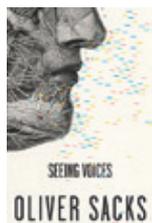


Interview with Maurine McLean, Former Sign Language Interpreter

I have long considered sign language interpreting to be the most mysterious version of the kind of work we do in our particular corner of the linguistic universe. But I had no idea just how mysterious—and remarkable—it was until I started researching it for this interview.



I began by approaching Maurine McLean, a federally certified Spanish>English court and conference interpreter who began her career as a sign language interpreter.

It was Maurine who suggested I should read the book *Seeing Voices: A Journey into the World of the Deaf* by Oliver Sacks, who was a renowned neurologist, best-selling author, and professor of neurology at the New York University School of Medicine.¹ After reading this extraordinarily moving book, I realized that much of what Sacks has to say should be part of this interview, as it will help readers gain a better understanding of the field we're about to discuss. For, as Sacks says, "We are remarkably ignorant about deafness, which Dr. [Samuel] Johnson called 'one of the most desperate of human calamities.'"² On the whole, since the dawn of human consciousness, deaf people—literally unable to speak for themselves—have been, at best misunderstood, and at worst ignored and abused.

Having read *Seeing Voices*, I now understand that there are different ways in which to experience deafness. One can be born totally (prelingually) deaf, in which case one has never heard language spoken. One can also lose one's hearing later in life and become post-lingually deaf, after mastering speech and gaining an understanding of the concept of speaking. Other crucial factors involve the individual's early home life: some are raised in a family in which they are the only deaf person, while others are born to deaf parents and/or have deaf siblings. The difference, in terms of the deaf individual's potential and degree of suffering, is truly like night and day. Later in life, the deaf



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individual's exposure to supportive—or otherwise—community and teachers also has a huge impact on his or her experience.

Those of us who can hear take our hearing for granted, just as we take our vision for granted if we can see. It requires effort to imagine what life would be like if we were deprived of the ability to hear people speaking, or never had that ability in the first place. The thought is quite frightening, and we're quickly overwhelmed by a sense of isolation that we've never really contemplated, let alone experienced. But I don't think we can ever fully appreciate what it would be like to have never heard speech, and therefore never learned how to speak. For interpreters and translators, the very idea of a world *without* words is incomprehensible. We understand instinctively that language is what allows us to fully embrace our human estate and culture, gain a sense of our surroundings, communicate with others, and acquire and share information. At an even more basic

level, our ability to speak is inextricably linked to our ability to think. As Sacks says, "Speech is a part of thought."

Over the past three centuries different theories have been proposed concerning how best to teach the deaf to communicate. Some of these methods rely on the idea that, with enough training, the deaf can learn to lip read and speak. Others rely on a codified system of signs that are based on the natural gestures that deaf people have always developed instinctively and used among themselves. Conflicts have arisen, pitting competing methodologies against each other—Signed English versus American Sign Language (ASL), for example—just as in other areas of linguistic teaching. All this, of course, has a direct bearing on how interpreters approach the task of interpreting for this community.

So, Maurine, please begin by telling us how you first became interested in sign language. How did you learn sign language interpreting?

I've always been drawn to work involving sound and meaning. One of my earliest jobs was teaching English as a second language (ESL) to Spanish-speakers at a continuing education program at St. Mary's University in San Antonio, Texas, around 1978.

I was also performing in a series of musical groups at the time. Teaching involves quite a bit of talking, and since I was also singing many evenings, I started having recurring bouts of laryngitis. Instead of resting and reducing my vocal wear and tear, I decided that if I were to learn sign language, I wouldn't need to take time off from teaching. I began taking sign language classes at San Antonio Community College and became proficient enough that I could teach my basic ESL class through a sign language interpreter when laryngitis laid me low.

But that self-interested initiation into the world of deafness soon evolved into much more as I befriended some deaf people and started learning about deaf culture and the varieties of sign language. I learned more sign language after moving

to Austin by taking courses at deaf churches, community college, the Texas School for the Deaf, and signing with deaf friends. At some point I sent off to Gallaudet University's library to get sign language lessons on videotapes.³ That was before the internet; it must be much easier now to learn sign language with online videos. I was studying books that had two-dimensional drawings with arrows to explain each sign, which wasn't optimal!

How did you get your sign interpreter's license? Once you were certified, how did you go about becoming active as a sign language interpreter?

While working on a master's in applied linguistics at the University of Texas at Austin, I kept up my studies of sign language until I was proficient enough to get an entry level license that allowed me to interpret in community and classroom settings in Texas. That's when I began working for Travis County Services for the Deaf. Assignments varied from interpreting public meetings to doctor appointments to job training sessions. I learned quite a bit on the job as I interpreted for different kinds of signers, ranging from the initialized signs of the Signed English system to the iconic and often idiosyncratic signs of American Sign Language (ASL). I also learned that signs vary according to deaf/hearing family composition, degree of deafness, socioeconomic status, generation, regional origin, and race.

As for certification, Texas has a Board for Evaluation of Interpreters (BEI). The BEI tests and certifies five levels of sign language interpreting. The highest level is for court interpreting. There is also a trilingual certification for ASL, English, and Spanish. The Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf offers two national certifications. The National Association of the Deaf also certifies interpreters. There may be other state certifications of which I'm unaware.

After graduating with a master's in applied linguistics, I took a position in Puebla, Mexico, teaching English at the University of the Americas for a year. When I returned to Austin, I went back to graduate school to study speech communication at the University of Texas department that houses deaf studies. I



completed all the coursework toward a PhD, but then took a major detour and went to study Spanish>English judiciary interpreting at a summer program at the University of Arizona at Tucson. A lot happened that summer: my Spanish was clearly more proficient than my sign language skills, I fell in love with court interpreting, got my state and federal credentials as a Spanish court interpreter, abandoned the doctorate, and, regrettably but inevitably, let my sign language interpreter's license lapse. Despite this, I've remained keenly interested in the field, as an observer if not actually a practitioner.

In his book, Sacks tells us that the 18th century was a time of enlightened understanding of, and compassion for, the condition of the deaf, when several fine French minds suggested new methods for instructing this community. These new ideas were brought to the U.S., and the American School for the Deaf was established in 1817 in Hartford, Connecticut. The French Sign system was blended with the sign languages used in this country to form a hybrid called American Sign Language, as distinct from the combined system of sign and speech that was called Signed English. What is "Signed English" and how does it differ from ASL?

I believe the principal difference is that ASL arose from the deaf community, whereas Signed English began as a way to teach deaf people English. The most extreme form of Signed English is a system called Signed Exact English that follows English word order, spells out past participles, and has gerund indicators in

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accordance with the English language—features that are superfluous to ASL.

Signed English uses initialized signs. For example, the days of the week use a small circular movement of the hand shape for M, T, W, Th, F, and S. Sunday has its own sign, since the "S" is already taken for Saturday. Signed English usually, but not always, tends to follow the word order and structure of English.

ASL isn't dependent on letter hand shapes corresponding to English words. For example, the ASL sign for "GO" uses two index fingers, while the Signed English version uses a "G" hand shape. The systems aren't totally exclusive. Many people combine signs from both systems, or adjust to their interlocutor's use of one system or the other.

Please tell us how a sign language interpreter works with a deaf client. How is it different from working with someone who can hear whatever proceedings are involved?

It's important to arrive a little early so you can chat with the person a bit to get a preview of the way they sign. One big difference in interpreting for the deaf is how to deal with sounds. A hearing person will perceive an airplane flying overhead or loud construction noises and pause the conversation. For the deaf person such a pause could be perplexing. Suddenly no one is talking—what's wrong? In these situations the interpreter will sign "loud airplane" or "waiting for noise to stop."



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There are also certain visual logistics to consider. The interpreter should wear clothing that provides a sharp color contrast to the color of his or her hands so they are easily visible. Busy prints are to be avoided. The interpreter should be careful to stand at a distance and in lighting that facilitate easy perception of the signs. An interpreter standing in front of a window on a sunny day won't be easy to read. In a group situation in which participants sit around a table, I would sit or stand directly across from the deaf client to minimize the excessive swiveling of the neck involved in glancing from me to the other speakers.

Sign interpreters at conferences or concerts are called "platform interpreters," and they have the same concerns about light and contrasting clothing. But nowadays the interpreter's image can be projected on the big screen, obviating in part the need for special seating up front for deaf attendees.

How does a sign language interpreter determine which register is most appropriate? Are regional influences a factor as in spoken languages?

There are generational differences in sign language, just as in other languages. Each generation likes to have its own slang. Some signs have evolved over the

years to replace stereotypes and reflect political correctness, such as signs for ethnic groups and nationalities. There are also regional differences in signs, corresponding to areas of the country or to which school for the deaf one has attended. I suspect that the internet may be reducing these differences somewhat.

An interpreter usually works between two languages. But a sign language interpreter is doing something different in terms of making the speaker "audible" to a deaf client. Can a bilingual sign language interpreter sign into a language other than the one being used by the speaker?

There is such a thing as relay interpreting in sign language, when several spoken and sign languages are involved. I've seen this in action at conferences. If a deaf client has specific language needs due to learning disabilities, mental health problems, or idiosyncratic signs, an additional interpreter may adapt signs to a usable form for that person. Deaf-blind clients use interpreters who sign in the hand-under-hand style. Clients with retinitis pigmentosa have a very limited visual field or tunnel vision, so their interpreter must stand farther away and sign in a limited field to make the signs legible. A deaf person educated in the U.K. would use a different sign system

from the one used in the U.S., so a chain of interpreters may be needed to receive ASL and produce British Sign Language. You can see that there are quite a few complexities to be considered.

Two of my most interesting assignments were trilingual. I interpreted a basic high school French class for a hard of hearing client. I had studied about five years of French, so I understood the basic French input. My output in sign language had adaptations to indicate verb endings, much as in the style of Signed Exact English, but adapted for French. I was listening in either my first language, English, or my fourth language, French, and interpreting into my third language using signs with French adaptations that the student and I had agreed upon. It helped that she was a good student and that I was such a language aficionado.

Another trilingual situation was when I interpreted phone calls from someone in a Spanish-speaking country to a deaf adult who had immigrated to Austin, Texas. He used a mixture of ASL and English-initialized signs. I was listening to the phone in my second language and signing into my third, then perceiving the client's signs and voicing them into Spanish over the phone. It may sound complicated, but that mode of interpreting was extremely easy compared to the French class, which usually left me exhausted.

Unsurprisingly, there are several misconceptions about sign language and interpreting. One is that sign language is a sort of universal lingua franca. There is an invented system of gestures and signs called Gestuno, which is analogous to Esperanto, and there is also International Sign Language. Can you tell us how those systems work and where/how they are used?

I'm aware of Gestuno and Esperanto, but I've never seen them in use. I think of those systems as language pastimes more than actual functioning language systems used by communities.

Isolated deaf people, perhaps rural residents who don't know many or any other deaf people, will develop "home signs" within the family. Such a deaf person's knowledge of standard sign language would depend on the school services available in the area. With

the broad reach of the internet there is less linguistic isolation and more standardization of signing.

Another misconception is that sign language is not a proper language, but a sort of pantomime or gestural code. Oliver Sacks tells us about William Stokoe, a young linguist who came to Gallaudet University in the late 1950s. He saw that sign language was nothing of the sort and went on to prove that it satisfied every linguistic criterion of a genuine language, in its lexicon and syntax and its capacity to generate an infinite number of propositions. Stokoe suggested that each sign has at least three independent parts—location, hand shape, and movement (analogous to the phonemes of speech). Can you tell us about that?

We can use the sign for “thank-you” as an example. This sign uses a hand shape of an open palm with the fingers touching each other, not spread out. The location of the sign starts at the chin. Touch the tips of the fingers to the chin with the palm toward the chest. Then execute the movement by dropping the hand forward and downward until the palm is perpendicular to the chest. It’s so much easier to show someone a sign than to describe it in words!

Stokoe also says, “Speech has only one dimension: its extension in time; writing has two dimensions; models have three; but only signed languages have at their disposal four dimensions—the three spatial dimensions accessible to the signer’s body, as well as the dimension of time. And sign language fully exploits the syntactic possibilities in its four-dimensional channel of expression.” Please tell us more about how this works.

Signing is a total body experience. Signs are clarified and embroidered upon by the speed of their execution, the facial expression, blowing of air from puffed cheeks, and the posture of the entire body. The same basic sign for “eat” can be modified to mean “eat without much appetite” or “scarf down a meal.”

Sacks tells us that the syntax, grammar, and semantics of sign languages are complete in themselves, but they have a different character from that of any spoken or written language: they are visual, spatial languages. It is therefore not possible to transliterate a spoken language into sign language word-by-word or phrase-by-phrase because their structures are essentially different. Can you explain how they are different? From this perspective, how does sign language work?

Sign language has its own word order and idioms. These must be studied in the same way as spoken languages to become accustomed to the way the language is produced by the community that uses it. An example of word order would be EAT-LATE-YOU-QUESTION, meaning “Have you eaten yet?”

One idiom that sticks with me is WRONG-ZERO, which means “You two look just alike.” One of the delights of language study is discovering such expressions, trying them out, and having success in communication. Sign language is no different than other languages in this respect.

Yes! As in the expression “born in a mill,” which denotes deafness. Something most interpreters learn quickly is that they develop bonds with their clients in environments where the client feels vulnerable for any number of reasons. The deaf consider themselves to be a linguistic and cultural minority. How does a “hearing” interpreter relate to and gain the trust of a client from that community?

I think an interpreter gains trust by having a sterling reputation regarding confidentiality. Interpreters can’t talk about their clients, but the clients do talk about and recommend interpreters. So professional courtesy, empathy, continuing study and cultural sensitivity help an interpreter have a good standing in the community. If a hearing interpreter has deaf parents, there is no question of acceptance in the deaf community. As a hearing interpreter from a hearing family, I didn’t enjoy that kind of entrée and had to earn acceptance job by job.

Finally, what advice do you have for someone who would like to work as a sign language interpreter?

Expect to be studying for several years before achieving a conversational level, as with spoken languages. There is a large market for sign language interpreters, particularly those who can work in Spanish, English, and sign language. I think most sign language interpreters find their work satisfying, intellectually stimulating, and enjoyable. It opens up a world of new perspectives. ●

RESOURCES FOR SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETERS

American Association of the Deaf-Blind
www.aadb.org

National Association of the Deaf
www.nad.org

National Consortium of Interpreter Education Centers
www.interpretereducation.org/specialization/deafblind

National Task Force on Deaf-Blind Interpreting
<http://bit.ly/RID-deaf-blind-interpreting>

Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf
www.rid.org

NOTES

- ¹ Sacks, Oliver. *Seeing Voices: A Journey into the World of the Deaf* (Harper Perennial, 1990), <http://bit.ly/Seeing-Voices>.
- ² Samuel Johnson was an English writer and critic, and one of the most famous literary figures of the 18th century. His best-known work is his *Dictionary of the English Language*.
- ³ Gallaudet University, founded in 1864 in Washington, DC, is the major U.S. school (other than the American School for the Deaf) devoted to the instruction of the deaf. It’s the only higher education institution in which all programs and services are specifically designed to accommodate deaf and hard of hearing students.



Tony Beckwith was born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, spent his formative years in Montevideo, Uruguay, then set off to see the world. He moved to Texas in 1980 and currently lives in Austin, Texas, where he works as a writer, translator, poet, and cartoonist. Contact: tony@tonybeckwith.com.