

INTERPRETING IN

Formal Settings



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GOAL

The goal of this compilation of **videos** is to provide an opportunity to observe interpreters working between ASL and English in a formal setting. This type of setting requires specific skills and coping strategies that differ from those used in less formal settings. This compilation allows students and interpreters to observe, study, and discuss the work and to notice the ways in which interpreting in formal settings differs from other types of interpreting settings. Although observation is the primary goal, the videos could also be used for interpreting practice.

THE ARRANGEMENT FOR

Interpreting in Formal Settings

Gallaudet University granted me permission to use these videos, as did each of the presenters and interpreters. This video compilation of Gallaudet University Commencement speakers from 1994, 1995, and 1996 shows examples of interpreters working between ASL and English in a formal setting. The videos include only the formal presentations, not the conferring of degrees.

The arrangements, positioning, and timing of all presentations were overseen and implemented by Gallaudet University Television Department. All parties knew that the events were being recorded.

Presenters used ASL or English and worked from prepared remarks. In most cases the interpreters had the speeches in advance so they could prepare and rehearse their interpretations. There is one instance in which the presenter did not follow the prepared remarks. The interpreter was surprised but managed not to show it.

The interpreters working from English to ASL were onstage near the presenter. In this case the interpreters wore regalia that contrasted with their skin tone. The backup interpreter was seated in the front row of the audience, facing the stage, where the on-duty interpreter could see them and indicate when assistance was needed.

Those who were working from ASL to English were seated in the first row of the audience, facing the stage, and had clear sightlines so they could see the presenter signing. In

this instance the two interpreters who were working as a team sat next to each other. One spoke into the microphone and the other watched the presenter and provided assistance to the team member as needed.

You may notice that in some instances the ASL to English interpreter may be a bit ahead of the presenter if the interpreter is referring to the printed version of the presentation. The interpreters refer to the printed version but they do not read directly from the paper while working.

Possible Uses for This Video

This video is designed primarily to allow in-depth observations of working interpreters in a formal setting. Each video in the compilation includes a presenter and an interpreter. In each instance the presenter is onstage in front of a large audience. Teachers can guide students in discussions before the observations by noting which aspects of the interpretation should receive attention. Discussions after observing the interpretations can be helpful and are sure to generate many questions about interpreting in formal settings. Study groups can use the videos as discussion material, and mentors can use the videos to generate discussions and to develop strategies for preparing to work in formal settings. When discussing these observations, it is important to remember that the focus is not on criticism of the interpreters, but rather on the effect the interpreter's choices had on the communication and the specific types of demands found in this setting.

Suggested Directions

THE POWER OF OBSERVATIONAL LEARNING

There are two main ways to learn new responses: one is by direct experience and the other is by observation of "models," meaning, in this case, persons who are more experienced in rendering interpretations. According to Bandura (1977), virtually all learning that results from direct experience occurs on a vicarious basis by first observing other people's behavior and then later performing the behavior. Remembering how the model performed the behavior helps you formulate your own response without having to go through trial and error.

Bandura explains that observational learning can shorten the time it takes to acquire skills. **"Rarely do people learn behaviors under natural conditions that they have never seen performed by others"** (p.22). For example, aspiring surgeons must observe

many hours of procedures performed by experienced surgeons before performing surgery themselves. If people learned only through trial and error, the amount of time needed to learn is increased, and the consequences could be negative. Interpretation is a complex process, and the consequences of a faulty interpretation could negatively affect those who are relying on the interpretation, so it is clear that observation must play an important role in interpreter education. The more costly and hazardous the effects of the potential errors, the greater the need for observing competent examples.

Even though many interpreter education programs want students to observe a wide variety of settings, these are often difficult to arrange. Videos such as these allow interpreters and students to review and discuss aspects of the interpretation.

The acquisition of linguistic skill is another area where observing competent models aids in the learning process. Children do not learn language in a random pattern; instead, they learn by listening to language and then formulating their own utterances. Learning to interpret is not random either. This learning process occurs in an orderly fashion. First, fluency in two languages is required. Then intralingual or single language skills must be strengthened, followed by exercises in interlingual skill development, such as translation, consecutive interpreting, and simultaneous interpreting. Watching an interpreter at work allows the observer to develop ideas about which interpretations and decisions are most effective within a given setting.

THE FOUR COMPONENTS OF OBSERVATIONAL LEARNING

Bandura suggests that observational learning has four main components: paying attention, retaining information, reproducing observed behaviors, and incorporating new skills. These are briefly described below.

Paying Attention

To learn by observation, a person must attend to and accurately perceive the behavior. "The rate and level of observational learning is also partially determined by the nature of the modeled behaviors themselves, their salience and complexity. In addition, observers' capacities to process information govern how much they will benefit from observed experiences. People's perceptual sets, deriving from past experience and situational requirements, affect what features they extract from observations and how they interpret what they see and hear" (p.25). This means that you may obtain more information in your second or third observation of the same conversation because the observation process itself allows you to learn and create a base of information on which you can build.

Retaining Information

Visual coding

You must remember what you observe to be influenced by what you observe. You must be able to remember it long after the model is no longer present. The memory of the observation is saved symbolically. Humans have an advanced capacity for symbolization that promotes learning by observation. Observational learning depends on two representational systems that allow you to access the symbolic memory. Bandura calls these two systems imaginal and verbal. Imaginal retention means that some behavior is retained as an *image* of a performance. Exposure to visually observable events, objects, and people creates an image in memory that can be retrieved after the actual objects are no longer present. Visual imagery plays an important role in observational learning.

Verbal coding

The other way that symbols are created is through verbal coding. By “verbal coding” Bandura does not necessarily mean acoustic coding. Instead, the concept that underlies his theory is that linguistic shorthand is stored in memory. Bandura’s theory does not address sign language directly but may be extended to include it by acknowledging that American Sign Language is a set of symbols just as English is a set of symbols. In either case, symbolic codes, such as languages, carry a great deal of information in forms that are easy to store and retrieve. Information that is presented in ASL or English is coded as linguistic input and stored. “Details of the route traveled by a model, for example, can be acquired, retained, and later reproduced more accurately by converting the visual information into a verbal code describing a series of right and left turns as RLRRLL than by relying on visual imagery of the route” (p.26). If the directions were presented in ASL, the information might be coded as a series of signs indicating right and left. When modeled activities are transformed into images or linguistic symbols, they are readily usable and become memory codes for performance. Observers who code modeled activities retain behaviors better than observers who do not code the information.

Mental rehearsal

Mental rehearsal is another important aspect of retaining information. Mentally rehearsing a modeled response increases the likelihood of remembering the behavior. When lack of opportunity prevents overt practice, it is even more important to rehearse mentally

and visualize yourself performing the activity. Bandura stresses that mental rehearsal in which individuals visualize themselves performing the appropriate behavior increases proficiency and retention. "The highest level of observational learning is achieved by first organizing and rehearsing the modeled behavior symbolically and then enacting it overtly" (Bandura & Jeffery, 1973, p.27).

Bandura and others (1973) conducted experiments to determine the effect of symbolic coding on observational learning. They found that symbolic coding in observational learning, whether the coding is images or linguistic input, is important for adult learners. When observers talk about observed behaviors or observe modeled behaviors more than once, they retain behaviors better than those who simply observe or are distracted during observation.

Reproducing Observed Information

According to Bandura (1977), the third component of modeling focuses on changing symbolic representations into appropriate action. Skills cannot be perfected through observation alone; they must be practiced and improved through a series of adjustments to the performance. The four aspects of this component of observational learning are cognitive organization of responses, their initiation, their monitoring, and their refinement on the basis of informative feedback. For example, when learning to interpret, after you have observed an interpretation, you must first organize your cognitive response ("Yes, that was an interpretation that I would like to study and perform") and then initiate or perform the interpretation yourself. Next, you receive feedback from someone who has monitored or observed your interpretation. Based on that feedback, you can refine or modify your interpretation in your next attempt to interpret the same or similar material.

Incorporating New Skills

Bandura (1977) says there are two main reasons that motivate people to adopt behaviors they observe. First, observers are more likely to adopt modeled behavior if it results in outcomes they value. Second, they are more likely to want to adopt behaviors that appear to be effective for others.

Whether you realize it or not, you are evaluating each interpretation you observe and perform, so you will most likely want to repeat only those that you feel were successful. This means if you observe a model that is, in your opinion, excellent and effective, you will be highly motivated to attend to, remember, and try to reproduce a similar interpretation. If the observed interpreter's skills are very advanced and if you

are a beginner, it is likely that you may miss some of the salient features, that you may not remember all the features, and that you may not yet have the motor skills to render a similar interpretation. However, by repeated observations of the same interpretation, you increase your attention and memory. Repeated attempts to render the interpretation improve your accuracy in using the necessary motor skills.

Summary

The four components of observational learning will be at work as you watch this video and practice interpretations. You will be viewing images of interpretations that will build up your imaginal stores of information. Through discussion you will linguistically code what you have seen. This will help you remember what you have observed and will make observational learning more effective.

PHASES OF THE INTERPRETATION PROCESS

The sections that follow emphasize the salient features of interpretation so you can apply the components of observational learning to the interpreting process. The most critical awareness you can develop is noticing how errors in interpretation affect communication. The severity of errors can correlate to the phase in which they occur in the interpretation process. The phases where errors can occur, and the possible consequences, are briefly described here. Remember that interpretation is not really a linear process, as all parts of the interpretation process affect each other. In studying interpretation, however, it is convenient to discuss the process in three separate phases—comprehension, transfer, and reformulation—in order to notice the effects of the interpreter's decisions. The following is based on Gile's (1995) sequential model of translation. For a more complete explanation of his sequential model of translation and effort model of interpretation, see *Basic Concepts in Interpreter and Translator Training*.

Comprehension

Comprehension is the first phase of the interpreting process. It includes fully analyzing the message, including fingerspelled words when the message is in ASL. Errors in comprehension are very serious and may prevent the interpreter from successfully moving on to later phases of the interpreting process. If the interpreter has misunderstood the message or failed to comprehend, it is not possible to convey the source language message accurately in the target language. The effect of miscomprehension will depend on

the context, the situation, and the participants. Those who depend on the interpretation usually do not realize when the interpreter has misunderstood or failed to comprehend the source message and generally assume that the interpretation is faithful and accurate in all respects. When the interpreter has misunderstood or failed to comprehend the source message, the result is likely to be that the participants who are depending on the interpretation will misunderstand each other.

Transfer

Transfer is the phase in which the interpreter mentally formulates an interpretation in the target language and envisions how the interpretation should be rendered into the target language syntax. Sometimes the interpreter has correctly understood the message but does not know how to transfer the message into the target language. This can happen when there are weaknesses in either syntax or vocabulary in the target language. Errors in this phase are less severe than those in the comprehension phase, because the interpreter has understood the message well enough to begin the interpretation process. Errors during the transfer phase are more severe than errors that occur afterward, however, because the accuracy of each remaining phase depends on the accuracy of the earlier phases in the process. The message cannot be reformulated if the interpreter does not know how to transfer it.

Difficulty in the transfer phase may cause the interpreter to render a message in the target language that follows the source language syntax. Another type of error that can surface during transfer is choosing incorrect lexical items in the target language. When either of these types of errors occurs, the person receiving the interpretation must work harder to make sense out of the interpretation, may misunderstand, or may obtain no sense from the message at all. When errors occur during the transfer phase, it is likely that the participants in the dialogue will misunderstand each other, or worse, think they understand each other when they really do not.

Reformulation

Reformulation is the visible result of the previous phases in the interpretation process. In this phase the interpreter renders the message into the target language. It is possible for the interpreter to correctly understand the message, correctly transfer the message, and still encounter problems in reformulation. Errors in reformulation may include mispronunciations, awkward sentence constructions, and other errors that are generally much less serious than errors that may occur in the previous two

phases. When errors occur in this phase, the recipient of the interpretation can usually make sense out of the message, but the message will still be skewed to some extent by these errors. Ideally, the Interpreter renders the interpretation in a manner that is appropriate to the form of the target language and preserves the meaning of the source message.

Error Taxonomy

One of the most useful ways to categorize errors is to study the impact of the error on communication. Not all errors are equally serious. To determine how serious an error is, you may use an error taxonomy to help sort out the effect of the error on the message. For example, some omissions may be intentional, such as leaving out a detail to maintain the integrity of the overall message while working to keep up with a rapid speaker. Sometimes a misinterpretation may not have a noticeable effect on the communication, especially when the people in the conversation have sufficient background information.

Here is one way to organize the seriousness of errors in interpretation (Gorman, 1989):

Very serious	Total skew of the message due to comprehension problems;
Quite serious	Total skew of the message due to following source language syntax;
Somewhat serious	Minor skew of the message due to omission or addition of detail;
Not serious	Error does not skew the message; and
No errors	Communicative function is well preserved.

Before watching this video, compile a list of terms related to commencement and check their meaning, pronunciation and usage to maximize your observation experience. You can discuss these terms in a group or work on them individually.

Although the primary purpose of these videos is for observing interpreters at work, you may wish to practice rendering your own interpretations of the material.

Here are some other ways you can improve your awareness of the dynamics in an interpreted situation:

1. Notice the effect of physical placement of the interpreter in the setting.
2. Notice the ways in which ASL signs are formed in this setting. Are they larger, are there different signs for formal settings? What else do you notice about the signing style used onstage?
3. In listening to the English used in this setting, how does it differ from conversational English?
4. Do you notice any errors in the interpretations? What do you think are the possible causes for errors given that the interpreters had the presentations in advance?
5. Do you notice any of the interpreters asking for or providing back-up assistance? Can you observe any specific strategies requesting assistance?
6. Notice the effect of processing time on the effectiveness of the interpretation.
7. Notice whether or not the emotional affect of the source and target messages match.
8. Notice strategies used for requesting clarification.
9. Notice how and where the interpreter stands onstage.

Discussion Starters

1. How would you prepare for an interpreting assignment for a formal event such as a commencement or awards ceremony?
2. If you had the opportunity to have a pre-assignment meeting with the presenter, what questions would you ask to help you interpret more effectively?
3. What would you wear to interpret in a formal setting where you will be required to be onstage?
4. Do you think the stage lighting shines in the interpreter's eyes? Do you think that will affect the work?
5. What strategies would you use if you needed assistance from your team interpreter while you were the interpreter onstage. What would you do if you were the interpreter at the microphone to let your team interpreter know you need assistance? When would you discuss this with your team interpreter?

6. Formulaic language can occur in formal settings. For example, "Ladies and gentlemen...." What are some other examples of formulaic language that you could practice in advance of interpreting in a formal setting?
7. Find two passages where you admire the way in which the interpreter conveyed the message and practice those.
8. If you find passages where you feel the message was skewed, render your own version of an interpretation of the same passage.
9. Can you spot which interpreter was surprised by the speaker who did not follow the prepared remarks?

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