The Sign Language Interpreter in Inclusive Education

Power of Authority and Limits of Objectivism

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Abstract. This article discusses the significance of the fact that educational sign language interpreting1 is evolving within the context of current practices of inclusive schooling. Sign language interpreters are already in the process of defining their professional authority and autonomy in relation to educational practices. From the perspective of mainstream education, achieving inclusion of all deaf children requires that the spoken English classroom be made accessible to the sign language-using deaf child. This social interplay suggests a symbiotic arrangement – one in which language mediation of an expressly certified quality lends credibility to the social efficacy of educational inclusion. Moreover, this symbiosis appears as an effective and positive response to legislation, in particular in relation to disability discrimination acts. However, this article raises deeper concerns about longstanding educational inequalities, and in particular the troubled status of linguistic rights in relation to deaf children within mainstream education. The argument, articulated with conceptual tools developed by Pierre Bourdieu, is that interpreter-mediated inclusion leaves unaddressed a number of challenges and opportunities relating to the specific abilities and educational potential of deaf children, leaving them locked in limiting forms of educational participation.

A new professional role, that of educational sign language interpreter, is currently being carved out of sets of practices which have been evolving,

1 The reference to ‘sign language interpreter’ is problematic because it does not recognize that the mediation is bi-directional and also benefits people who do not understand sign language; the reference should perhaps be to sign/spoken language interpreter. At the same time, it is customary to make reference to specific languages being interpreted (as in ‘English-French interpreter’), and it must be pointed out that sign languages are equally defined: British Sign Language (BSL) is different from French Sign Language (LSF). However, because there is a need for a shorthand form here, and most of the argument presented spans across particular countries, communities and languages, the term used is 'sign language interpreter'.

judging by the available literature, over no more than the last decade or so (Scott Gibson 1991, Harrington and Turner 2001, Monikowski and Winston 2003, Napier and Barker 2004, Pollitt 1997). These practices concern in particular the formalization and institutionalization – mostly through national registers and codes of ethics and practice which conjoin various skills and locales (such as association with local and national agencies, freelance arrangements, and employment in public institutions) – of a more or less coherent form of marketable expertise. With this formalization a newly defined professional ethos and kinship has arisen that rests not only on shared understandings of what constitutes the nature and level of expertise, but also a collection of qualifications by which standards are becoming embedded into a new cultural fabric of professional competences, qualifications, demeanour, collegiality, fair competition, service delivery, and strategies for resolving disagreement. Substantively, these are the normative mechanisms for closing rank within a new entrepreneurial collectivity.

What is emerging as having particular importance to a critical sociological perspective are the sorts of common dispositions that make up a new collective enterprise and, in particular, one that is becoming capable of self-regulation and “institutionalized call to order” (Bourdieu 1977:17) without explicit reference to rules, except in those cases through which the integrity of the profession itself is being called into question by individual (mis)behaviour. In the United States, the professional facade is nurtured through a transparent description of national standards for interpreter education, although it is based on a self-review process that is voluntary for the time being and therefore not yet considered to be a ‘bona fide’ accreditation scheme (Monikowski and Winston 2003:257). In the UK, a range of interpreter training programmes exist that are mostly, but not totally, delivered through the standard certified programmes of regular university education. In the UK there is now the IRP (the Independent Registration Panel) for British Sign Language/English interpreters in England, Northern Ireland and Wales, which is charged with setting national standards, ‘mapping’ training programmes, monitoring training and assessment centres, and administrating a complaints procedure in relation to registered interpreters.

Sign language interpreting, as a practically constituted community mobilized by shared material and symbolic interests, is therefore in the process of articulating the boundaries of professional activity. It does so theoretically by questioning the nature and relevance of particular sign language forms (in particular as defined by distinctions between sign language as used within the community, and sign system as used in schools, and between literal and free interpretations), and practically by occupying specific roles in clearly defined public domains. Sign language interpreters are also beginning to provide interpretation services in education. In this particular public domain their new professional status has implications that go beyond the immediate
concern or direct interest of the interpreter or their profession, since they are not located within their own practice, nor are they even specifically triggered by it. Instead, what is beginning to take shape is a systemic-level interaction between the kind of mediation that the interpreter offers and the practical form of public intentionality that is called educational inclusion, which seeks to create a dichotomous correlation between, on the one hand, segregation (i.e., being located in separate schools) and social exclusion, and, on the other, mainstreaming and social inclusion. As the UK Inclusion Charter would have it (Centre for the Studies of Inclusive Education, quoted in RNID 2001:5):

Ending segregation in education is a human rights issue. Inclusive education is an indication of the child’s equal value and status in society. Segregation strengthens prejudice against those with SEN [Special Educational Needs] in wider society. Inclusive education is essential to increase wider participation of all people within society at large.

The complex practices of educational inclusion are motivated by a supposedly modern progressive public concern with social inclusion and human rights. But what is particularly interesting about the emergence of the educational sign language interpreter at the point of intersection with those practices is the extent to which the demonstration of professional effectiveness – and in particular the various research activities that are undertaken in order to analyze and improve that effectiveness – papers over questions that should be asked about the conditions of the very possibility of that professional effectiveness. The more educational sign language interpreting is treated as distinctive practical activity, the more it also becomes a discrete object of observation and analysis to those who study its effectiveness. But the problem is that this same focused attention ignores the need for a critical analysis of the deeper social mechanisms through which the practical activity itself is actualized and legitimated. Following Bourdieu, what is hidden

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2 I must point out that I am not here concerned with the role of CSWs (Communication Support Workers). CSWs are educational support workers, for the time being far more commonplace in the UK than are qualified educational sign language interpreters. According to Harrington (2001), CSWs are less likely to be suitably qualified in terms of interpreting skills; but they are likely to insist that they have a different and wider role in supporting learning. Whether or not their particular role in supporting deaf pupils has been beneficial, or has supported the inclusion of deaf children into the mainstream, is not at issue here. The focus here is on the emergence of a qualified and publicly organized interpreting profession, and the extent to which its claims to professional standing and practices in relation to interpreting between pupils and their teachers and peers will interact with the current policy of mainstreaming deaf pupils.
from the self-critical gaze of the professional interpreter who aims to maximize their professional role and expertise are the structured dispositions within which educational sign language interpreting as practice, together with the underlying social structures that have caused so many deaf pupils to be placed in the mainstream in the first place, operate as objective structures; that is to say, as structures which seem to explain “the self-evident, natural character” (Bourdieu 1977:3) of the familiar world.

I have elsewhere described a parallel but similarly ‘hidden’ interaction between two linked spheres of closely related social activity (Thoutenhoofd 2003). That discussion centred on the translation, into British Sign Language (BSL), of standardized assessments used in primary education of deaf children. The a priori decision to translate a ‘hearing’ test for use with deaf pupils, as opposed to designing a new test which explicitly targets the skills and knowledge of both hearing and deaf children, should raise obvious questions, in particular about the underlying social construct of inclusion. The very real and supposedly practical availability of the test in both BSL and English combines with strong claims about validity and functional equivalence at the level of culture and language. And the latter are in turn – and this is the critical point – based on claims about the professional status of the English to BSL translations themselves.

Successful exploitation of these translations in a market of inclusive education has the incidental effect of hiding the possibility of dialectical questions by making them seem irrelevant and off the mark simply because they do not focus on the quality of translation or the content of cultural diversity. Yet in relation to, in this instance, the exact extent to which groups of hearing and deaf pupils are treated in an equitable manner by a test which was designed for hearing pupils and translated for deaf pupils, dialectical questions are indeed relevant. They are the deeper-level questions that lie beyond an objectivist concern with a phenomenological world that constructs deaf pupils as a previously excluded group that can be included in something conceptualized as a mainstream test by a professionally undertaken language translation. Dialectical questions seek to understand the educational context that the testing itself supports by its very practice. They raise the issue, in particular, of the extent to which this context will allow for such notions as equity of treatment and socio-cultural diversity even in principle by recovering an account of the social structures beneath the actual practice. Such questions are therefore ultimately about power and how it determines social practice.

In summary, the insertion of the educational sign language interpreter into the English speaking mainstream classroom, and the BSL translation of an assessment tool standardized for English speakers, can both be made intelligible as closely linked exemplars of Bourdieu’s theoretical logic concerning social structure, in particular with regards the extent to which their
seemingly self-evident character leads to the kind of objectivist knowledge through which education as practice is structured. It is necessary to keep in mind Bourdieu’s insistence that notions such as practice, habitus and field are thinking tools that are there exclusively to yield analytical outcomes, and not in order to support a theoretical discourse per se (Jenkins 1992:67). At the same time, their basis in external realities of sorts needs strong assertion since a notion such as practice does not point to temporary constructs but precisely to a theory of social practice and society that is able to reveal their ordered and predictable nature. In the case of deaf education and the contemporary notion of inclusion, the crucial point is that a new practice of educational sign language interpreting will facilitate the embedding of the practice of educational inclusion (as extended to deaf pupils) precisely because it allows for educational practice to remain otherwise unchanged. In its concern with the education of deaf pupils, the scholastic social order has proven unsurprisingly stable and relatively unchanged over time – indeed, this observation arguably explains the choice to translate educational assessments not designed for deaf pupils.

1. The language of the professional sign language interpreter

Hearing people have been interpreting for deaf people for generations (Scott-Gibson 1991). Mostly, these interpreters were family members who had sufficient skills in the sign language used by the deaf family member to act as a go-between. In addition, the UK deaf community was serviced by clerics or teachers who had often developed contact signing skills. But Scott Gibson sees a more general liberalizing philosophy taking root in the mid-20th century (presumably in the wake of the great expectations of social reform that followed the conclusion of WWII), a philosophy which led to the professionalization and transfer into public functions of the services previously carried out by missions and benevolent societies.

A research project conducted by the British Deaf Association in 1977 found that deaf people wanted to have access to a pool of language mediators who would be “competent, aware of their professional responsibilities, and thereby paid professional rates” (Scott Gibson 1991:254). As Scott Gibson points out, it is important to relate this historical development to that of research into BSL. In particular, it needs to be recognized that BSL was quite literally invisible to public discourse until the very late 70s. It was only long after early descriptions of American Sign Language (ASL) (Stokoe 1960, Stokoe et al. 1965) reached researchers in Europe that the academic mind focused on the notion that the signing that was used by deaf people in the UK should also be analyzed. Moreover, although there has been a flurry of activity and considerable progress in setting up all manner of projects and provisions in relation to the BSL community of language users (training
courses, linguistic and sign lexicographic research, language qualifications, awarding bodies, and the like), it has taken some time to compose an academic body of work that has made it possible to formalize it as a study subject in higher education, and to filter that down the education system and into public discourse and awareness.

It is worth noting that the first BSL/English Dictionary only appeared in 1992 (Brien 1992), and that BSL did not receive official recognition until March 2003. In the UK, BSL/English interpreter registers were set up in the early ‘80s, along with representative associations (Scott Gibson 1991:257) and codes of ethics and practice. In effect, there has been a swing in attitude towards sign language interpretation, from seeing it as community service by a number of committed individuals to a body of professionals with certified qualifications. Moreover, both in the United States and in the UK the development of professionalism has been associated mainly with hearing people rather than with deaf people, and this has led to the professional status becoming, at the same time, a site of cultural conflict (Phillip 1994). Socially, professional qualification has had serious repercussions on the relations that hold between individuals (Scott Gibson 1994, Corker 1997, Pollitt 1997, Napier 1998). Indeed, the effect of qualification must not be underestimated, because as Bourdieu (1990:132) explains,

> by giving the same value to all holders of the same certificate, thereby making them interchangeable, the educational system minimizes the obstacles to the free circulation of cultural capital which result from its being incorporated in particular individuals.

What happens, according to Bourdieu, is that a skills set becomes associated with a qualification rather than with any particular individual. This not only commodifies the skills, it also makes them interchangeable with respect to social agents; the qualification (the skills set) can then become a terrain for negotiation about what it should contain. In the case of sign language interpreting, it is clear that this ongoing negotiation is not disinterested with regards to the status of social actors and the language they use, and this of course is also absolutely significant for the linguistic access deaf pupils can expect to receive through the professional practice of educational interpreting.

There is a relevant example of such a terrain of potential conflict in the UK situation. As with much spoken language interpretation, the deaf participant in a sign language interpreted interaction may actually possess skills in the target language (English). But the deaf participant cannot access the source mode – the actual spoken delivery – and so has no channel for checking the interpreted message against the source message. Napier (1998:21) provides an account of a deaf person demanding that BSL/English interpreters produce clear English lip-pattern with the signed interpretation, so that
he could check the accuracy of the interpretation. In fact, a double conflict occurs here. Firstly, BSL has its own mouth patterns that serve grammatical functions of sign modification; therefore the request in that particular sense is for a ‘less than pure’ form of BSL to be used, one that replaces expected BSL mouth pattern with English word mouth pattern. There is here not only a conflict in professional ethics, but also a cultural conflict about language form, between language users and an academically supported discourse of how the language works. And secondly, there is a conflict here in terms of language status, in that English lip-pattern only makes adequate sense within the context of a more English sign order. In that sense BSL is at the far end of a continuum which also includes signing that has much greater adherence to the structure and word order of English than it has to BSL.

Corker holds that the majority of deaf people are culturally conditioned to an ‘in-between’ identity based on the use of SSE, or ‘Sign Supported English’, by the fact that such forms of signing are extensively used in educational settings. Rather than consider SSE to be an impure form of BSL, Corker holds that SSE is an example of ethnolinguistic vitality (1997:17), and that the rejection of non-BSL forms of signing amounts to a combined agenda of status and corpus planning.

There is a further interesting point of contact with this site of conflict. Some commentators report a particular distinction made between so-called free and literal translations – free translation being associated with an indigenous sign language (for example BSL), and literal interpretation being associated with a more English grammar-derived form of signing, which also includes fingerspelled lexical terms to facilitate the acquisition of subject-specific English vocabulary (Pollitt 2000). The distinction is claimed to be roughly equivalent to the US notions of interpretation and transliteration (Napier 2002a:285, Napier and Barker 2004:230). Napier and Barker, based on research into the preference that university students may have for one or the other form of communication, concluded that interpreters “should be able to code-switch between free and literal interpretation as the situation, consumer, and content of the message requires, using clear mouth patterns and fingerspelling when appropriate” (ibid.:236).

Such conscious mixing of codes can apparently be considered a linguistic ‘strategy’ to the extent that interpreters may be able to make explicit decisions about codes in order to maximize the likelihood of being understood, especially when interpreting texts that are highly formalized or that have high lexical density (Napier 2002a:285-86). By contrast, others may feel that this level of code-switching is beyond the capacity and legitimate requirement of a qualified Auslan/English3 or BSL/English interpreter. The

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3 Auslan is the name of the national sign language of Australia.
suggestion that might arise from this position is that the true grammatical form of BSL is both well-known (shared by a community of users that is exactly identifiable by reference to the form of language used) and requisite in order to warrant the explicit exclusion of more English-based forms or code-mixing and switching, and that therefore the ‘non-BSL form’ is out-with the expected competency (and possibly professional interest) of the BSL/English interpreter. In this case, the suggestion would be that deaf people who prefer forms such as SSE should perhaps be able to expect the services of an SSE/English interpreter.

The focus on the distinction between two sign forms (BSL and SSE), or alternatively the distinction between free and literal translations as two codes of one single sign form, has a deeper resonance in a context in which there are still very few sign-bilingual education programmes using British Sign Language in the UK. As Corker (1997) notes, most education-based forms of signing are of the SSE and not of the BSL form of sign communication, but it needs to be recognized that this is because those forms of education are based on a monolingual English philosophy of curriculum delivery, as opposed to BSL or sign-bilingual modes of delivery.

The clear potential for conflict over the expected range of sign language competencies of the professional sign language interpreter possibly explains research interest in this area, but the debate is also and inevitably affected by barriers to linguistic access within mainstream education (despite some good examples, such as Deaf Ex-mainstreamers Group 2004). Moreover, current training programmes are delivered by trained and qualified hearing and deaf professionals, and are supported by a growing body of academic knowledge that includes both research findings and linguistic theory concerning interpreting practice. Such programmes are likely to start releasing sign language interpreters (who are hearing persons) onto a market that, within the sign language using constituency, is at least in part shaped by deaf people who have either come through an education system that is English or sign-support English based (and who are therefore more likely than not to have less than fluent BSL skills), or who will prefer SSE.

Increasingly, this interpreting market will also serve deaf people who have been through a mostly mainstream education, and who are therefore more likely to have learned their sign language from support workers (Storey and Jamieson 2004), which is equally a non-standard and impaired model of first language acquisition. There may then evolve a situation (and it may already exist below the surface) in which fully qualified, professional sign language interpreters are considerably more fluent in, and have a more analytical understanding of, the sign language they use than many of the deaf people they interact with. If such forecasts have any basis in reality, then in terms of both the social relations between the profession and deaf sign language users, and the social structuring of those relations, this means that the
kinds of cultural capital deriving from language resources are increasingly unevenly divided between hearing and deaf people, between the more and less powerful, as is the quality of sign language instruction they receive and the range of sign language uses to which they are accustomed.

2. Deaf culture and cultural mediation

There is a second characteristic element to the interaction between inclusion and the professional educational sign language interpreter, one that draws on a commonplace and occasionally emotive discourse concerning deaf culture. The earliest and often-quoted specific reference is to Woodward (1982), who proposed that an academic distinction be made between people with a hearing loss and those who belong to a cultural community of sign language users. He proposes to refer to this latter group as capital ‘D’ Deaf people, in simulation of that convention being used for ‘Black’ people in the US. By the time of Scott Gibson’s account on the professionalization of sign language interpreters, this distinction had become a commonplace. Scott Gibson notes that in addition to being bilingual, interpreters must also strive to become “bicultural, for accurate transmission of information may take place only if based on a deep knowledge of both languages, both cultures, and the cultural differences involved” (1991:255).

In fact, the association of culture with language is very convenient in arguments concerning both deaf culture and deaf community; the original Dictionary of ASL (Stokoe et al. 1965) contains a section on the cultural characteristics of the community of ASL users. It has been suggested that this key resource represented a break with a social concern about deafness as pathological condition, bringing “official and public recognition” to the culture of Deaf people (Padden 1989:2); in that sense the concept of deaf culture was part of a socio-political process of emancipation. The actual operationalization of culture is as a set of learned behaviours among which language is of foremost importance; a deaf person may even learn the language later in life and thus become enculturated into Deaf culture (ibid.:6, emphasis in original):

… the language of the culture of Deaf people [in the US] is American Sign Language (ASL). … At the same time, when Deaf people are involved in community activities which include hearing people who use English, they may choose to use a variety of Sign English. Language use at the community level is rather flexible, but within the cultural group, language is more restricted.

According to this particular logic, deaf people can belong to a community of deaf people, but can only be culturally ‘Deaf’ once they have attained a
certain fluency in the indigenous sign language; already the relevance of this type of discursive and academic logic to the role of the educational sign language interpreter is becoming clear. Within most educational systems, English-based forms of signed communication, such as Signed English, Sign Supported English, and Paget Gorman are being used, thus creating an apparent barrier towards enculturation in deaf communities. If the academic convention does reflect the status quo of community politics and membership then the use of English-based forms of signed communication has potential social exclusionary effects. Exclusion may indeed become acute and have life trajectory consequences (Corker 1997, 1998) for individuals, and this may in fact provide a social impetus to some individuals to acquire the indigenous sign language in adulthood (Ladd 2002, Oliva 2004).

It is clear that the interpreting profession connects with this cultural discourse. Many of the academic texts on sign language interpreting have adopted the convention of the capital ‘D’ in reference to a deaf culture that is closely tied to the use of an indigenous sign language, and on occasion professional conduct is considered to be allied with it. For example, Pollitt (1997:25) recommends that the interpreting profession identify “acceptable professional Deaf behaviours” in order to glean from those information on the kinds of behaviour considered professional within such a deaf community. Napier (2002b:23) makes reference to the need for interpreters to understand the sociolinguistic and sociocultural contexts of a ‘world view’ of deaf people. Moreover, such cultural understanding has implications for professional skills, through which the interpreter engages in a “complex linguistic and cultural process of transferring information between languages” (ibid.:20). And finally, the interpreter is the ally of the Deaf community, using their knowledge “of both Deaf and hearing cultures to address power imbalance” (ibid.:21).

Similarly, Tate et al. (2003:15) suggest that the “target language and culture” for the translation of their performance indicator assessments is that of an indigenous minority in Britain, a group who learn most readily through BSL. The culture is held to be that of Britain’s BSL-using Deaf community. In considering the assessment translations, these researchers were interested in allowing for future cross-cultural comparisons, aiming at a test adaptation rather than the development of a new test altogether. They also recognized the potential for invalid cross-cultural comparison, so that sections based on phonics (questions about saying words and rhyming words) are made optional for deaf pupils using BSL.

Of further relevance to the discussion of the widespread discourse on deaf culture is that skopos theory (Nord 1997) has been applied to the task of translating test items from English into BSL. Skopos is an approach to translation that focuses on textual coherence across the translation, taking into account the cultural differences between source text and target text lan-
guage users. Tate et al. suggest that this approach enabled the translators in their research “to think about acceptable BSL translations of the English questions that can be said to yield valid cross-cultural comparisons” (2003:19). However, I have elsewhere discussed the fact that none of the examples of cultural translation quoted in Tate et al. in relation to their translation project actually have much to do with cultural difference. Instead, their examples reference issues that are, to my mind, purely linguistic and cognitive in nature (Thoutenhoofd 2003:64). Although my discussion did not focus on issues of translation, in a later reply Tate et al. (2004:S195) argue persuasively that experts in BSL and English need to be involved in the translations, commenting that “we use the term “experts” without embarrassment”. They conclude with the comment that, after all, the deaf pupils being assessed through this instrument will become the future Deaf community of BSL users.

But there is no question at all that assessment instruments for deaf pupils who use forms of sign language are part of the current audit culture. The assessment tools in question are considered to be of a high standard and are used in many local authorities. At the same time, it is entirely legitimate to ask reasonable questions about what kind of social structuring lies behind specific practices of educational testing, the professional practice of translating, a Deaf Studies discourse about ‘Deaf culture’, and the widespread policies of educational inclusion. Within the context of the increasing professionalization of the sign language interpreter, and the ways in which their insertion into deaf education both affect and reflect those practices, assertions about ‘expertise’ are revealing, precisely because they are quite literally powerful claims. They absolutely do present new claims to authority within the context of deaf education.

With this emerges a new objectivist construct, a co-incidental (but far from accidental) effect of losing sight of deeper-level questions that are about the exact nature of that expertise, in particular how it is constructed and asserted within the wider context of both educational and deaf studies concerns. Questions should therefore be asked about the relationship between what is measured with translated assessment tools and what is being delivered in the process of teaching an essentially monolingual and ‘non-Deaf cultural’ mainstream curriculum, including attention to the qualifications, experience and language skills of teachers. The worry is that a superficial deaf cultural discourse is being used as a shorthand in relation to a collective of deaf individuals that does not actually fit the descriptors being used very well, as the earlier discussion about language forms and educational experiences suggests.

Bourdieu noted that there is no way out of the game of culture (1980:225). The only chance of objectifying the “true nature of the game” is to detail as far as possible the very operations needed in order to achieve that
objectification. But a legitimate bypass to such a philosophy of theory will be to consider that the ubiquitous deaf cultural discourse has produced few analytical connections with the wider social order. Concepts such as deaf community and deaf culture are being reduced to the intellectual tools of a pseudo-science of Deaf Studies in which common experience is considered evidence of a supposed unique as well as coherent social phenomenon. The problem is that it treats all experiences of deafness as if they were the realizations of a single pure object of study waiting for a correct (i.e., deaf) interpretation. This is reminiscent of Bourdieu’s comments on Saussurian linguistics, which to his mind reveals “an inability to conceive of speech and more generally of practice other than as execution” (1977:24). Bourdieu (1990:31) further explains that

> [u]nlike the orator, the grammarian has nothing to do with language except to study it in order to codify it … within the limits allowed by the urgency of practice, the grammarian is tacitly inclined to treat language as an autonomous, self-sufficient object, that is, a purposefulness without purpose – without any other purpose, at any rate, than that of being interpreted, like a work of art.

Short of critically analyzing how such claims about culture, community and language actually help to describe the deep social structures of a phenomenological world – something which we might call the habitus (Bourdieu 1977:72, 1990:53, Jenkins 1992:74) of a deaf collective – such discourse merely constitutes the privileging of a constructum over the materiality of practical realization (Bourdieu 1990:33). And the habitus in which deaf people find themselves is one that is proving remarkably resistant to change, as is clear from the actual outcomes of deaf education (Powers et al. 1998; Thoutenhoofd et al. 2005).

In sum, the concept of deaf culture has attained an ahistorical essence that has put it both beyond question and beyond any practical value or use. Given the varied demography, social situation and educational and language experience among deaf children, youngsters and adults, it is quite simply unreasonable to insist on some kind of generalized, unspecific notion of a deaf culture that is “a set of learned behaviors of a group of people who have their own language, values, rules for behavior, and traditions” (Padden 1989:4). Such staid and functionalist descriptions fall well short of an imaginative sociology of deafness. The various edited collections which reveal something of the particular activities or the often exceptional experiences of this group (see Taylor and Bishop 1991 and Taylor and Darby 2003 for the UK, McDonnell 2004 for Ireland, Wilcox 1989 for the US) offer nothing to extract from such accounts as product – the opus operatum of Deaf Studies activity – the modus operandi, or “the principles of its production” (Bourdieu 1977:36).
Such texts have little that is of real use to say about how a deaf collective that is gathered up so very neatly and convincingly in the pages of a book intersects with, and is distributed across, the sort of messy mainstream social structure within which it exists. It is in that sense that the Deaf Studies account of deaf community and culture is quite literally a text, and quite blind to the all too convenient conditions of its own making, a habitus that is neither unpacked nor plugged into mainstream social science concerns. This is a criticism that is well beyond a quarrel over a definition (Bahan 1994, Ladd 1994, Montgomery 1994, Stokoe 1994, Turner 1994a, 1994b), since it is a call to stop constituting the social world as if it were a self-contained spectacle of interactions that has a purely symbolic value, and to recognize that the play includes some very powerful social actors.

The challenge now is to develop a grasp of the motivated and very particular relationships that produce a social structure in which a specific kind of sign language interpreting professionalism is being inserted into the very contemporary social context of deaf pupils in a mainstream education that has absolutely no time for the capital ‘D’ beyond reminding mainstream teachers not to stand in front of a bright window while they talk. The discourse about interpreting as cultural mediation, when combined with a separate discourse about the culture of deaf people, does a very great deal to support claims about expertise in language mediation and therefore the necessity of using an interpreter, as the example of the assessment translations shows. But more importantly, it provides a coherent argument about sufficiency essentially by limiting the nature of the task, through the suggestion that if the translation or interpretation is of expert quality and supports its own claims, such as those about cultural appropriateness or about method, then the logic of the overall effort (that is, the actual practice) attains such a self-evident character that it can no longer be questioned, at the same time sustaining both Deaf Studies discourse and interpreting professionalism.

We are in fact dealing with a social ordering that can perfectly well be explained by constraints without recourse to a cultural account which centres the experience of being deaf in contemporary education around a discourse of deaf culture. In exactly that same vein (and repeating my contention vis-à-vis the translation of assessment tools), it should come as no surprise that Napier’s (2002b) admirably detailed research on interpreters’ coping strategies (the ways in which they correct for potential error in the process of interpretation) does not reach conclusions in relation to culture, despite noting in the introduction that the application of cultural knowledge would be an example of linguistic coping strategy used by interpreters (ibid.:xiv). Indeed, the strongest finding to emerge out of the actual analyses is a correlation between educational background of the interpreters included in the study and the number of erroneous omissions made in the interpretation
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That finding is certainly not about culture but is very much about social order.

3. Educational inclusion and the professional sign language interpreter

The most obvious constraint that the social order imposes on current practice is the policy of educational inclusion, which limits choice by closing deaf schools and restricts language used by the classroom teacher to English because the teacher has to function in mainstream classrooms. Inclusion also does a very great deal to avoid questions about the language of curriculum delivery and assessment. It is entirely to blame for the need to dissipate specific expertise (including linguistic skills) that was previously available through special schools to potentially each and every mainstream school in the country – an outcome that cannot be attained despite the most effective attempts to approach the problem via professional development training and collaborative working.

Allan notes, for example, that although the Scottish Executive would claim politically that teachers are well supported in this process, in effect teachers are “crying out for skills, knowledge and expertise in order to meet children’s needs effectively” (2003a:187). In Scotland, sign-bilingual provision is not a significant element in the placement options for deaf pupils, but there are pupils who do their learning through BSL, and schools that support their right to linguistic access. The Scottish Qualifications Agency (SQA) allows for the signing of assessment materials to a deaf candidate (SQA 2004:24) for both internal and external assessments. Moreover, candidates are permitted to sign their responses to external examination papers. Communication is arranged for by the assessment centre or school itself through the use of a ‘communicator’ – as SQA terms that role – who is usually the pupil’s teacher or a support worker. The only language skills requirement is that the communicator must be able to communicate effectively with the candidate and have a good working knowledge of the subject. It is the responsibility of the centre to ensure this level of skill, which needs to be “sufficient to reflect the candidate’s breadth of knowledge and activity” (ibid.:45).

Under current arrangements, signed responses are video-taped and translated by the centre; the marking is done on the basis of the English transcript. The quality of the translations is monitored through a once-yearly moderation event that includes native signers and an employee of SASLI (the Scottish Association of Sign Language Interpreters). This arrangement reveals the somewhat uneasy marriage of linguistic access rights and curricular learning and assessment demands. It is a process that is entirely based on both interpretation and translation. As such it requires skilled mediation and careful
monitoring of the quality of those intervening processes, but strangely the arrangement requires no professional qualification or status at all on the part of either the ‘communicator’ or the team monitoring the quality of translation. It therefore seems likely that future developments will call for educational sign language interpreters to undertake both tasks.

4. Inclusion policy: the Scottish example

Section 15 of the Standards in Scotland’s Schools Act (SEED 2000) introduced a ‘presumption of mainstreaming’, an insistence that pupils with special educational needs will be educated in a school other than a special school, except where exceptional circumstances act against best interests. Exceptions cover only the aptitude of the child, negative effects on the mainstream classroom arising from the inclusion, or unreasonable expenditure being incurred. A public guidance document (Scottish Executive 2002) notes the right of all children and young persons to be educated alongside their peers in mainstream schools unless there are good reasons for not doing so. It is based on the premise that there is benefit to all children when the inclusion of pupils with special educational needs with their peers is properly prepared, well supported and takes place in mainstream schools within a positive ethos. Such inclusion helps schools to develop an ethos to the benefit of all children, and of society generally. It also helps meet the wishes of many parents that their children should be educated alongside their friends in a school as close to home as possible.

Ainscow and Tweddle (2003:173-74) list four elements of inclusion, arrived at in consultation with a sample of participating local authorities: inclusion is a process; it is concerned with removal of barriers; it is about participation and achievement; and it involves an emphasis on groups of learners who are at risk of marginalization, exclusion or underachievement. Policy for inclusive education should be: short, containing a view of the future and basic values and principles; stable and relatively unchanging; capable of being internalized and applied to other policy areas; developed through the active engagement of all stakeholders; clear, despite diversity of opinions amongst stakeholders; led by the local authority; supported by a clear Government lead; and be carefully and systematically managed throughout its implementation (Ainscow et al. 1999).

The above represents the ‘ethos’ of an ideal-type structured and long-term intervention. Inclusion therefore also implies a moral responsibility in relation to monitoring, in line with Taylor Fitz-Gibbon’s comment that we should be “monitoring the outcomes we care about enough to measure” (1996:32). However, there is a recognized danger in the use of data to
monitor the progress of children or evaluate the impact of interventions. Evaluations conducted on the basis of “narrow, even inappropriate, performance indicators” can be deeply damaging, invite misinterpretation and have a negative effect on the behaviour of professionals (Ainscow and Tweddle 2003:175). Therefore evidence collection needs to relate to the presence, participation and achievement of all pupils. This necessitates a focus, within such methods as classroom observation, on the classroom as social space, rather than on individual performance. Allan (2003a:183) has at any rate noted that one of the biggest barriers to inclusion is the tendency among professionals to mythologize progress towards it, pronouncing that it is ‘not yet there’, which presupposes that we have a clear idea of what full inclusion looks like in practice.

What we can say about full inclusion in relation to deaf children is that it is almost exclusively about linguistic access and status. Effective inclusion also has to do with varying the curriculum (Clough 2000), but only in order to take account of both issues of access and status. Here is a further issue in translating tests into BSL in order to measure school performance in relation to a fixed curriculum. It may be good social science to some, but to others it may reflect an obsession with standards that shuts down imagination and hides the constrained nature of the curriculum (Allan 2003b:1).

The case study of Fiona, a deaf girl (Allan 1999:95), reveals instead no opportunities to learn sign language in school, and an assimilation into a social environment that implies denial of deaf identity, which forces Fiona to be less deaf and more disabled. Allan reports how Fiona “sought to transgress out of her deafness because of its negative connotations within the mainstream school” (1999:98), producing an experience of exclusion and marginalization while her peers assisted her practical educational inclusion by ignoring her deafness and “helping her to learn the rules of successful mainstream performance” (ibid.:91). This produced no benefit to Fiona, since, in her own words, “When people speak to me there is a lot of noise. I can’t hear what they are saying because in the academy there are 1200 people in school who make such a noise that I can’t hear” (quoted in Allan 1999:91). This experience appears to be widespread (Oliva 2004). While it is not about sign language per se – even though its relevance in the above case should be obvious – it is certainly about access to language. It demonstrates why deaf education is about linguistic access and has little if anything to do with misplaced moral assertions which mistake physical location with a ‘hearing’ formulation of social inclusion, the benevolent ‘ethos’ of a school, with the skills of a hearing teacher in a mainstream classroom, or even with placement as such, except to the critical extent that language access implies being effectively part of a language community. This last point is exactly what is so very sorely lost with the closure of deaf schools, which is now constitut-
ing the educational sign language interpreter as the mediator between deaf pupils and their language community. The kind of reasoning that proposes that social inclusion for deaf pupils should mean being placed in linguistic isolation in mainstream settings, in which access to language requires either the personal resources of additional effort or the mediation of ‘support’ staff (which always marks the pupil as different and having a ‘need’, and inserts new categories of social and educational authority between the pupil and learning), reflects an underlying social order and social structure that allows no fundamental change of any sort to the nature, content or organization of schooling, but does engage with economic arguments about placement, such as those presented in relation to the supposed cost benefits of cochlear implantation (Francis et al. 1999).

5. Language support and social exclusion – beyond Bourdieu

The conclusion that follows from this combination of social facts is that the educational sign language interpreter is a crutch to deaf pupils’ learning. Moreover, he or she is a crutch that serves to make inaccessible a deeper analysis of the conditions of social exclusion by making interpreting practice appear effective, exactly through the various professional activities (such as research into the effectiveness of processes and intervention types) that constitute that practice. Irrespective of how professionalized, protected by codes of ethics, trained and secure the role of the interpreter might be, of how much research is invested in matching the skills of the interpreter with the requirements of the pupil or the demands of any particular curriculum subject, the educational sign language interpreter may underpin the social construction of the presumption that the deaf pupil has special requirements in the first place and support a kind of mainstream education that is exclusionary by forestalling root and branch change.

Consideration of that position within the structural relations of social power does draw quite critically upon the notion of social solidarity, somewhat like that recognized as characteristic of the community interpreter of the past. However, this more contemporary social solidarity does not concern an allegiance to any particular concept of deaf community (even less to deaf culture), but concerns first of all allegiance to those deaf pupils who are socially excluded from full equitable participation in education by impaired, or mediated-only language access to their schooling. Furthermore, this solidarity can only be based on a deeper awareness of the complex dynamics of social exclusion.

In relation to deaf pupils, the current policy of educational inclusion, far from being equitable or progressive, actually seems part of an historically consistent pattern of disadvantage that is situated much deeper within the
social fabric. It reflects the dynamism of a modern society with novel (or as in this instance, re-invented) institutions that have a “propensity to continued and unlimited change” (Byrne 1999:73). However, it is critical to understand that it is the propensity for change, and not change as such, that defines the society as dynamic (ibid.). As is also clear from deaf education and deaf history, there is a time component to social exclusion, which means that social exclusion can only be understood across individual life trajectories, in other words by examining not individual cases but the ensemble of cases (ibid.:75):

If we do we find that as we map trajectories through time we do not find either an even or a random patterning of trajectories throughout the condition space. Instead we shall find certain areas of the condition space being occupied with sets of trajectories which, while they are not the same cycle on cycle, none the less stay within particular boundaries.

According to Byrne, social exclusion is not about individual circumstance, but is about a collection of categorically worse conditions, forming a social space that is multidimensional in character. Individuals can occupy that space for varying periods of time, or they can loop in and out over time. This is the beginning of an understanding of habitus that includes a level of complexity which is difficult to imagine in Boudieu’s social theory. The strength of a complexity approach to social or biological trajectories means that at the level of social order, individual agency can make a difference. It is a view of the social in which life trajectories do indeed occupy a social terrain that includes certain constraints – for example the types of historically persistent constraints that show up as stable educational underperformance, and which mark the social exclusion of deaf pupils as both durable and continuing. It is however a perspective which adds an element of chaos theory, including being able to factor in the potentially significant effects of comparatively minor social agency intervention.

There is a contradiction between, on the one hand, the notion of a community (envisaged as a group with a collective identity of interest and action), and on the other hand the facts of social exclusion that distribute and disintegrate all collective experience. This contradiction seems equally, and more perversely, to exist between the Deaf community and policies of inclusion. I remain unconvinced of the temporal stability that is implied in the commonplace Deaf Studies notion of community (and not only in relation to social mobility), but that is not the point. The more general conclusion is rather that there is a need to critically analyze the concepts of deaf community and culture – including those used to warrant ‘expert’ interpreter mediation –
against the one historically consistent social form of being deaf: the common residence of deaf people in an excluded space that is defined entirely by a perpetual struggle over linguistic access.

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