signed message, and to a spoken message. My view of interpreters was always the same growing up. I see how some deaf people look at interpreters as “assistants” or “helpers,” but I don’t like that role. I’m in charge, not the interpreter... Now, back in 1988, on their “off duty time” interpreters were typically friends in the community... DPN interpreters did a great job. Most of the reporters would do interviews, and the interpreters wouldn’t speak for themselves – they would defer to deaf people. Not like how when hearing people address all their questions to interpreters, who then answer everything. Instead, they brought in a deaf person to answer, so that was good... Interpreters served as ears to the outside world for us. I mean, interpreters knew where reporters were and who they were, so they would tell us things like when they arrived, like when ABC [News] or someone got there, they would pass on the word and inform us. Also the police would tell us about things like road closures, and interpreters kept us informed, so they were our ears to what was happening out there, which helped so we didn’t have to do a lot of checking into things, they would let us know as our ears.

Albert

This perspective underscores Albert’s multifaceted relationships with interpreters, as well as his understanding of their role. Note the apparent contradiction in his views about interpreters: although he initially emphasizes the linguistic mediation aspect of interpreting, he also describes the personal relationships between the protesters and interpreters. With his suggestion that interpreters acted as the protesters’ “ears to the outside world” who took actions beyond interpreting – such as providing protesters with information about the journalists reporting on the protest – he situates interpreting as an activity that goes beyond linguistic facilitation and cultural mediation. By framing interpreters as “friends in the deaf community” on their “off duty time,” Albert portrays the complex professional and personal roles that interpreters have in the deaf community. These perspectives from consumers of interpreting services demonstrate the critical importance of addressing “slash roles” and professional boundaries established by interpreters and those with whom they work. Scholarly discussion is warranted on the roles and boundaries

interpreters assume in times of protest as well as in conflict settings, and how they can differ according to localised contexts, particularly in the realm of activism in signed language communities.

The interview data I have shared and analysed here are a first step towards this discussion and work to reveal how DPN stakeholders – interpreters and protesters – navigated the role of interpreters between hearing and non-hearing agents in the protest. Emerging in this study is the dynamic nature by which the interpreters managed complex boundaries and expectations, which were based on expectations of the deaf community as well as their own expectations of themselves as allies. The interpreters drew from their personal and professional beliefs about interpreting and the deaf community when making decisions about how to assume their role.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In this paper, I have explored the role of 21 American Sign Language-English interpreters who offered their services in what is widely regarded as the most critical moment in the civil rights history of deaf people in the United States of America. Although social scientists caution against making broad conclusions about the consequences of protests and movements, Barnartt and Scotch (2001) report that protests about deaf-related issues increased fivefold after DPN. The reverberations from DPN were felt around the world. For example, Druchen (2014) suggests that DPN acted as a catalyst for a great deal of activism from deaf South Africans, including protests demanding changes in deaf education. Specifically, 42 deaf schools participated in a protest in 1988, calling for the use of South African Sign Language, rather than only spoken language, for instruction (*ibid*).

Language – like ideologies and power dynamics – is not always audible, and in many cases is not heard. In the Deaf President Now protest, interpreters played an integral role in making deaf protesters' cries for justice be literally seen as well as heard by the hearing majority. In a similar vein, the perspectives of interpreters are often in such contexts frequently ignored and unheard. Through this retrospective case study, I have attempted to hear and amplify the voices of the

interpreters who lived through an important historic moment in the deaf community and interpreting activism by listening to their stories in their own words and sharing them here.

While I have shown that individual interpreters' decisions and actions as told in their own voice can be analysed from theories in social movement studies, I have also shown that individual interpreters describing their sense of belonging to this protest offers a unique window into the local dynamics of power at play within an educational institution whose students identify with many roles. Specifically, the constructs of collective identity and ideologically-structured action in relation to their sense of agency, choice, and affiliation as interpreters with the deaf community explain how and why interpreters participated in this particular protest.

In this respect, this study reiterates the findings described by Cokely (2005) when describing the bond between interpreters and the deaf community in the early development of the signed language interpreting profession in the United States. Chronicling how interpreters shared strong connections with deaf people and rarely expected compensation for interpreting, in environments of increased professionalization, the field of deaf community interpreting underwent a “change from [a relationship] based on communal obligation to one based on economic opportunity; from one based on personal relations to one based on business relations” (Cokely 2005:16). Given the strong ties between the interpreters and the wider deaf community, it is not surprising that many of the interpreters I interviewed felt aggrieved and motivated to take action (Klandermans, 2001). The interpreters who participated in DPN primarily did so with no promise of compensation or formal professional responsibility. Instead, they participated in the protest out of their “communal obligation” to and with the deaf community (Cokely 2005:16). Although the interpreters interviewed frequently referred to the contemporary business model of community interpreting, their collective identity and personal connections with protesters and members of the wider deaf community was a key motivator for their participation in 1988.

I note here that the interpreters interviewed for this study were all hearing.<sup>10</sup> Hearing interpreters, by definition, are not deaf and do not have the same worldview and experiences as members of the

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<sup>10</sup> Deaf people in the United States may seek professional interpreter certification through the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf.

deaf community (Lane et al. 1996). However, as deaf studies scholar Paddy Ladd explains, hearing individuals with strong ties to deaf people (e.g., children with deaf parents, parents of deaf children, individuals who work with deaf people) may have “partial membership” in the deaf community (2003:42). In the context of the American deaf community, individuals with partial membership are hearing but use American Sign Language and work closely with deaf people. This notion of membership was supported by comments made in interviews with deaf protesters and members of the deaf community who recognized DPN interpreters as community allies. From this perspective, I argue that the sense of solidarity between and across community identities thus explains much of the work interpreters did during the week.

While neither deaf nor full members of the deaf community, the volunteer DPN interpreters in this study exhibited collective identity with protesters. As Polletta and Jasper write, collective identity includes the “affective connections one has to members of a group that oblige one to protest along with or on behalf of them” (2001:290). Through years of developing relationships with deaf people, interpreters’ collective identity with the deaf community – including deaf DPN protesters – appears to have been a significant factor in their activism. The personal ties of interpreters to deaf people support the view that collective identity leads to “the pleasures and obligations that actually persuade people to mobilize” (Polletta and Jasper 2001:284).

The perspectives from volunteer DPN interpreters reveal their work as being ideologically-charged actions performed by engaged individuals, rather than a mechanical process of linguistic transfer by detached and disinterested professionals. Specifically, their stories illustrate how the DPN interpreters were influenced by underlying beliefs about their connections to the deaf community and professional tenets of interpreting practice. The beliefs and ideologies emerged as more transparent when they talked about interpreting politically-oriented assignments other than DPN. Some interpreters underscored how their own views about society and social issues, for example, affected their decision about when – and when not – to interpret certain politically-based assignments. Many of the interpreters interviewed stated that they would not accept interpreting assignments centered around issues that they opposed. By refusing to accept such assignments, the interpreters’ social ideologies competed with their strong sense of commitment to providing

language access for members of the deaf community. It may be that the interpreters recognized that their personal ideologies made them unqualified for certain political assignments because they may have struggled with interpreting in a professional or detached manner.

Ideology and awareness of power inequalities however was not only a factor in DPN interpreters' decisions about providing services; ideology also impacted on how those services were provided. Throughout their interviews, the DPN interpreters discussed their position of being hearing people within a protest led by the deaf community. Interpreters repeatedly emphasized, for example, that they only provided language services, and had assumed no leadership role in the protest. They also adamantly stated that they only served as supporters and allies of deaf people and did so at their request. Such statements, however localised in context, thus provide insights into the interpreters' decisions which foregrounded the importance of deaf leadership and decision-making in the protest. These statements are connected to the interpreters also citing the right of deaf people to autonomy and self-determination. Throughout the interviews conducted, all interpreters described great caution in not usurping the power and autonomy of the protesters – citing, for example, perspectives of outsiders to the protest. A pervasive theme in the data was that the right of deaf people to self-determination was paramount in the work of interpreters, an aspiration that was borne out in the interpreters' decisions and actions. In this way, the interpreters' ideologies about deaf autonomy shaped how they conducted themselves during the protest.

To borrow a term from Baker, the data in this study suggest that interpreters do not merely mediate encounters in the linguistic sense; they also participate in “producing” them (2013:24). In various ways, the data speak to the roles that interpreters assumed in this contentious political setting and so highlight their ideologies. While they expressed their reticence to adopt leadership roles in this particular protest, interpreters in this historical protest also never claimed to be detached language mediators who enable communication between two contesting parties. By the nature of their work, DPN interpreters did not seek to avoid being enmeshed in the dynamics of situations for which they interpret. Rather, as demonstrated through the interview data cited in this paper, they actively worked to become part of the dynamics at play. Although this paper addresses the role of a particular group of interpreters from one historical event (i.e., American Sign Language-English

interpreters in the context of DPN), the findings have wider implications for and invite further research on the study of interpreting, power, and ideology. In the 21st century, deaf people and other linguistic minority groups continue to take up space in a variety of contentious settings. The dynamic roles of interpreters in these settings must be taken up and analysed with a critical eye to understand their ideological underpinnings.

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