

Book review

HOLCOMB, THOMAS K. / SMITH, DAVID H. (EDS) (2018) *DEAF EYES ON INTERPRETING*, WASHINGTON DC, GALLAUDET UNIVERSITY PRESS, 318 PP. ISBN 978-1-944838-27-0.

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Interpreting that involves signed languages is often thought to stand out within the wider Interpreting Studies field in a number of respects – too many to rehearse here. One feature that frequently passes without comment, perhaps because it seems so ‘natural’ or familiar to many, is the fact that the majority of practitioners within the field have been hearing people. Yet this has many important consequences, given its concomitant implication of an enormous imbalance between interpreters whose first or preferred language is spoken (i.e. the vast majority) and those for whom it is signed. In academic circles, this has contributed to a parallel situation in documentation and discussion of relevant theory and applications: in short, most of the literature has been written by hearing people. Now, what might be the consequences of *that*? Writing in 2019, I am acutely conscious of the minefield of positioning and identities into which I step through agreeing to write this book review (which internet searches suggest may be the first to be published). The easy route would be a fawning paean to the courage of the editors and contributors for their forthrightness: but, being an academic, I remain less captivated by the ‘authenticity’ of authors’ feelings than by the penetration and theoretical impact of their insights.

In this era of #MeToo, 'Black Lives Matter', state-your-pronouns requests and the like, readers may feel that I should identify myself before going any further. (Perhaps we should always be expected to do this. Discuss.) I was born hearing to two hearing parents, and have no known blood relatives who sign. I began to learn British Sign Language (BSL) in 1985 when, as an undergraduate linguistics student, I spent the second of my four years of study on a placement as a full-time classroom assistant in a school for deaf children in the north of England. Motivated by the character of the language, the complexity of its social circumstances and the issues of justice and politics associated with it, I continued to learn the language, research and write about it during the remainder of that programme and on into a masters degree dedicated to Sign Language Studies. I began working as a research assistant in sign lexicography in 1988, and have maintained a primary interest in social and applied aspects of Sign Language Studies through over 30 years as a full-time academic since. I was appointed Chair of Translation and Interpreting Studies, my present position, in 2005. I have never been an interpreter, though I have delivered educational programmes to such interpreters for most of that time, and have led the development of academic interpreting programmes which have received their share of recognition. I've researched and published in the field throughout my career. I will never attain the fluency of a preferred-language signer, but I am sometimes assumed to be deaf by BSL users who encounter me for the first time in signing environments. Readers will inevitably reach their own conclusions from what I have, and have not, reported here.

Clearly, then, I am reviewing as a hearing person a book that exists precisely to augment a literature challenged, through the very existence of this volume, for being 'too hearing'. Deaf people educate interpreters; undertake research on interpreting; live and work with interpreters throughout their lives; run interpreting businesses; represent service-users to interpreters and vice-versa; write policy for, plan and manage interpreting; and can also become interpreters. In and amongst all of that, of course, the ups and downs of interpreting provision get talked about frequently and intently. This generates opinions and ideas in abundance. The goal of this book, then, as the editors' preface (page xviii) expresses it, is to harvest and disseminate such material to advance the field: "to encourage out-of-the-box thinking as well as consideration of creative solutions to challenges that Deaf people encounter in their interpreted experience".

The result is a richly varied smorgasbord, combining the insights of nearly 40 contributors, 32 of whom are deaf. Five interpreters and interpreter educators were asked to critique the chapters, help to guide clarity and write a short foreword designed to set the stage for the volume. A sixth similar individual wrote a corresponding afterword. All of the editors and contributors are drawn from the United States of America, which implies an important caveat regarding the universal applicability of the discussion. Until comparable volumes are written elsewhere, we can only reach rather uncertainly for impressions of deaf people's experiences and perspectives in every other part of the globe, strongly suspecting, perhaps, that these will vary widely according to economic, social, educational and other circumstances.

In this instance, at least, the editors state that they have endeavoured to ensure that this should not “turn into merely an ‘interpreter bashing’ exercise instead of an educational effort” (page xix). This intention might have been an even greater risk given the fluid mixture of data-driven evidence, anecdotal lived experience and opinion from which the 20 substantive chapters are constructed. This was, we’re told, some contributors’ first experience of preparing a formal manuscript for publication, and a degree of analytical and expressive unevenness in the content is therefore not unexpected. Asserting that “epistemologies, or the ‘ways of knowing,’ of ordinary people should not be dismissed” (page 2) does not, in the output of an academic publisher, invoke *carte blanche* to claim equal validity for every ensuing claim. Whilst the resulting chapters have been editorially managed to prevent the occurrence of ‘interpreter bashing,’ a collection that begins with the premise that the Deaf community “slowly has been left behind” (page 1 of the editors’ introduction) – despite the carefully passive voice adopted in that expression – has a lot of work to do if it is to avoid giving the impression that those outside the community were responsible for it thus being ‘left behind’. In this respect, then, the volume is only partially successful. The availability online of chapter summaries in American Sign Language (ASL) is, on the other hand, a commendable practice and one that is sure to occur with increasing frequency (although we may be waiting for a number of years before ‘mainstream’ publishing houses emulate the Deaf/Sign Language specialist responsible for this volume, Gallaudet University Press, in this respect).

So, does this volume advance the field? The book’s chapters are organised into four sections. The first of these, ‘Seeing Through Deaf Eyes,’ introduces a number of key themes for the volume. Trudy Suggs tees off by reinforcing the value of narrative to disenfranchised communities’ struggle for empowerment. Thomas Holcomb’s contribution stresses the importance of deaf people and interpreters working collaboratively in the search for excellence. Transparency and accountability in business practices form the basis for Chad Taylor and colleagues’ paper, encouraging the belief that these will assist service quality.

Section two, ‘Understanding the Issues Through Deaf Eyes,’ begins with John Pirone and co-authors engaging with students about their experiences of working with interpreters in mainstream educational settings, unsurprisingly identifying practitioners’ ASL fluency, professionalism and intercultural skills as key factors. The next two chapters (by Kim Kurz and Joseph Hill, and then by Keith Cagle and colleagues) centre on ASL and English skills as being critical to interpreting in deaf people’s life experiences. In a case study, Tara Holcomb and Arcelia Aguilar try to show how the outcomes of interaction depend hugely on the decisions of any interpreters involved. Concluding the section, Leala Holcomb reports an experience whereby improved academic interpreting was found to arise as a result of ‘crowd-sourcing’ support through social media.

In section three, which looks at ‘specialized areas of interpreting’ (and here I’m intentionally signalling my own scepticism: which areas should we designate as non-specialized?), readers will find that the focus rests largely upon the education sector. Tawny Holmes discusses legal rights in the US to such interpreting; two pairings (David Smith/Paul Ogden and Patrick Boudreault/Genie Gertz) review challenges for Deaf academics on campuses and the conference

circuit; Thomas Holcomb describes an experience which enabled him to review interpretations into English of his own lecturing in ASL; and papers from Amy June Rowley and Fallon Brizendine interrogate the accessibility of interpreted mainstream schooling for children. Moving to the business world, Sam Sepah's experiences as a Google employee provide the context for reflections about good practice in workplace interpreting. Susan Gonzalez and colleagues stress the creativity and flexibility required to provide meaningful access for Deaf and Deaf-Blind people from diverse backgrounds in healthcare settings.

The volume's last major section, 'Moving Forward with Deaf Eyes,' is designed to centre on the identification of solutions to a number of the issues raised. Wyatte Hall zones in on an approach – *théorie du sens* in all but name – that foregrounds the notion of identifying underlying meanings and describes the result as 'Deaf-centred' interpreting. Familiarity with the norms of Deaf culture is presented by Marika Kovacs-Houlihan as a key element in an interpreter becoming a 'favourite' in education or the workplace, and by Naomi Sheneman as being demonstrable through competent interpreters' management of social encounters. In the last paper, Chris and Kim Kurz and Raychelle Harris review aspects of ASL usage that they suggest are under-exploited by interpreters, leading to inadequate service delivery.

Framing all of the above are two opening and closing contributions. The preface introduces the perspective of five prominent interpreters and interpreter educators (all hearing) invited by the editors to "read and critique each chapter [in order] to minimize the possibility of confusion or misunderstanding" (page xvi) of the points being made. Lastly, an afterword by educator and past president of the US Conference of Interpreter Trainers, Carolyn Ball, underlines the forward-looking intentions of the volume as a whole, and encourages readers to work towards raising standards.

Within a canon of Interpreting Studies literature that has expanded hugely over the preceding half-century (assisted by the pressure upon academics to 'publish or perish,' the burgeoning range of outlets, and the blurring of lines between robust, expertly peer-reviewed material on the one hand and blogs, vlogs and commentaries on the other), there is little in the present volume that shines out for its originality or perspicacity. A clear opportunity is missed, for example, to connect this work to a much wider field of 'client/stakeholder expectations' research (see Downie 2015, 2016 for details) within which parts of it could otherwise sit very comfortably and informatively, explicitly extending the scope of the literature. Nevertheless, no-one can read everything that's written these days, and for many readers, there will be observations here that seem new and provocatively insightful. On the whole, the volume retains a constructively critical spirit, though contributors' "raw feelings" (page xii) are occasionally evident, and a sense that interpreters are being 'bashed' re-emerges as early as page 4 ("the importance of honoring Deaf people and listening to them [is] frequently suppressed by interpreters").

There is, however, unequivocally high-quality research by Deaf authors on interpreting topics emerging elsewhere with increasing frequency today. It is associated with the same unapologetic adherence to traditions and standards of scholarship that has re-invigorated the cultural and social aspects of Deaf Studies

in the short course of our new century (e.g. Bauman 2008; Bauman/Murray 2014; Kusters *et al.* 2017). The same level of informed, rigorous and original contribution would be an exciting addition to Interpreting Studies, but that is not the nature of this volume. We must, though, understand this volume in context. Now, I don't spend any time in the USA, so I can't comment informedly on the place a volume like this may occupy there. These papers may represent US responses indicating US solutions to US problems. But as I read that context, from my experienced, hearing, Scottish/British/European perspective, then taken *not* fundamentally as scholarship, this volume embodies a useful contribution which may contain some valuable pointers to Deaf opinion and some provocations that will help anyone engaging in this field hold up a mirror to certain aspects of received wisdom and reflect on various assumptions.

What would be needed to make this book of broader value to the field? In short, a greater sense of context. There is real potential for the wider discipline in engaging with the point of view foregrounded in these chapters – primarily, that of Deaf participants in interpreted interaction. I have already noted that the volume makes little attempt to connect American experiences with those of the rest of the world here, but this would already promote a more rounded and significant discussion. Given that it is Deaf people's identities as members of a linguistic minority that are foregrounded here, one might anticipate that comparison and correspondence with the experiences of members of other such minorities – in the US or more broadly – could be revealing. And identities being as complex and fluid as we know they are, it would help us to see the kaleidoscopic shifting of identity relations, and their realisation through the communicative choices of interpreters, were *both* sides of the interpreted equation to be considered in this way. A well-crafted book dedicated to hearing non-signers' insights into sign language interpreting could – though undoubtedly different in character – be every bit as revealing as the present volume. From the texts collected here, one might be forgiven for thinking we had lost sight of the foundational point that interpreting serves *both* primary participants in an exchange (in our case, Deaf and hearing), and is not provided for the benefit of either one alone.

The second aspect of context one might welcome would be an enhanced sense of historical depth and conceptual engagement. Contributors to this collection rarely diverge from the preface's summary in its invocation of an "interpreter-centric model" which has "kowtowed to translation" and "dominant culture rules over true communication access" (pages x-xii). Something is going badly wrong if such modelling can be taken as the default basis for the papers that follow, because every aspect of this image has been de-constructed, analysed in detail, re-framed and re-theorised extensively over the last 30 years. How can this fail to be acknowledged in an influential work of this kind? Part of the answer to that question must be that these ideas and discussions are not reaching every part of stakeholder communities. It is vital – in signed and spoken language interpreting circles – that we address this vexed issue.

Perhaps paradoxically, in light of all of the above remarks, it is just possible that this could be something of an era-defining book: era-defining in the sense that it just might mark the closing of one era in order to usher in the next. The new era one would hope to see would be characterised by serious and substan-

tive discourse, across all of the divisions of identity, geography, community and ideology implied by the foregoing paragraphs. Let's face it: we do need to get beyond 'business as usual'. We live in fragmenting societies, with misaligning and diverse (too often contradictory) values, and identities that are confused and frequently contentious (to the point where we don't even know which spaces we can safely share with whom). Amplified by technologies driven by artificial intelligence that we barely control, we misengage and talk past one another – Deaf and hearing; interpreters and consumers; researchers and other stakeholders; nation failing to speak unto nation... Too much information, too little time and space to think, too many voices, too little attention, too much spin, too little trust, too many 'authorities', too little sense of history and perspective, too many 'facts'. Meanwhile, the planet around us is imploring us to re-prioritise, to rediscover frugality, empathy and humility. Will we do it?

In its way, then, it is clear that this book offers something unusual and timely in the scholarly literature on ASL-English interpreting, and that must be unambiguously welcomed. Interpreting is a collaborative exercise or it is – quite literally, in my view (as expressed in original papers published on both sides of the millennium e.g. Turner 1995; Harrington/Turner 2001; Turner 2005, 2007; Turner/Merrison 2016) – *not interpreting at all*. We share or we stall. The more we promote mutual engagement by all relevant parties in the objective of making effective interpreting services routinely available worldwide, the sooner we're likely to attain that goal – and perhaps play a part in working towards much greater humanist goals. To achieve this, though, we will need to exhort foregrounding of informed, realistic and forward-looking dialogue throughout. At present, Deaf authors and analysts participate in little of this at the global level, and it is not easy to envisage any simple change in that situation. To the extent that the existence of this volume acts as a stimulant to interaction across stakeholder communities, it is a significant contribution to the field.

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