Abstract

This presentation documents selected milestones in the development of platform signed language interpreting, from the late 18th to early 20th centuries, among British Sign Language (BSL) and American Sign Language (ASL) communities of practice. One French precursor is also included.

“Platform” is a term of art in the signed language interpreting (SLI) field to indicate a larger audience, analogous to “conference interpreting” for spoken-written language practitioners. Platform work can be into a signed language from a stage, or into a spoken language from a signed presentation.

Aims

1. To foreground these data through an ongoing project to document signed language interpreter history in the UK and US will begin to resolve three problems that have left deficits in the academy:
   1) SLI studies have no organized historical inquiry; inaccurate and incomplete curricula create a knowledge gap for trainee and practicing SLIs.
   2) Substantive SLI examples are rare in historical/mainstream interpreting studies scholarship.
   3) Interpreters have been largely overlooked among lay and academic deaf historians, as well as in Deaf studies generally.

Discussion

The platform SLI is rarely visible, but mentions are often disregarded to avoid colonizing deaf narratives. Building an academic niche for historical SLI creates space for difficult conversations.

Evidence for historical bases of practice can inform discourses of social/political power, privilege, and oppression, and contextualize shifts over regulatory “divisive politics” and “reactor voices” of a “fractured field” (Carmichael, 2017, p. 5).

Takeda and Baigorri-Jalón (2016) advocated drawing interpreters out of sterile textual analyses, into a living “habitus, associated with a professional code of ethics and a social identity that have evolved through time” (p. ix). Leahy (2015) and Leahy (2019, forthcoming) primarily surveyed legal venues, tracing roots of legal SLI before national sign languages and Deaf communities.

Turning to the later practice of platform SLI broadens historical analyses away from deaf individuals toward settings more rooted in the service of signing deaf communities. These data can be categorized as:

Churches Professional Community

The timeline at left displays such evidence of 225 years of platform SLI in BSL and ASL communities.

Methods and Data

This a preliminary qualitative-descriptive study falls within what Pöchhacker (2011) identified as the “empirical-interpretive discipline” of interpreting studies, and gathers data “of the non-numerical kind” (p. 14–15).

Re-orienting historical texts away from deaf people and toward the platform interpreter’s standpoint culs abundant examples from known accounts, and uncovers new ones. Archival methods supplemented with research into personal histories, situates subjects within their lives and times. Pym (1998) characterized such lists, catalogues, and biographical profiles as “complex detective work, great self-sacrifice and very real service” (p. 5).

Conclusions

Locating centuries of historical platform SLI is a long-term, worthwhile project. Uncovering new data, and re-framing existing accounts enriches adjacent disciplines of Disability studies/histories of signed language interpreting. It also revises assumptions among SLIs, who are rarely taught to look past 20th century lived experiences. Deepening the SLI pedigree re-conceives practices more longitudinally, and challenges the certitude of theoretical and political tides.

In addition to more focused work within worship, professional or public settings, future directions could research transnational/multilingual gatherings (especially with International Sign) or concentrate on the practices of deaf interpreters.

Contact

I enjoy working with other scholars interested in histories of signed language interpreting. If you would like to know more, share resources, or collaborate on a paper, kindly get in touch. You may also follow my progress via social media feeds, or my blog at interpreterhistory.com.

References


