

Translation: Deaf Realities

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the development, through personal and professional experiences, of the beliefs underpinning identity in Deaf translators from their localized perspectives. The constructs of critical event narratives (Mertova & Webster, 2009) and narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Moen, 2006) illustrate the evolution of their identities as translators. I apply the frameworks of social constructionism, feminism, and Deaf Studies to data drawn from interviews with six Deaf translators, categorizing seminal events in their lives into four key societal elements – social, educational, political and cultural – that reveal the power structure within which their identities as Deaf translators developed. I argue that the identity of Deaf translators – like all other identities – is constructed through deep, personal experiences of truth. My analysis of interview data explores the experience of Deaf translators, providing new insight into why Deaf translation matters, through inquiry into the critical events that made them translators.

KEYWORDS: translation studies; narrative inquiry; critical events; identity; Deaf Studies; social constructionism; feminism

Introduction

Hayden White (1980) has argued that humans are fueled by a deep-seated ‘impulse to narrate’. Bruner (1988) argued that people are innately driven to use their “actual minds” that speaks to the irrepressible act of imagination in which humans create a worldview in response to the events that unfold in their lives. The human drive to seek and create social realities results in a world that often seems saturated by narratives (Moen, 2006). In fact, stories are woven so tightly into the fabric of our lives, that it is possible to overlook the role they play in framing our identities (Rosen, 1986). As I collected the stories of the participants in this study, I was reminded of the quote by Terry Tempest Williams, who observed that stories are “a sacred visualization” of an individual’s experience. I apply a narrative inquiry approach (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) to the personal

narratives of a set of Deaf translators. The focus here is not so much on the act of translation itself, still less its product, but on the effect that their work as translators had on the development of identity in these individuals. The focus is on identity and its development; explication of the work of Deaf translators is necessary because this is a quite small, specialized, and little-known group. But the central point remains the development of identity within a minority group. I seek to explore what it means to be a Deaf translator; specifically, to explore the impact of powerful life experiences, both personal and professional, on the identity and work of Deaf translators.

Humans have a long tradition of storytelling, a tradition that may be even stronger in societies without a written language, such as in Deaf communities (Lane, Hoffmeister, & Bahan, 1996). Drawing on this natural storytelling phenomenon, I examine Deaf translators' stories not only for their individual value, but also for the "context in which they occur" (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p. 2) This approach reflects Lytold's (1979) concept of an emancipation narrative, a subset of his grand narrative, in which narration can reveal connections between events and the social conditions – the hegemonies -within which they unfold, and the constraints that these circumstances imposed. Viewed this way, an examination of stories may illuminate the historic and social milieu that influenced the development of translation within the Deaf community in the United States of America.

The American Deaf community, like other minority groups, is a tight-knit society with its own history, a flourishing culture, and a political agenda (Bauman & Murray, 2014; Baynton, 2008). The term *Deaf-World* was coined to describe an estimate one million Deaf Americans who identify as an ethnic group sharing a unique common language (ASL – American Sign Language), culture, and community (Lane, Hoffmeister & Bahan, 1996). According to Lane et al (1996), the Deaf-World can be characterized as an ethnic group, with the same characteristic that marks other ethnicities (e.g., shared language, common ancestry, stories, folklore, artistic traditions, and a community that perpetuates cultural norms through the generations (Lane, 2011). Lane, Hoffmeister, and Bahan (1996) claim that a utopian vision of a "Deaf country," created by and for the Deaf, has long been a central theme in American Deaf Culture. The gathering places for the members of the Deaf-World – residential schools, clubs, political organizations, and venues for

the visual and performing arts – bring Deaf people together in social settings, in marked contrast to the isolation that single Deaf people experience in the hearing world. In these gathering places, too, the skills of the bilingually adept – the translators – can be readily found and utilized.

Until the 1960s, American Sign Language was not recognized as the natural visual-based language of the US deaf community. As with other human languages, ASL developed over time. It has a distinct grammar and syntax, and has a distinct community of users. The rich tradition of storytelling in the Deaf-World makes narrative inquiry a particularly apt methodology for this study. Although storytelling is a universal practice (Trahar, 2013), it has particular significance in Deaf communities, due to its reliance on face-to-face communication as a means of cultural transmission. Storytelling provides a means for cultural affirmation and validation of Deaf lives. Storytelling peels back the layers of disempowerment of Deaf existence and are unified by the shared experience of oppression thus, provides a means for Deaf people to take control of their own reality (Suggs, 2018).

It has been speculated that signed languages have been used as long as people have existed on earth (Hamilton, 2014; Lane, 1984; 1992). Recognition of ASL as a legitimate language was instrumental in opening up avenues of inquiry into Deaf life, which led to the development of the discipline of Deaf Studies. The timing of this development coincided with the re-emergence of modern social justice movements.

To analyze the participants' experiences in terms of translation practice, I employ three frameworks to illuminate the ways the six participants in this study make sense of themselves and their work within the social world: social constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Bourdieu 1990); feminism (Harding, 1986; Haraway, 1988; Hill-Collins, 2000; hooks, 1984) and Deaf studies (Gertz, 2008; Ladd, 2003 & Lane, 1992. To my knowledge, this project is the first study that merges narrative inquiry and critical events with translation studies through thematic analysis to describe the experiences of Deaf translators' development of identity from their specific contexts. In this way, I sought to understand more how ideologies personal to Deaf translators impacted and shaped their well-being doing translation work. Consequently, this study contributes

new knowledge to the field of Translation Studies while opening the way to and inviting more research in Deaf translation studies.

Background

To date, limited scholarly attention has been given to Deaf translators' experiences and knowledge about translation. This study is unique in that it is conducted from the perspective of a Deaf person who does translation work. In this respect, I as the researcher have an 'insider' perspective on the topic – or in other words, I bring a Deaf-centric lens to the data analysis of Deaf experiences of translation for the first time in contexts of translation studies. Many of the questions I asked in this research were very similar questions to those I had asked myself during my own journey in becoming a translator. Having shared experience of being a Deaf person doing translation work thus helped me to understand the participants' stories and interpret their remarks in a personally meaningful way within a new research context. I believe that my own journey as a translator also led me to a richer level of understanding of participants' experiences as they told of them to me and paved the way for an interactive, mutually comprehensible discussion, where participants felt that their experience would be communicated meaningfully,

This paper explores translation in the social and cultural context of the Deaf community. The study of the 'sub-field' of Deaf translation studies is a new phenomenon and has particular value for five reasons. These five reasons, amongst others are why Deaf translation matters:

- 1) The field of Deaf translation from a Deaf-centric researcher perspective is almost unexplored, this means that very limited empirical evidence exists in this context.
- 2) in an interconnected world where contact between people has changed for the foreseeable future due to public health concerns, research on exploring-connections between people and language mediated across different formats as a way of sharing knowledge, ideas and information has never been more vital than ever.
- 3) there is intrinsic value of exploring translation across different mediums, and specifically of Sign Language is a visual language.

- 4) it promotes the validation of ASL (American Sign Language) and recognition of bilingualism.
- 5) it seeks to support democratic, humanist ideals, taking deaf translation as a point of departure.

While translation by and for Deaf¹ people has a long history, that history is little documented. In many cases, knowledge of this history comes to us mainly through folklore. This folklore, however, in the present day is easily validated using readily-accessible data.

Context and research questions

I chose a structured inquiry approach to my research by formulating a set of questions to guide the collection and analysis of the data for this study. The questions guiding each interview were the following: what social, educational, political and cultural elements arise within critical event narratives of Deaf translators that reveal their perspectives and practices in creating translations? How has personal and professional experience of these elements affected the development of identity in bilingual Deaf translators?

Personal identity is a process of social construction that is built upon past and present interactions within a social context. People who are taught that they are of lower worth than others tend to deny their own nature (Smith, 2011). A significant number of people want to be “normal,” which leads many deaf people to reject the fact that they would benefit from visual means of communication and refuse to adopt sign language.

Identity is a socially, culturally and historically constructed phenomenon that is continually formed and re-formed through people’s experiences, interactions and emotions, as well as their ideas, ideologies and ways of seeing the world around them (Bourdieu, 1990). ‘Deaf identity’ provides a lens on membership of a Deaf community that is separate from the hearing community. This

¹ Deaf people and deaf people. Capital D-Deaf people are sign language users and consider Sign Language their first language, and who consider themselves members of a culture. Lowercase d-deaf people are those with hearing issues and may use some sign language but dissociate or do not consider themselves from Deaf culture.

separate cultural and linguistic identity leads to a sense of belonging. In this way, deaf identity provides insight into the complexity of what it means to be Deaf. It involves a shift from an imposed, medicalized identity to an empowered identity rooted in a community and culture of others who share similar experiences and outlooks on the world (Bauman, 2008). Language is one of the pillars of personal identity – as with all humans, language is integral to the construction of the personal, socio-cultural and sociopolitical identities – which makes sign language a marker of cultural and language identity. ASL. Created and owned by Deaf people, is where they feel most at ‘home’. Historically, this is linked to call to dismantle the hegemony in education that denies the equality of sign language in classrooms at schools for the deaf. This is why sign language has a powerful role in sustaining and promoting language identity. It empowers deaf people with a discourse language of their own. Shared narratives are often of school experiences of oppression and language deprivation. There is a commonality of shared experiences about language ownership, culture and education. This discourse helps Deaf people understand what means to identify as an ASL/ Deaf person, after which they can then construct new knowledge and take control of language identity.

In sum, the facets of identity arise from and are inextricably linked to social, educational, political, linguistic and cultural issues including value systems, power and ideological effect, which dynamically influence individuals; lived experiences. The resulting transformation of negative experiences into a positive view of the Deaf self leads the development of identity in a cadre of bilingual Deaf translators.

The impetus for this study arose from my own life experience as a Deaf translator. I was curious about the experiences of my peers. Conversations with these peers indicated a probable commonality of experience that deserved exploration, but I could find very little research on the field. I knew that the field itself was not new; although it is not widely known. Deaf people have long performed as language brokers in a range of situations, often beginning in the classroom, where linguistically inept teachers are the norm. The dynamic nature of unrecorded sign language has meant that little record of early translation work by Deaf people exists outside of the memories of the people who participated in this work. Nevertheless, the translation work of Deaf bilinguals

has been integral to many facets of Deaf of Deaf culture, which exists and must function within – albeit distinct from – the majority, hearing culture. There has been an acute lack of formal training for Deaf bilingual translators. For many, the route to this vocation has been through theatre, where every produced work is to some extent a translation.

A growing body of research on translation leaves many unanswered questions about bilingual Deaf individuals and what they bring to the work of translation. Their work is often solitary, and seemed to me to call for research, the outcome of which would ideally contribute to the field of translation studies, but would, at a minimum, answer some of my own questions. As a researcher, I have an insider's perspective on this topic, and I bring a Deaf-centric to analysis of the data. Many of the questions posed in this research were the same ones I had asked myself during my own journey of becoming a translator. This experience helped me understand the experiences of my study participants. I was intrigued about the manifestation of these personal and professional experiences in their individual lives and work. Moreover, on a practical level, while interpreters are regarded as paid professionals, the work of Deaf translators is typically both unpaid and intermittent in nature. I wondered why that should be.

I hope through this research to bring recognition to the work of Deaf translators and to advance knowledge and breadth in the field of translation studies.

Theoretical Frameworks

This study uses social constructionist, Deaf studies and feminism framework to explore the development of a group of six Deaf bilinguals into translators.

The theory of social constructionism provides the primary backdrop for framing the experiences of these six Deaf translators, which I did by first collecting their stories of experience in social contexts and then analyzing how these experiences constructed new insights into meaning and the nature of translation.

A narrative approach to the data provided me with a critical lens into the conveyance of both implicit and explicit knowledge through narration (telling stories), to recount the development of

personal identity and deepening awareness through individual experience (Linde, 2001). This reflects the theory that participation in social and cultural activities leads individuals not only to learn and develop but also influences the way those individuals think (Moen, 2006; Vygotsky, 1962).

Research into the work of Deaf translators contributes insight into a valuable but little-known field within Deaf Studies. My own research uses a ‘Deaf lens’ to bring greater insight into the social arrangement in the same way that fields like Women’s Studies, Jewish Studies, Black Studies, etc., have brought awareness to the issues of gender and race issues to a level we had not previously imagined. This approach grounds the experiences of Deaf participants with the field of Deaf Studies.

I chose *social constructionism* as the primary framework for this study because of its focus on individuals’ perceptions of their own experiences to construct their social identities and their images of themselves (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Burns & Grove, 2001; Thorne, Reimer Kirkham, & MacDonald-Emes, 1997). In the context of Deaf individuals working in translation, social constructionism refers to the “conception of identities as processes – rather than products – that take shape in the course of specific interactional occasions” (Defina, Schiffirin, & Bamberg, 2006, p. 341). Horejes (2012) defines social constructionism as “a critical approach to understanding our social world” that performs “an integral role in ideology by defining norms, values, ideas and language” (p. 55). Social constructionism calls for the grounding of knowledge in the context of its social, educational, political, and cultural nature of narrative discourse. The emphasis on individual perception of their own experiences is a necessary starting point where there is so little empirical research, and the general lack of prior research can be traced to ableist (in this case, specifically audist) perceptions of Deaf people as a group that needs to be *helped*; most research in this area has hitherto concerned interpreters, the vast majority of whom can hear. The notions that Deaf people can perform high-level language work is relatively new. The entry of Deaf people into interpreting (as Certified Deaf Interpreters) is newer still, while Deaf translators have a long and largely unknown history (at least outside their community). It seldom occurs to people to research something they do not know exists.

Social constructionism describes a path to self-definition (Berger & Luckman, 1966; Durkheim,). According to Tajfel & Turner, 1979, such a paradigm provides an explanation of *how* one becomes oneself. Feminism and Deaf studies are both movements of self-discovery, each offering a lens into the social arrangements, self-identity, resistance and liberation that explain why the self- one chooses is what it is.

Feminism, while often defined by its roots in the experience of women, provides a philosophical basis for the ongoing struggle to achieve equality in opportunity and treatment for all people. This view of feminism opens up space for self-discovery and the development of autonomy. The whole of autonomy runs counter to the existing, prevailing ideologies to create a political social movement that strives toward equality – economic, cultural, social etc., - it is more about self-definition than being defined by others. Specifically, this is seen as relating to “a women’s place” and traditional views of the value of women. But to perceive the philosophy so narrowly is to miss its power and breadth

Intersectional feminist theory deals with universal issues and at its core is a civil rights movement for all people which seeks to address early failures – now changing, specifically in the context of 2020 – to embrace women of color, and their experiences in the context of race, class and ethnicity within interlocking systems of power (Crenshaw 1991) As Friedan wrote, “What used to be the feminist agenda is now an everyday reality” (1963, p. 375).

So how do analytical frameworks which situate feminist narratives as a creation of women’s knowledge, what it means to be a woman, empowerment, and in equal standing with systems of power historically dominated by men, relate to Deaf studies, and Deaf narratives? In short, Deaf narratives serve to reveal self- knowledge or Deaf-knowledge, what it means to be Deaf, being empowered to form a Deaf identity equal in standing to anything in the hearing world. Individuals’ perspectives are formed from their own social and political experiences. And due to the specificity and inter-connected of their experience, their experiences and perspectives have been embraced by many other minority studies disciplines, and specifically postcolonial studies as useful prisms

to shed light on identifying factors contributing to oppression and injustice affecting their communities (Humphries 1977; Skutnabb-Kangas 1988; Lane 1992; Ladd 2003; Czubek & Greenwald 2005).

Understanding *Deaf Studies* is a strand of scholarly inquiry that offers a way of understanding the experiences of Deaf participants in the translation setting. Czubek and Greenwald (2005) state “Deaf Studies intends to further our understanding of the human condition and using a ‘Deaf lens’ we can gain greater insight into the social arrangements in the same way that fields like Women’s Studies, Jewish Studies, and Black Studies have brought gender and race issues to a level of awareness we not imagined years ago” (p. 442). This knowledge encompasses the history, culture, community, politics, identity, power, and language defining Deaf ways of being – past, present, and future. Additional concepts that arise in the data are those of audism (Humphries, 1977), linguisticism (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1988), the medical vs. cultural model (Lane, 1992) and colonialism (Ladd, 2003, Lane, 1992).

In this paper, my focus has been on the issues of foremost concern to the Deaf community, primarily the development of personal and professional identities. However, I am mindful being Deaf can hardly be the only lens for any complete individual, and for that reason I sought out a diverse set of participants who brought further diversity to my study.

Audism and linguisticism have long been practiced, even before they had a name, as forms of deep-rooted discrimination. Audism refers to the hearing (non-Deaf) practice of dominating, restructuring, and exercising authority over the Deaf community (Lane, 1992). Linguicism is defined as prejudice based on language, the domination of one language at the expense of an indigenous language (Phillipson, 1992; Skutnabb-Kangas, 1988). Audism and linguisticism relate to postcolonial studies in that colonialism is the practice by which a powerful group (usually a country) imposes its will on a less powerful entity. Processes of domination are not only limited to the fields of geopolitical power, but also that of medicine. The medical-vs-cultural model ² is

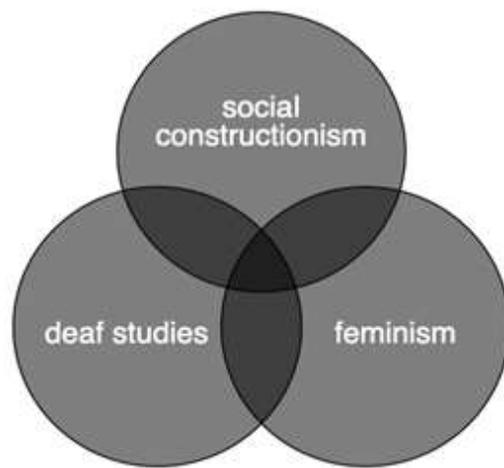
² The distinction between the medically “deaf” and the culturally “Deaf” has lately been challenged as an “an oversimplification of what is an increasingly complex set of identities and language practices” (Kusters, et al, 2017).

the paternalistic viewpoint of medical experts who are allowed to define the rules under which Deaf people may function within society (Andrews, Leigh, & Weiner, 2004). The distinction between the medically “deaf” and the culturally “Deaf” has however lately been challenged as an “an oversimplification of what is an increasingly complex set of identities and language practices” (Kusters, et al, 2017). This may well be due to the increase of mainstreaming – the practice of placing deaf students in non-Deaf environments. Nonetheless, it is medical experts which prevail and shape the medical context in which many Deaf people live. It is for this reason, that taken together, I draw on the concepts of social constructivist and (intersectional) feminist approaches in relation to the Deaf context as one way of guiding the examination and understanding of language and social identity for the Deaf translators in this study.

As summarized in this section and illustrated in Figure 1 on the next page, the three overlapping lenses for this study are social constructivism, feminism, and Deaf Studies. Using these lenses to investigate the work and identities of Deaf bilingual as translators informs the exploration methodology chosen for the study. The three paradigms serve as analytical guideposts toward finding the true, or deeper meaning of the six participants’ experiences and help provide a deeper illumination of these experiences and accompanying feelings that are not obvious on a surface level, or a solely descriptive approach.

This may well be due to the increase of mainstreaming – the practice of placing deaf students in non-Deaf environments. Capital D-Deaf people are sign language users who considers themselves members of a culture; lowercase d-deaf people may use some sign language but dissociate themselves from Deaf culture.

Figure 1: Three overlapping frameworks: social constructionism; feminism; Deaf studies



Method

This study used narrative inquiry (Moen, 2006) that specifically examines critical event narratives (Mertova & Webster 2009) to investigate Deaf bilinguals' experiences as translators. Moen's (2006) work on the narrative research approach discusses the use of sociocultural theory as a frame of reference, a way of querying and reflecting on the research in order to examine and understand how human actions are related to the social context in which they occur and the process of personal evolution can be made manifest. For Mertova and Webster (2009), "a critical event is defined as an unplanned and unstructured event that significantly impacts the professional practice of an academic." In the case of this paper, critical events are life experiences that have a significant impact on. Human understanding and subsequent action and generally arise from the social world that people inhabit and the personal, internal narratives that propel them. My favorite line relating to this is "people without narratives do not exist" (Polkinghorne, 1988). Humans' experiences of the world are condensed into these narratives, which researchers then collect and distill into insights.

The population of Deaf translators is quite small, and I asked my peer network to name the more outstanding members of this group. It was not very surprising that the names I was given closely

matched those on my personal list. From these, I invited those who provided the most diverse sample, based on age, gender, ethnicity, education and geographical background. I purposely recruited participants' who I was confident could provide different insights into the translation experience. It may be worth noting that the focus was on creating and performing English to ASL translations.

Kvale (1996) stated that a small number of participants can be sufficient for most studies when involving complex analysis – where the objective is to uncover meaningful in-depth relations of the life-world of the interviewees, rather than simply log discrete data elements.

With these perspectives in mind, I collected the data through interviews and interpreted their insights through the lens of four elements: social, educational, political, and cultural. For this study, I conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with six Deaf individuals which I drew on from my networks, contacts and involvement in the Deaf community. Culturally Deaf people in fact comprise a very small proportion of the general population. Harlan Lane, in his 2005 *Ethnicity, Ethics, and the Deaf-World* stated for example that “The size of the population is not known, but estimates generally range from half a million to a million members (Schein, 1989).” The population of the United States at the time Lane wrote was approximately 320 million, making the Deaf population approximately 0.15% and 0.3% of the general population.

Given that Deaf translators - whose discipline is still in the early stages of development - are an even smaller subset of this group, my candidate pool was limited to a relative handful of people, many of whom are personally known to me. The criteria for inclusion were:

1. Self-identify ASL as their dominant and primary form of communication;
2. Self-report as having bilingual skills in both ASL and written English;
3. Have experience with creating English to ASL translations (five of the participants were paid professional translators and one was highly sought out for theatre translations. In addition, the participants' translation work has been publicly available on vlogs, stage readings, and other venues); and

4. Have an established reputation within the Deaf community for their work as translators.

Participants

Of the six participants, four were female and two were male. The participants' ethnicity varied – one identified as black, one as Korean, and four as white. Three participants had Deaf parents who used ASL and three had hearing parents. One participant had hearing parents who used Signed English.³ Of the six participants, two have Deaf siblings. Four participants attended a school for the Deaf and two were mainstreamed in a public school. The participants ranged in age from mid-20s to late 70s. They came from various geographical areas of the United States and represented different educational backgrounds (e.g., Deaf school, mainstreamed). I purposefully recruited participants who could provide different insights into the translation experience. It is also worth noting that all of the participants had experience creating and performing English to ASL script translations for theatre (e.g., stage, film).

Research methodologies and parameters of data collection

To ensure the faithful of the interview data collected, I comply with accurate procedures in the data collection phase and throughout the study. This study was approved by the Gallaudet University Institutional Review Board (IRB). Prior to being interviewed, each participant received an email requesting their participation, which explained its purpose and scope of the research. Once agreed, each participants' interview sessions were scheduled. Prior to each individual interview, issues of confidentiality and consent and filming of the interview session were discussed in both ASL and written English to ensure full access to information. Participants completed background questionnaire information form, signed both an informed consent and video release form, which allowed me to record our interview so that I can transcribe and analyze the data. Three hour in-person interviews were scheduled in a filming room at Gallaudet University's Department of Interpreting and Translation for five participants. Because distance made an in-person interview

³ Signed English comes in many forms, but is in essence the production of individual ASL signs in English word order. By substituting an alien syntax, this process quite often strips utterances of all meaning except to those already adept in English and some form of signed language.

prohibitively expensive for one participant, that interview was conducted by video conferencing. The total of 17 hours of video interviews were recorded.

Before filming, I offered participants individually the opportunity to ask any questions pertaining to the study. When the participant was ready to begin, the participants first read and then viewed my signed translation of a prepared script that explained the study. The script was used to ensure that the participants understood the process. I also felt that it was important to model the bilingual approach of this study.

The semi-structured interview protocol was designed to elicit narratives about critical events in the participants' lives related to translation. The protocol consisted of open-ended, descriptive questions about general topics about experiences while growing up that had impressed them as being meaningful. The general questions were followed by probe questions to elicit details and specific descriptions of those experiences and participants' perspectives on them. The research questions were used to categorize participants' responses, but were not revealed to the participants. The interview questions were designed to avoid, as much as possible, pre-determination of the themes in participants' response. Researchers, particularly in Deaf Studies, are prone to preconceptions, for which reason I took pains to avoid leading questions and to allow participants to reveal their own internal themes.

The interview protocol consisted of clustered questions in three interconnected thematic question sets. The first set of questions explored each participant's early experiences of being Deaf and self-perceptions. The second set of questions invited participants to share narratives regarding the nature of their communication and interactions with teachers, families, and peers. The third set of questions focused on participants' understanding of their identity as a translator had evolved. Throughout the interview, I was mindful to ask for clarifications or questions as needed. At the conclusion of the interview, I checked with the participants, to ask if they were satisfied with their responses or wanted to add further information.

Analysis

To ensure analysis captured the richness of the collection data, each of the six video-recorded interviews was uploaded into ELAN (EUDICO Linguistic Annotator), a software annotation tool that allows for transcription and description, creation and analysis of video resources and annotations for the purpose of documentation. ELAN's multi-tier functionality allows for identification and labeling of specific ideas in a videotext. It is highly useful for identifying and analyzing semantic and thematic motifs. Within ELAN, I created a six-tier system for analyzing the data. The six tiers shown in the image of Figure 2 were: *gloss*, *critical events*, *elements*, *thoughts/notes*, *themes* and *translation aspects*.

Figure 2: Sample of ELAN tiers on screen



After uploading the videos, I examined them to identify segments containing critical events in the four elements and then transcribed those segments into one ELAN tier using ASL glossing and transcription guidelines created were conducted in American Sign Language; meaning, I communicated and asked using in American Sign Language, the same language in which they responded to my questions. American Sign Language is a purely visual/gestural language, it has no written language version of ASL. Thus, when attempting to transcribe signed data: a written transcription of the data is in fact a translation of the original signed data.

In the context of ASL transcription into ELAN, Julie Hochgesang (2012) pointed out the differing modalities - signed versus written - require researchers to be scrupulous in determining what

specific features to select to accurately transcribe signed languages. Phonological features do not carry easily across modalities; for instance, a wrinkling of the nose cannot be described perfectly in a written description, but its meaning can be captured.

While creating my own transcriptions of data presented in American Sign Language, I kept my focus for the most part on the meaning of the data: its semantic and thematic content, rather than creating a detailed description of the signs used. To this end, I made a painstaking translation of each signed utterance into written English. I subsequently had each such translation verified by a deaf person who was a native user of American Sign Language.

After collecting and transcribing the data, I completed the coding and analysis of the data. To analyze the data, I used Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach to thematic analysis: 1) recording my own first impressions of and reflections on the data; 2) generating initial thematic codes; 3) searching for themes; 4) reviewing and categorizing themes; 5) defining and naming those themes; and 6) producing the report.

I felt this approach was particularly useful in this research project because Deaf people are storytellers, and this approach allowed participants the scope to uncover their personal stories around the general research questions. These personal narratives were not in every instance previously known to or analyzed by any given participant; the process of telling the story was sometimes also the process of discovering it - for the teller as well as the researcher.

From the raw narratives, I sought to identify patterns and organize these into forms that permitted the identification of common themes and their categorization into meaningful structures. Once this was complete, I was able to take an interpretive lens to the data. The open-ended nature of the initial questions, moreover, allowed me to draw out participants' views, opinions, knowledge, experiences and values.

Using the societal elements – social, educational, political, and cultural; social constructionism, feminism and deaf studies 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 the process through which the Deaf translator participants in this study developed their personal and professional identities as deaf translators. For many Deaf translators, the work is something they have simply done because it was of them; many have long been unaware that the profession was open to them, and for many the mastery of the skills required of translators is also crucial life skill for Deaf people: the ability to cope with the language and culture of the predominately hearing societies within which Deaf culture exists. The final analysis of the data identified 304 critical event narratives, 100 concepts shared between the participants and a total of 19 themes.

Results

The six participants in this study all began their journeys in a hearing-centered social construct, and each encountered a number of critical events that led to their development of deaf-centric perspectives that more accurately fitted them. Each journey was different, but each person came to see clearly the social stigmatization that had been placed on them, and come to terms with that stigmatization before, finally, discarding it, a progression from “I am broken” to “I am.” For each participant, encountering one or more Deaf role models was a key waypoint, a milestone on this journey. Of equal worth was their dawning realization that in their struggles with English, mastery of their own language, ASL, put them on an equal footing with those hearing people whose mastery of English was counterweighted by their ineptitude in ASL.

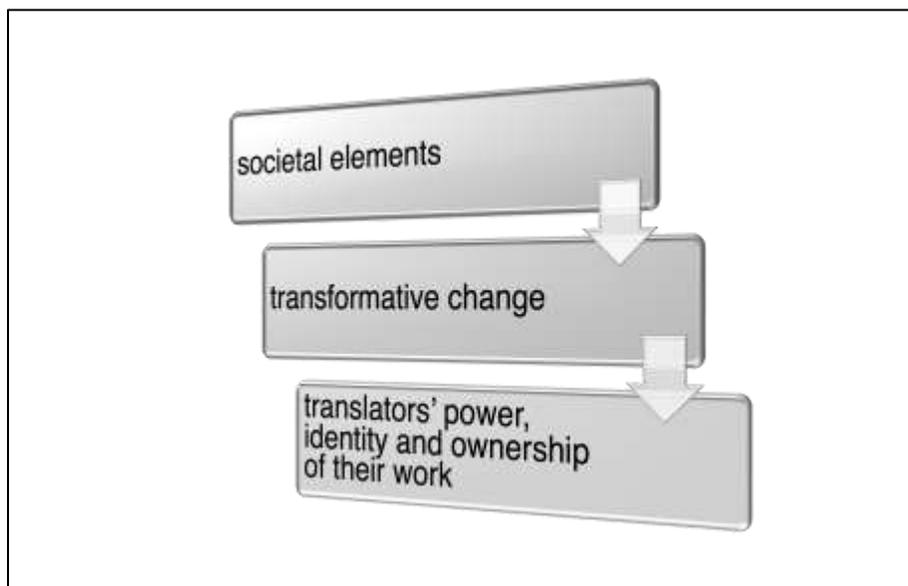
The role and nature of the bilingual Deaf translators interviewed in the course of this study has evolved throughout their lives, beginning with their early education, socialization and oppression and undergoing a series of critical events that led to transformative change. These processes led to the development of multiple, intersectional identities in this group of people.

Through the power of narrative, the six participants in this study opened themselves up, revealing to themselves as well as to me their inner nature, the multifaceted essence of their identities as Deaf bilingual translators, and, having done so, were able to consciously and wholeheartedly embrace those identities. I selected narrative inquiry as my approach for this study, knowing its

power to heal, transform, and empower people. This was true for myself as well as for my participants. For that, I am and will forever remain deeply grateful.

Figure 3 below visualizes the process in which societal elements result in transformative change for the Deaf participants, leading to their empowerment and identity as translators and giving them a sense of ownership of their work.

Figure 3: Image of how societal elements result in change in the Deaf participants.



For the purposes of this article, I have selected particular quotations because they were illustrative of the themes in the data I identified as critical events in my analysis. The following are samples for each societal element that illuminates experiences in the social, educational, political and cultural experiences of the participants. The quotations can be read as snapshots, partial views into the full data set and examples of the themes I explored.

Social: three themes

1. stigmatization
2. “hearing people know best”
3. deaf experts: socio-economic status of deaf translators

Theme: stigmatization

“I felt inferior. I never felt confident writing in English, especially fearing that hearing people would make fun of me and think that I was stupid.”

Theme: hearing people know best

“I learned ASL late in life. I believe this was because hearing administrators and teachers decided the best language policy for use in the classroom. That was why I was not exposed to ASL when I was younger.”

Educational: seven themes

1. self-perception and internalized oppression
2. self-perceptions of inferiority
3. internal oppression within the deaf community
4. the lack of language models in educational settings
5. lack of formal training
6. ASL vs. literal translation of English
7. language brokering and intuitive development

Theme: self-perception of inferiority

“I never felt comfortable using English. I had seen how hearing people mocked me because of my English, saying that I wasn’t smart.”

Theme: ASL vs. literal translation of English

“I had low self-esteem and felt I didn’t have good translation skills, but people kept reassuring me that my skills were fine.”

Political: three themes

1. political ideology in educational language policymaking
2. economic impact
3. taking political ownership

Theme: economic impact

“It’s important to have Deaf consultants, translators, and interpreters. We need more Deaf people involved in making decisions about language and protocols. Hearing interpreters are earning money from us; we can and should be engaged in this process.”

Theme: taking political ownership

“I see parallels with feminism, from that standpoint of shared experience and realization. This has had an impact on how I have changed my translation work. We must take the lead.”

Theme: political ideology in educational policymaking

“The emphasis was on the importance of reading and writing English. ASL was only good for informal conversations”

Cultural: six themes

1. home/deaf space
2. language and personal identity
3. naming the problem
4. role models
5. Eureka moments
6. the impact of the interviews

Theme: role models

“Bob Panara had an enormous impact on me. He changed my life. I looked up to him. Watching him translate was awesome. He made it seem easy; I had never before realized what translation actually was.”

Theme: language and identity

“My role model in shaping my identity was Carolyn McCaskill. I was in awe of her. And that helps with translation, which I had learned much from Willy Conley.”

Discussion

I began this study using three frameworks for analysis: social constructionism, feminism and Deaf studies. The research appears to indicate that I chose correctly. The development of identity in deaf translators is an experience of *social construction*. These identities developed in a milieu pervaded by the message that English language was superior to all others and that, moreover, signed languages were not ‘genuine’ languages. As explained by another participant, the work

performed by Deaf translators was not valued by the governing social, educational or political institutions, but only by the individuals and groups of people for whom it held genuine worth⁴

Deaf translation, which had emerged long before any modern institutions of ‘linguicism’ translation, has prevailed despite all of these negative messages. It is important also to note that the period covered by this study was one of great social and cultural ferment, leading to educational and political changes that are not yet settled. American Sign Language (ASL) only gained broad recognition in the early 1980s. Prior to the 1970s the notion that ASL was a true language was essentially unknown, even to those who used it.

Feminism, frequently and maliciously misrepresented as the notion that women are superior to men, is in fact an assertion of what should be obvious: that women are *equal to* men. The long, hard-fought and by no means complete struggle to gain acceptance of this idea has been an inspiration to other categories of people for whom the indignities of forced inequality are a daily experience.

Each of the scholars cited has developed the ground for various standpoints and epistemological ways of feminist thinking which illuminate and emphasize the critical concept of what it means to be a woman. Sandra Harding (1986) maintains that the critical discourse fostered by divergent epistemological approaches to feminism is vital to the quest for a science informed by emancipatory morals and politics. Donna Haraway (1988) debunks the myth of scientific objectivity. Her term “situated knowledges” points out that all knowledge comes from positional perspectives like the metaphor of “The Blind Men and the Elephant.” Patricia Hill-Collins (2000) proposed a form of standpoint theory that emphasized the perspective of marginalized (specifically, African American) women. She argued that the interlocking system of race, gender, and class oppression and privilege has given such women a distinctive point of view from which to understand their marginalized status and suggested that they can contribute something special to feminist scholarship. Hill-Collins called for inclusive scholarship that rejects knowledge that

⁴ “I...felt I didn’t have good translation skills, but people kept reassuring me that my skills were fine. I was puzzled” - Participant

dehumanizes and objectified people. Bell hooks (1984) asserts that feminism is “rooted in neither fear nor fantasy – ‘Feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation and oppression’”. Noting a lack of diverse voices in popular feminist theory, hooks published *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* in 1984. In this book, she argues that those voices have been marginalized and states: “To be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body.” She argues that if feminism seeks to make women equal to men, then it is impossible because in Western society, not all men are equal. She claims, “Women in lower class and poor groups, particularly those who are non-white, would not have defined women’s liberation as women gaining social equality with men since they are continually reminded in their everyday lives that all women do not share a common social status.”

A profoundly meaningful point occurs when people confront acts of injustice, as occurs when Deaf people take the opportunity to gain liberation. Deaf people are among the people whose situation is directly addressed by both the feminists and the civil rights leaders of the past century. The Deaf President Now movement (1988) was not only based upon the earlier feminist and civil rights struggles but the public environment in which it occurred was also welcoming and supportive; people were aware of the earlier struggles and were generally able to recognize the basic issues of equality, justice and fairness.

Intersectional feminism takes into account the many different ways each woman experiences oppression, not all of which are rooted in sexism. Crenshaw, in her 1991 paper, *Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color*, talks about the ways in which different systems of oppression are intrinsically connected and how these connections align other oppressive – isms. Among these is *audism* – the notion that being able to hear in itself confers superiority – and audism is closely tied to linguicism. In the same way that Women’s Studies with intersectional feminist issues, and arguably based on that model, Deaf Studies explores the very diverse experiences of Deaf people.

The feminists have given us a model of personal development that requires self-reflection, development of awareness of one’s environment, recognition of one’s peers and, finally,

recognition of one's rightful place in the whole, in the social, educational, political and cultural spheres. This was also the model underlying the civil rights movement in the United States. The path is not commonly an easy one. This is the path that at least some bilingual Deaf translators have trod to reach their present identities: a sequence of awareness, resistance and liberation.

Deaf studies, an approach to the specific issues confronted by deaf people - and by Deaf users of signed languages in particular - is a newer offshoot of the age-old struggle for equality and human rights. The ancient canard that inability to hear or speak equates to an inability to reason, to think, has been confronted but not vanquished. Deaf translators' struggles with social ideologies have forged their identities. Their experience of oppression, audism, and linguisticism have tempered them. And the Deafhood movement has helped to shape the development of identity in Deaf translators.

In the analysis of critical event narratives, the data revealed that the participants experience themes of internalized oppression, stigmatization, and had been inculcated in the belief that "hearing people know best." Each participant had struggled with a sense of inferiority and been affected by a lack of competent language models. These experiences resulted in confusion over not only the usage of their bilingual status, but their own identities. None of this is exceptional within the historical framework of Deaf education. What is remarkable is the extent to which participants have managed to thrive.

This brings me back to Lyotard's concept of the "grand narrative" as a way to reflect the hegemonic ideologies that impact the daily lives of individuals, a construct that I find still useful in explaining the standpoints of my participants. I have argued here that the grand narrative of the study participants, reflected in social, educational, political, and cultural societal systems has been "Hearing People Know Best." Participants' comments revealed how they had struggled to overcome this ingrained belief to find their own language and cultural identity and to develop their standpoint as translators. Several participants have taken a lifetime to realize that this grand narrative of the superiority of Hearing people was socially constructed by the many messages of their lives. Only after deep reflection (even during the interviews) did they come to see that,

especially for ASL-English translation, the narrative may be flipped on its head to be, Deaf People Know What Is Best For Themselves.

“I learned ASL late in life. I believe this was because hearing administrators and teachers decided the best language policy for use in the classroom.”

“My role model in shaping my identity was Carolyn McCaskill. I was in awe of her. And that helped with translation, much of which I had learned from Willy Conley.”

I used Lyotard’s “grand narrative” concept to relate participant narratives to the research frameworks. Each participant’s story of the journey of self-discovery strongly resembled those of the others, and analysis of these within the selected frameworks clearly revealed a shared story of emergence from oppression to full humanity.

Conclusion

This study, which ought to properly be seen as an early exploration of the specific subfield – the development of identity in Deaf translators, - sought to examine how bilingual Deaf individuals developed both personally and professionally into translators. Specifically, it examined the specific life events – critical events – that participants have in common. How did those events affect each individual? How do the effects of those events linger in their present lives? The study explored the links between four elements – social, educational, political, and cultural – that emerged in critical event narratives of a group of Deaf translators. The participants’ comments provided insights into the beliefs, values, and attitudes they constructed about English and ASL, as well as about their perception of their own translation work.

This study was a deep examination of six individuals’ stories about their insights into the experience of being Deaf translators. The data revealed multiple voices that infused their translation world, and how those voices manifested themselves. I described the meanings and experiences through three theoretical lenses: social constructivism, feminism, and Deaf Studies.

Catherine Kohler Riessman (1993) wrote that we become the stories that we tell about our lives. Throughout the interviews in this dissertation, participants produced some signs in a way that indicated a convention or a comfort surrounding certain emotions particularly noticeable with the signs - examples being HOME COLLECTIVE MUTUAL-UNDERSTANDING and IDENTITY – this was indicative of their sense of ASL being their linguistic homeland, an anchor for translation work as well as for identity. Each of the narratives examined in this study provided insights that may serve to inspire further inquiry by Deaf researchers to look deeply and to push through limiting beliefs, and to challenge and change oppressive social paradigms.

Through the process of this research, it became clear to me that Deaf translators can create new narratives that we want to see manifested in our future. If we want to see Deaf communities more fully engage in and contribute to society as a whole, previous narratives on ‘who knows best’ must change. The accelerating pace of modern society, fueled in part by rapid technological changes, opens new possibilities for Deaf people and, in particular, for Deaf translators. The possibility of new discourses, knowledge, and perspectives into liberation can obliterate old oppressive frames. It is my hope that this contribution to the body of knowledge of Deaf translators will continue to grow and inform decisions of curricula and promote social change in our grand narrative that currently narrowly defines the function of Deaf translators. I am hopeful, too, in my belief that society’s acceptance of the antiquated grand narrative is shifting so that the social construction of identity in Deaf people will occur earlier in their lives than it has in the past. This study has given me a sense that there is a new paradigm for understanding translation. The shared insights in this study indicate future possibilities, viable new educational and career paths, and the potential for research in translation by Deaf bilinguals.

Maya Angelou in 2012 made a statement about the power of knowledge and perspective in context of Black History Month that I believe should resonate within the Deaf community – indeed, within any exploited minority community – on both the individual and community level: “The more you know of your history, the more liberated you are.”

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