Me, an Oral Interpreter?

By Donald McGee, OIC:C, New York

Oral interpreting/transliterating is still somewhat of an enigma for some interpreters. Those interested in developing oral interpreting/transliterating competencies have often felt unable to do so because of the scarceness of convenient training opportunities, or because they live in a geographical area where oral interpreting is not traditional, or because many oral deaf adults are not aware of the usefulness of oral interpreting and therefore don't request it, or because the interpreter's experiences in providing oral interpreting have been unsatisfactory.

The newly developed RID oral certification has created an increased interest in training opportunities, especially of the workshop format. The number of oral deaf adults who take advantage of oral interpreting services is steadily growing and can be expected to grow even more in the future. Current figures from the Gallaudet Research Institute indicate that 95% of reported students who are in schools and programs for the deaf and hard of hearing use sign and speech, or auditory/oral communication. Of the total population reported, 35% were profoundly deaf.

A common misconception about oral interpreting/transliterating is that there is only one way to do it. To the contrary, it is a highly individualized process. Our tendency as humans is to categorize and label concepts, events and people in order to process information quickly. We say that things are black or white, good or bad; or that people are deaf or hearing, oral or signing. This tendency to "think in boxes" ignores the reality that between the two end-points of deaf and hearing is a continuum of characteristics that defies stereotypes.

Within the continuum of oral deaf people is a great range of characteristics which affect the oral interpreting/transliterating process. The process, like sign language interpreting, is highly variable in its usefulness to individuals. The interpreter who is new to oral interpreting/transliterating may understandably encounter confusion and frustration when attempting to facilitate clear and efficient communication with, for example, (1) deaf persons who have never used an interpreter before or who have little or no experience in directing the work of an interpreter; (2) clients who have visual or other problems which affect their ability to speechread; (3) clients who depend a great deal on amplified audition and are confused by lag time; (4) clients who rarely watch the interpreter; (5) clients who, because of personal preference, position themselves in the least favorable spot in the room, which impedes the communication process; (5) clients who are excellent speech readers and want every word repeated exactly as it is said, even if it is said wrong; clients who want verbatim transliteration even when it is not appropriate to the situation; (6) clients who want sign-supported transliteration; (7) clients who have no familiarity with sign language. The list of individual differences could go on and on.

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An advantage that the oral interpreter/translator often has is that of serving one client at a time. This can offer maximum opportunity to adjust the process suitably for the client. Interpreters new to oral interpreting should feel perfectly at ease in telling the client that they are still learning about oral interpreting and that they want useful feedback about their performance. Oftentimes, the client will say that he or she is still learning about oral interpreting also. Oral interpreters can expect that at some time or another in their career a client will say, “I can’t understand a word you say!” This is particularly discouraging if you think you’ve just done your very best job of using natural phrasing, good facial expression, appropriate gestures, and clear articulation. It illustrates a fact of life that every interpreter is not right for every client, and that preferences and abilities in speechreading are highly variable, and that each interpreter has his or her own unique characteristics. The next client might tell you that you are perfectly understandable.

The golden rule in oral interpreting is to be as relaxed as possible, keep mouthed speech as natural as possible, and don’t exaggerate. This works fine for interpreters who speak perfectly, but most of us elide speech sounds and words in natural conversation. Ironically, some of the words we tend to elide the most (a, an, the, and, etc.) are the very words that provide the grammatical structure the speechreader requires in order to take advantage of the redundancy of English. In trying to increase our clarity we may feel that we are exaggerating our mouth movements inappropriately, but it is the client’s perception which determines whether we are or not. Attention to natural phrasing will provide the foundation for improving the clarity of individual words. Lecturers and speakers who speak very fast diminish the interpreter’s ability to maintain natural phrasing and adequately represent each speech sound, and it is the client who must decide whether to ask the speaker to slow down (often this is inappropriate to the situation or against the wishes of the client), or to accept an interpreted message, or to try and follow the rapid message through transliteration. Relaxation and natural phrasing are not always possible.

Techniques for the communication of the speaker’s affect or mood are well known to interpreters, but what about the speaker who is giving a canned lecture or reading a speech and exhibits no affect or clues to his or her mood? As often happens, the slight variations in vocal tones of the speaker are not very susceptible to interpretation or transliteration, although they are minimally helpful to the hearing audience in keeping its attention focused on the message. The interpreter’s face need not reflect the monotone of the speaker unless there is a compelling reason to do so. The interpreter may add facial expressions which add interest and support the content of the speech but do not necessarily convey affect or mood. This is desirable because it helps keep the speechreader focused on the message and helps to avoid the tedium of watching a moving mouth with no other visual supplement.

The appropriate use of gestures can sometimes be an area of confusion for the oral interpreter. There are some clients who attend to the lips so closely that supplementary movements of the hands distract them. The majority of oral clients, however, expect to see natural gestures which support the message. “Sit on your hands” is not good advice unless one’s gestures are so ambiguous as to be meaningless to the client. Gestures are generally used to indicate who is speaking, or the location of people, places and things, or to establish categories which are being compared or contrasted with other categories. Gestures are especially useful in helping to identify referents.

The difficulties of establishing clear referents are known to everyone who interprets. Referents seem to be especially problematic in office settings where the staff speaks its own abbreviated language. Sentences such as “They sent this RFP down for review, and they have their work cut out for them, because you know how they like to criticize” may have three different referents represented by they. The message is that management (they) has sent a document which a subgroup of the deaf client’s office staff (they) must review because the general public or other unspecified group (they) is likely to be critical of the document. The speaker’s tone of voice and emphasis help the hearing staff figure out what is meant, but the deaf client can be left totally confused unless some supportive visual cues are given.

Lag time between the spoken and transliterated messages is often a significant problem for clients participating in group meetings where give-and-take conversation is expected. It is difficult for the client to jump into conversation at exactly the right time without overlapping another speaker who is finishing his or her last sentence or who is just starting to speak. It would be nice if everyone raised a hand before speaking but this generally does not happen in most meetings. An agreed upon visual signal between interpreter and client is likely to be the best way to handle the problem, but there is great variation among clients as to personal preferences regarding office protocols, whether or not the client is signaled by his or her own amplified hearing or must depend on visual cues, and the size of the group. Many clients watch the speakers, rather than the interpreter, in order to help with exact timing of the client’s response or contribution (as well as for other reasons), but will turn to the interpreter for clarification when needed.

There already are a number of sign language interpreters who are excellent in oral interpreting/translating. More are needed. Those who have fear-of-the-unknown-syndrome may find that working first with oral clients who use sign-supported speech in interpreting situations makes the transition easier because they can provide invaluable feedback on improving one’s skills in oral communication. Negotiations prior to service, regarding the skill level which the client expects, the client’s willingness to accept an interpreter new to oral interpreting, and the understanding that constructive feedback will be expected, are quite proper and help to eliminate possible disappointments for client and interpreter.
Taking the Mystique out of Oral Transliterating

By Claire A. Troiano, OTC, Massachusetts

"You do what?" Tell someone that you are an oral transliterator or interpreter and this is the response you will most likely receive—even from your colleagues—sign language interpreters! The Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf is once again certifying oral transliterators so, hopefully, as our numbers grow, so will the awareness of the important needs oral transliterators help to address. Deaf people who communicate orally depend on speechreading, residual hearing, and the English language to receive spoken information and to express themselves. Just as a deaf person who depends on sign language may need an interpreter to facilitate communication, so does the oral deaf person.

The process of oral transliterating is much more complex than it looks to the casual observer. In my experience, the most successful oral transliterators share some common qualities and characteristics that appear to be a natural part of who they are. It is these qualities that lay the foundation for them to become effective oral transliterators. There certainly are many other techniques that also must be learned and mastered. But if these essential "natural" characteristics are not in place then it may be difficult, if not impossible, for a person to master the techniques. What are these natural qualities or characteristics?

- Oral transliterators must be speechreadable (lipreadable). They have to be the sort of speaker who can be speechread by the average speechreader at first encounter with little or no effort. They have to have natural and clear articulation with no exaggerated lip movements.

- Since speechreading involves much more than simply watching the lips of a person, people who are naturally expressive when they speak, using natural facial and body expression can be effective oral transliterators. For example, something as simple as movement of one's eyebrows sends a great deal of information to a lipreader. (This is a technique that possibly can be taught but it sure helps if a person is first an expressive speaker.)

- Oral transliterators must have an excellent short-term memory. The ability to listen to information and hold it in one's short-term memory while simultaneously voicing other information is vital. (Again, there are activities that can improve this ability but there are just some people who, no matter how hard they try, cannot do it!)

- Oral transliterators must have a comfort level with the English Language. There are times in the process of interpreting when it is necessary to paraphrase information, rephrase information, or make appropriate substitutions that aid in the lipreading process. All of this involves manipulating the English language while maintaining the intent of the speaker's message.

- Oral transliterators, like all interpreters, must have a degree of flexibility and open mindedness for at least two reasons. First of all, rarely are interpreting situations ideal, where the room is conducive to you performing your job effectively and where the people involved have any understanding of your role. You have to be able to make adaptations accordingly. The second reason that flexibility is so important is that each consumer is an individual with particular needs and preferences. We have to be willing and able to work with a variety of individuals.

- Oral transliterators need to have knowledge of speech production and speechreading which enables them to
identify which speech sounds or words are not easily visible on the lips. Armed with this information, the oral transliterator will then have to employ a variety of possible techniques.

- There are techniques, verbal and nonverbal, that the oral transliterator uses to support the lipreading process, especially in coping with the potential limitations of lipreading mentioned above. For example, some people think oral transliterators are not supposed to use gestures or body language to support their transliterating but these are very important nonverbal support techniques.

- Oral transliterators must have a thorough understanding of the RID Code of Ethics and of the role of the interpreter.

- A very important part of the job of the oral transliterator is to do what is referred to as visible-to-spoken interpreting. This requires the oral transliterator to be able to understand, easily, the speech of a variety of deaf speakers.

- The last item I mention is very important—the ability to speak inaudibly! There is nothing more distracting to the hearing people present than to have to listen to oral transliterators whispering loudly or ‘smacking’ certain sounds as they interpret.

There is a great deal of overlap in the profession of sign language interpreting and oral transliterating. The Code of Ethics and its application, the role and responsibilities of being an interpreter and the business aspects of being a freelance interpreter are identical. But there are also great differences and these lie in the mechanics of each type of interpreting.

Due to the shortage of oral transliterators, sign language interpreters and others have worked for consumers who request oral transliterating. Now that RID is once again certifying oral transliterators, consumers will eventually be assured that when they request an oral transliterator, they will get a qualified one.

- How many people are aware that there are some Deaf RID certified members who are certified to oral interpret? In the article Janet Bailey, CSC, SC:PA, wrote, she challenged RID members to keep our history intact by dusting off our files and shoe boxes in order to offer up our own "slice of RID history" (Bailey, p. 14.). This is my contribution, Janet!

I was certified in 1979 when the first oral certification workshop and evaluation was conducted at TVI (Technical Vocational Institute) in St. Paul, Minnesota. When I attended the workshop that was conducted before the evaluations were held, I never thought I would be certified as an oral interpreter. Although I attended a public school before anyone knew I was deaf, the only speechreading training I had received was from my own mother who died when I was five years old. She was not a speech teacher, but she had been a school teacher at one time, before my older sisters and brother were born. She never knew before she died that I was deaf, but she was an extremely sensitive person who realized the only time I understood her was when she faced me whenever she spoke to me; thus, I learned speechreading.

I can assure you I am not the most proficient speechreader in the world, but I became proficient enough to pass the first grade in the public school I was attending (in a remote rural area) the second time around. It was while I was in the second grade (the first time around) that an examiner from the Oregon State Health Board was conducting hearing tests at our school and discovered I was deaf. It was after this incident I was saved from further struggles in the public school because arrangements were made to send me to the Oregon State School for the Deaf in Salem, Oregon.

I must admit I have not been asked to oral interpret very much, but I also have to confess I was grateful I could read lips when a hearing certified interpreter summoned me to team interpret with her/him. S/he had been called by a hospital staff person to interpret for a person who had lost his/her voice as a result of a car accident and the family stood by hopelessly while s/he tried to communicate with them.

I have also attended conferences that oral deaf participants attended, too, and been grateful we have hearing certified oral interpreters so the oral deaf person could participate in the proceedings. I offer these facts to the membership in hopes they will always support the Alexander Graham Bell Association by providing evaluations for oral interpreting certification. RID is unique today because of the various certifications they offer our membership. Oral deaf people should have “full access to information and interaction in legal, medical, and educational settings in professional life and cultural events” (Frishberg, p. 164).

Bibliography


Oral Transliteration: What Do You Really Know?

By Martha M. Shippee, CSC, New York

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hat makes oral transliterating an interesting area of study? Here are some questions and answers that may help pique your interest in this growing field.

How much of this sentence is speechreadable?
Because he loves plants, his favorite place is the garden.

We have heard that anywhere from 30% to 60% of all speech either looks alike on the lips or is invisible. These percentages are based on research that focused on the visibility of isolated speech sounds. If the above sentence was presented by a trained oral transliterator, the entire sentence would be clear and easily speechread. The reason is that speechreaders are receiving the message in a context, not as isolated speech sounds.

Which part of this sentence is hardest to speechread?
The Wolk Center offers courses in acupuncture and acupressure.

Place of articulation is a primary concern for an oral transliterator. Sounds which are produced with articulators (tongue, lips, teeth) at the front of the mouth will be easier to see and to speechread. For example, "p", "f", "th", sounds are all produced at the front of the mouth (bilabial, labiodental, and lingua-dental positions respectively). The sounds, "g", "h", and "k" are produced in the back of the mouth (velar and glottal positions). This characteristic of their production causes them to be more difficult to speechread.

Another aspect of spoken English is length and familiarity of individual words within a sentence. In the above sentence, "Wolk" is the most difficult word to speechread because it is composed of low visible speech sounds, it is a short word, and it is potentially an unfamiliar proper noun.

What is the possible confusion that this sentence might cause for the speechreader?
The study will include articles published from 1916 to present.

Numbers in spoken English may cause a problem for the speechreader because they designate a specific detail, yet several numbers appear identical on the lips. For example, in the above sentence 1916 could be confused with 1960. To best understand this possible confusion silently say the following numbers "9" and "10", "13" and "30", "14" and "40", etc.

The trained oral interpreter learns how to minimize these possible confusions through strategies such as clear articulation, pausing, air writing or finger spelling, or various other strategies appropriate for the consumer.

What two words in this sentence might cause confusion for the speechreader and what other words might the speechreader perceive?
My brother went to the store to buy some shoes.

In addition to the place of articulation, another characteristic of speech readability is how unique the sound looks on the lips. Sounds which look alike on the lips are called "homophous." The sounds "m" and "b" are homophous. Therefore the words, "mother" and "brother" might look alike on the lips. Even though words may sound very different they may be visibly the same to a speechreader.

For example, another possible confusion in the above sentence might exist between the words "shoes" and "juice". It is the oral interpreter's task to be aware of this similarity and to create a message that will be able to be understood through various verbal and non-verbal techniques.

How could this sentence be made easier to speechread?
Do you want onions?

Oral interpreters also learn verbal techniques that help to clarify the message. For example, an oral interpreter might substitute a clearer synonym or antonym, add a clarifying word, use pausing or pacing, or rephrase the sentence. In the above example the oral interpreter might add "...on your hamburger" as a way to clarify the low visible word, "onions".

What gesture could help to improve the clarity of this sentence?
Wait, I need to get my keys from the secretary.

Oral interpreters can enhance speechreadability by incorporating appropriate facial expression, body language, and/or gestures into the inaudible spoken message. The individual consumer may have a variety of preferences related to non-verbal techniques that may be used during an oral transliterating event. Some consumers may appreciate the use of gestures to help indicate the meaning of a phrase or to show where individual words begin and end in a phrase. In the above sentence the word "keys" is difficult to speechread. Also, the word "keys" is short and does not have a synonym that could be readily substituted. A gesture (holding and turning a key) may help to clarify the meaning.

Sound interesting? These are some of the aspects that need to be considered when providing oral transliterating... it is not just moving your lips. Developing an awareness of our own speech patterns, acquiring specific skills to be able to produce clear and readable speech and working with sensitivity to the needs of these individuals is indeed a complex language task. Developing oral transliterating skills enables a greater number of community members to have access to communication. That is the true goal of an interpreter - language access.
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