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COMMUNICATION ACCURACY IN A SIGN-LANGUAGE INTERPRETATION OF A GROUP TEST

By HARRY W. HOEMANN, Ph.D.

While the services of a qualified interpreter are clearly necessary if deaf persons are to participate in events where spoken English is the principal communicative channel, there are no data to show whether the presence of an interpreter is sufficient to make orally presented information equally available to deaf and hearing participants. It is conceivable that reliance on a visual channel places deaf persons at a relative disadvantage, since environmental distractions may interrupt eye contact with the interpreter. Moreover, since the American Sign Language (ASL) has evolved primarily as a vehicle for informal social discourse, it may be poorly suited for formal presentations. Finally, a point not often discussed in the literature is that Sign Language utterances structured so as to conform to English syntax may be frequently misunderstood by deaf persons who are more competent in ASL than they are in English. The departure from preferred ASL usage prompted by the English original may result in a translation that strikes the deaf person as awkward or garbled, just as a too-literal English translation of a foreign language results in unwieldy sentences.

The present study assessed the accuracy of interpreted communications in a group test situation. Although the design made no provision for evaluating the relative influence of linguistic versus nonlinguistic factors on test performance, the investigation served, nevertheless, as a demonstration of the extent of the problem and of procedures for quantifying results.

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Method

Subjects

The Ss were 8 hearing-impaired and 16 hearing participants at the Workshop for Interpreters for the Deaf, sponsored by the Ohio Chapter of Interpreters for the Deaf in Akron, Ohio, May 15, 1971. Median age for the hearing Ss was 36 and for the hearing-impaired, 43. Five of the hearing-impaired Ss reported their hearing loss to have occurred either at birth or prior to age 3, and three reported that their loss occurred or was discovered between the ages of 10 and 12. Three of the hearing-impaired Ss described themselves as hard-of-hearing; five described themselves as deaf.

Procedure

A 10 item "examination" was administered orally, while a dues-paying member of the Ohio Chapter of Interpreters for the Deaf with at least five years experience as a professional interpreter was recruited to interpret the examination for the deaf persons present. After the examinees had been instructed to write down their name, age, hearing status, age of onset of hearing loss (deaf Ss only), and age of first experience with learning the ASL (hearing Ss only), each test item was read aloud twice by the examiner. The interpreter stood at the examiner's right and rendered the items twice in Signs. The test items were selected so that any adult with normal intelligence would have little difficulty answering correctly provided he understood the question. One exception (Item 3) was included to lend credibility to the announcement that this was a test and to provide a contrast with the other items. They were as follows:

1. In what month does Christmas fall?
2. What day comes before Tuesday?
3. Give an example of a deciduous tree and a non-deciduous tree.
4. What is the sum of 3 and 4 and 2 and 5?
5. Name the room in which people generally prepare their food for meals.
6. What is the hottest season of the year?
7. For what occupation is a hammer a necessary tool?
8. Name an article of furniture.
9. Write the name of an object that is either yellow or round but not both.

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10. Write the name of an object that is not in this room.

The papers were then corrected and scored.

Results

The modal score for the hearing Ss was 9 with a mean of 9.1, and the modal score for the hearing-impaired Ss was 5 with a mean of 5.6. Eliminating the hard-of-hearing Ss did not change the results, as the mean for the five deaf Ss was 5.1, and the modal score was still 5.

Item 3, the only non-trivial item in the test, was responsible for all but two of the errors made by hearing Ss. The deaf Ss scored poorly on all items except 1, 2, and 6.

Discussion

The deaf participants at the workshop were invited consultants, recognized by both the deaf community and the interpreter organization as valued participants at the sessions. It is unreasonable to attribute their poor performance to subnormal intelligence. Nor can the results be explained by poor interpreting. A videotape record of the interpreter's performance was examined later by the experimenter and judged to be adequate based on his experience as a professional interpreter.

It is likely that the lower performance of the deaf Ss was due to a combination of linguistic and nonlinguistic factors involved in their reliance on a Sign Language interpretation of the examination. Tasks requiring formal communication place deaf persons at a special disadvantage, since they are not trained in the ASL or in using it for effective communication. The present interpreter's Sign Language utterances, while permissible in the ASL, were strongly influenced by the structure of the English used by the test administrator. Finally, although environmental factors did not seem to have an adverse effect on the performance of the hearing sample, they may have increased the error rate for the present deaf sample. The test conditions were not ideal. Not all the deaf persons were seated in the front of the room, and late arrivers may have disturbed those taking the test.

While great gains in services for deaf persons have been made possible by trained interpreters, and while an interpreter is an essential prerequisite for deaf persons' participating in many public

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events, no assurances can be given that the presence of an interpreter, however skilled, is sufficient to place the deaf participant in a position equivalent to that of a hearing person. The present results indicate that, at least for formal communication situations, interrupted eye contact with the interpreter or Sign Language structure patterned after an English original may place the deaf person at a disadvantage compared with the hearing.