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Deaf Interpreter Professional Practice Paper

The Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, Inc. (RID), the national professional association of sign language interpreters in the United States, created this Professional Practice Paper (P3) to introduce the work of Deaf interpreters (DIs) as a generalist practitioner. Historically, Deaf¹ individuals have provided ad hoc interpreting services within the Deaf communities. Although RID began credentialing Deaf individuals in 1972, a severe shortage of certified DIs continues today. The use of Deaf interpreting continues to grow in recognition of the quality that DIs provide in interpreter-mediated language².

What is a Deaf Interpreter?

A Deaf Interpreter is a Deaf bilingual or multilingual person with lifelong fluency in signed language(s) who provides linguistic mediation services, including interpretation and translation. DIs work as professional interpreters and translators within intersectional signing Deaf communities. DIs work with Deaf, hearing, and other signed-language-using consumers via varying language modalities, which include visual, tactile, and auditory. Some DIs, but not all of them, are certified. Certified DIs obtain a Certified Deaf Interpreter (CDI) certification, which is a generalist interpreting certification program maintained by RID.

How can I find a qualified DI?

RID maintains a registry of DIs who have earned the CDI certification. Information about the CDI certification program can be found on the RID website³. Interpreters certified by RID adhere to the Code of Professional Conduct and agree to be accountable to their consumers and to each other through its Ethical Practices System⁴. Some states also maintain their own directories with varying criteria. While certain states may provide state-level certification⁵ for Deaf interpreters, the CDI certification is the only nationally recognized entry-level interpreting credential for DIs, often serving as an alternative to state screenings. The National Association of the Deaf (NAD) also maintains a directory of DIs who may not be RID members, but those interpreters are not evaluated for competency⁶. Finally, requestors may also request recommendations from consumers, interpreting agencies, or local interpreters.

¹ In this paper, *Deaf* is used to refer to people within multiple communities, including, but not limited to, individuals who identify as Deaf, Black Deaf, Indigenous Deaf, Deaf people of color, DeafDisabled, DeafBlind, Deaf immigrants and refugees, Deaf international visitors, and hard of hearing people who use sign language.

² Language and culture are inseparable; language use is intrinsically linked to cultural beliefs and social norms (Risager, 2006; Mindess et al., 2014; Holcomb, 2023). Further, language is regarded as embodied, multimodal communication in which individuals comprehend and express themselves via language, intonation, body movements, and other environmental cues (Vigliocco, Perniss, & Vinson, 2014).

³ <https://rid.org/certification/available-certifications/>

⁴ <https://rid.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Benefit-of-Sourcing-RID-Interpreters.pdf>

⁵ Such as Utah and Texas

⁶ <https://www.nad.org/deaf-interpreters-directory/>

When to hire a DI?

DIs can be hired for any setting with varying audiences, including, but not limited to; individual consultation meetings, formal proceedings, and large audiences (Cogen & Cokely, 2015).

Consumers of DI translation and interpretation services include hearing interpreters and Deaf and hearing individuals or groups. The composition of the interpreting team and its necessary skills depend on the assignment's requirements, in which the DI should be consulted on the team formation process.

Deaf or hearing consumers, requesters (individuals or organizations), interpreting agencies, and hearing interpreters may request hiring a DI for their services. Hiring a DI is not an evaluation of the linguistic competence of a specific person (Mathers, 2009). Hiring a DI is a consideration of the intersections between the need for greater accuracy, teaming factors, and language use that will best suit the consumers and their goals in an interaction. In contexts with a high volume of interpreting demands or sensitive contexts, DIs can work with schedulers, consumers, and interpreters to determine when and where DIs can best contribute to greater efficiency of resources.

Before accepting an assignment, DIs collect information on the scope of the assignment to determine if they hold the requisite knowledge of the subject, the required equipment, and the types of linguistic skills. DIs will identify the desired linguistic services, gather information about consumer goals, needs, consider their skills and training, identify strategies for linguistic mediation, confirm team interpreters as needed, and only then determine whether they can accept the request.

DI's linguistic services aid consumers in navigating social systems.

Each deaf person has personal knowledge with interactions involving signed languages, communication styles, and social conditions. The DI develops a formative competency to interpret through lifelong interactions of mediating communications within the signing communities and with non-signers (NCIEC Deaf Interpreter Work Team, 2010). This knowledge undergirds DIs' ability to identify instances of communication challenges. This sophisticated level of fluency aids DIs in providing interpretation and translation services with greater clarity, accuracy, and effectiveness. In this way, DIs can support consumers who frequently experience linguistic obstacles and power imbalances while accessing resources and services.

Individuals or organizations hire DIs to deliver linguistic content in a format that includes social and cultural context for access to consumer autonomy as they navigate social systems. In combination with specialized expertise in the subject matter, DIs draw on their linguistic proficiency and lived experience to work effectively and reduce common communication barriers. DIs can work with consumers in academic, healthcare, legal, press conferences, diplomatic, and religious settings, among others. Through their shared lived experiences, DIs can engage Deaf consumers from minoritized communities and contribute to creating an optimal communication environment with other deaf and hearing consumers. Interpreting and translation services by DIs can elevate consumers' communication experience and support organizations in satisfying their objectives for access and equity.

What type of linguistic mediation do DIs perform?

Linguistic mediation involves interpretation and translation, shifting communications from one language into another, between styles within a single language, or from one modality to another (Jakobson, 1959; Bell, 1984). Interlingual translation involves translating between distinct languages, while intralingual translation occurs within a single language, including dialectal or stylistic variations. Intersemiotic translation involves transferring information between different symbolic forms or communication modalities. DIs provide translation and interpretation services encompassing interlingual, intralingual, and intersemiotic communication (Tester, 2021). The type and delivery of the linguistic services and products are negotiated by DIs based on the communication goals of the consumers and the scope of the assignment.

DIs translate between signed languages (Boudreault, 2005) in addition to written languages, such as through captioning or teleprompter scripts (Adam et al, 2010). DIs also work between two variations of a single signed language to adapt the source message to best suit the communication style understood by the audience, drawing on their understanding of social systems and human interaction. DIs also develop communication strategies to bridge communication systems, and modalities, including adjusting illustrations, gestures, or signed words to accommodate consumer needs.

In what linguistic roles do DIs serve?

As a part of their services, the DIs mediate languages as an *interpreter*, a *communication facilitator*, a *co-navigator*, or a *translator*. *Interpreters* shift messages either simultaneously or consecutively. Simultaneous interpretations are interpretations delivered and corrected while the communications are being delivered. To increase accuracy, consecutive interpretations wait for a complete thought before the interpreted delivery begins.

A *communication facilitator* is an interpreter able to mediate live communication between the sighted and the tactile modalities. A *co-navigator* is an interpreter within the American Deaf community who describes the physical environment as they negotiate their movements in collaboration with DeafBlind individuals.

Translators rehearse their linguistic mediation for greater accuracy or permanence. The translation is then recorded in a written modality or, in the case of signed languages, a video recording. For an ASL translation, the translator needs a backdrop, a camera, and studio lights.

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