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Interpreting for Late Deafened Adults What's an Interpreter to Do?

By Karen Graham
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A deaf man turns on his video device and makes a call to a sign language video relay service. The interpreter answers, chipper, welcoming him to whichever VRS service. He asks her to sign English slowly – oh, and please mouth the words. The interpreter raises her eyebrows with a slight eye roll, she pauses, and then says: "I'll try." The deaf man hangs up.

Typically, life for a person who becomes deaf as an adult is a daily slaying of the communication dragon. Having not grown up Deaf nor likely to have ever attended a Deaf school, the sign language skills of a late-deafened adult are often a rough approximation of ASL signs in English word order, heavy on speech reading, and with all the elements of "hearing" English language such as puns and English word games. American Sign Language is often a source of anxiety with its rapid fire flying fingers and mouth movements that give no hint of the English word being represented. Given the unique nature of sign language communication used by people who become deaf as adults, and the large number of late-deafened adults in America who use sign language as a part of their communication repertoire, why is it that Interpreter Training Programs lack discussion in regards to working with this particular consumer?

I come at this story through romance. Like most interpreters I developed a fast and furious love affair with all things American Sign Language. After interpreting my way through graduate school I became the director of a psychiatric rehabilitation center where all of the clients and staff were culturally and linguistically Deaf. In the course of my many interactions with deaf people I ran into a deaf man who attracted my attention. But for some reason he seemed to understand about one-third of everything I signed to him. Thus began my own personal journey in the world of communicating with late-deafened adults. The man was Bill Graham, now my husband and the founder of the Association of Late Deafened Adults (ALDA). He was deaf, but not Deaf. In the ALDA vernacular: neither fish nor fowl.

Late-deafened adults define themselves as people in communication limbo.



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Interpreting for them creates conflicts and uneasy feelings in interpreters. As my husband would say: It's not comfy interpreting for us. Late-deafened adults typically seem like very bad signers, and usually they are. They may smile and nod at all the wrong places, fall asleep, get upset, or stare at you blankly. Then respond to a question clearly indicating that they had no idea what you were just interpreting for the past 20 minutes. They are "hearing at the forehead." They are simply very bad Deaf people. Yet, the interpreting profession needs to take a look at what is truly necessary to provide communication access to this group of deaf consumers whose numbers are growing and who are becoming more sophisticated users of services.

First, let's take a snapshot look at what the late-deafened person experiences communication-wise. They typically experience losing their hearing as a tremendous loss in most areas of their lives – relationships, careers, sounds of nature, warning sounds, and so forth. They've often been involved in trauma related to the hearing loss: serious infections, large quantities of ototoxic medications, car accidents, war, tumors, and roaring bouts of tinnitus. As a result some late-deafened people experience--in addition to having become deaf--depression, feelings of shame, a deadness, and what some have expressed as a lack of humanness. I quote from one late-deafened adult: "My misfortune is doubly painful to me because I am bound to be misunderstood; for me there can be no relaxation with my fellow men, no refined conversations, no mutual exchange of ideas. I must live almost alone, like one who has been banished; I can mix with society only as much as true necessity demands. If I approach near to people a hot terror seizes upon me, and I fear being exposed to the danger that my condition might be noticed." That's a quote from Beethoven, who became deaf toward the end of his career as a genius composer.

For late deafened people most attempts at face-to-face communication both with deaf and hearing people are cause for worry and an opportunity for embarrassment. If they don't understand sign language they are typically blaming themselves while becoming increasingly anxious, and anxiety is not a communication facilitator. Late-deafened adults enjoy karaoke and activities that remind them of their hearing days. Most of the time, they are just a wee bit uncomfortable in their deaf skin. They are often in denial of just how deaf they are, bluff when they don't understand something, can easily get lost in a conversation, and will tend to withdraw if given the opportunity. They are not as interested in Deafness in any political sense and simply want to understand what's going on one way or another. Cochlear implants are often used to varying degrees of success and captioning is handy as well. They often learn sign



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language through classes and their first language models are other sign language students.

Having not grown up deaf many late-deafened people are learning adaptive skills long after their Deaf counterparts. Not too much fun. But the good news is that many late deafened adults contribute greatly to society--Beethoven, of course, but also Thomas Edison, I King Jordan, Lou Ferrigno, and Howard Hughes. Late-deafened people often learn to cope using humor, faith, relationships, patience, and other deaf people.

The tagline for ALDA in regard to communication is: Whatever Works. I believe this is a good starting point for the discussion on interpreting for late deafened adults. It's important to remember that late-deafened people are often not used to long periods of watching sign language and fatigue is a big factor. They have less eye stamina. They also typically aren't as adept at tracking visually – an interpreter should try to not sign until you've firmly gotten their attention. They often will lead with their ears – they will try to “hear” whoever is talking, stare intently at them, then when realizing that they aren't going to understand look at the interpreter. This isn't rude, it's simply a conditioned response to hearing for more years than not. They may also look back and forth between captions and interpreter – late-deafened people have told me that often it's tiring to look only at one of the two (again the fatigue factor); other deaf people have told me they look at the interpreter to be polite whether or not they are understanding her.

Late-deafened people often assume that communication difficulties are their own fault and shy away from being proactive in their own communication access. I would suggest that the interpreter assist and offer more directions than you typically would when interpreting for late-deafened people - moving chairs, asking for changes in lighting, sitting closer to the captioning, and pointing out very clearly who is talking, for example. Interpreters have expressed to me that working with late-deafened people causes *them* anxiety because they often don't know if they're comprehensible to the consumer. Anxiety breed anxiety – style and demeanor is important in this context. Looking calm, moving slowly, smiling, and being relaxed can help assuage the consumer's anxiety about trying to understand the interpreter. Open the line of communication to make it more comfortable for the late-deafened person to ask for what they need. You might even be asked to interpret between two late-deafened people –for instance, if one consumer relies on speech reading and the other has facial paralysis (some late-deafened people have acoustic neuromas and facial paralysis is one outcome) they might need some translation assistance talking to one another.



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Late-deafened communicators often rely on an array of modalities to assist in understanding. Contrary to myth, late-deafened adults almost never know SEE or any of the sign supported forms of English taught in elementary school. They are also not always good speech readers. Always ask, but a good default system to begin with is conceptually accurate ASL signs in English word order with a healthy dose of English mouth movements and facial expression.

Pacing should be slow with emphasis on holding the first word of the sentence longer in order to allow the late deafened person the chance to put their mind into “watching signs” gear. Sign the vital words and concepts, leave smaller or less important words out. Too many signs too quickly is visually distracting and does not assist in comprehension – it’s visually noisy. Fingerspelling is the Achilles’ Heel of late deafened communication. Always hold the first letter longer than you feel comfortable doing. Often if the late deafened person misses the first letter they’re unable to catch up. The same is true with thoughts or sentences, if the person misses the beginning they’re unable to put closure to the concept. Use the clearest, cleanest signs possible, closer to the face than you might usually do – idiosyncratic pinky movements, sloppy placement, and stopping mouth movement will throw many late-deafened people off. Ask often if they’d like for you to repeat something. Help them navigate the communication maze. Always carry paper and pencil when working with people who have lost their hearing – for the occasions where a certain sign simply doesn’t work.

Serving the needs of this growing group of consumers requires some thoughtful analysis. What I’ve suggested are my own observations based on 20 years of personal experience. Greater attention by linguists and interpreters is required. Interpreter Training Schools should give consideration to instructing their students in working with people who become deaf as adults. In the meantime, when working with people who’ve lost their hearing remember: patience, humor, and creativity– as ALDAn are fond of saying: Whatever Works!