

# Re-visiting Role: Arguing for a multi-dimensional analysis of interpreter behaviour

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The concept of 'role of interpreter' as a discrete rigid construct has been used historically in ways that actually inhibit (rather than facilitate) interaction amongst participants. For example, interpreters will often speak of 'stepping out of role' to rationalise behaviours which, we would argue, are an integral part of the remit of the interpreter (for example in seeking clarification from one or more of the interactants). More recently, some researchers (e.g. Wadensjö 1998, Metzger 1999 and Roy 2000, amongst others) have challenged these notions and called for an analysis of role that crucially recognises the presence of the interpreter. We have argued previously (Llewellyn-Jones and Lee 2009) that there cannot be a one-size-fits-all approach to how an interpreter interacts in a given situation. On the other hand, we would not claim that interpreter behaviours are not entirely unconstrained; there are still ways of talking about appropriate vs. inappropriate behaviours without resorting to a monolithic, prescriptive concept of 'role'. It is time to rethink the entire concept of role and look more towards an approach that involves interpreters making informed decisions about how they present themselves in a given interaction. The paper will present aspects of a new paradigm that defines role not in a static way, but in a dynamic way that requires interpreters make active choices about managing the myriad factors that foster successful interactions.

There cannot be one right approach to all interactions. To talk of 'stepping out of role' is to miss the point. Interpreters are human beings with specialist communication skills and one can't step out of being a human being. Is it possible that the notion of 'role' is simply a construct that interpreters have hidden behind to avoid their individual responsibility for professional decision-making? If there are no clear rules to follow, what is there to regulate an interpreter's behaviour?

What ensures that the interpreter always acts professionally? The answer, we would suggest, is *integrity*.

(Llewellyn-Jones and Lee 2009: 6)

The above quote is the conclusion of a paper written for the Supporting Deaf People Online Conference in 2009. Since that time we have been looking at aspects of the manifestation of role and how we can find an explanation for those behaviours that will facilitate the interaction of the participants, rather than hindering it. To this end we have been exploring a number of questions:

- How can we explain what 'acting with integrity' looks like in a given interaction in a systematic, concrete, descriptive way?
- Why it is that what would be considered 'appropriate' behaviour in one interaction might be deemed 'inappropriate' in another, seemingly similar, interaction?
- Many authors (e.g. Cokely, 1992, Dean and Pollard, 2001) have discussed a variety of decisions an interpreter must make, whether they be interpersonal, linguistic, cognitive, cultural, etc: but how are these decisions related to each other?
- How can we explain the unique position of the interpreter in an interaction? Whilst many have looked at how interpreters are *different* from the other interactants, what can we learn from the *similarities* that interpreters have to the other participants?

To get at these questions we have explored the literature as well as looking at our own experiences as both practitioners and teachers of interpreting. What became clear to us is that there has been no satisfactory (to us) unified way of approaching these issues. Therefore we have decided to distil what we know about successful interactions into a way of looking at interpreting that relies on an interaction of multiple domains to explain (as well as predict) how an interpreter effectively and successfully fits into an interaction. We are proposing a new model to explain how an interpreter is situated in a given interaction (Llewellyn-Jones and Lee, forthcoming). Central to this model is the idea that the individual decisions made by an interpreter are not made in isolation from one another; rather the interactions amongst decisions (and not a single decision point itself) creates the manifestation of the role of an interpreter in a given interaction. Given this multi-dimensional nature of role then, it is impossible to talk about a single 'role' occupied by an interpreter in

EVERY interaction. Indeed, even the same interpreter creates a different manifestation of role in each interaction since there are unique factors in each interaction that will lead to (even slightly) different decisions. The goal of an interpreter is not to be the same in all interactions, rather the goal is to create a sense that what is happening is appropriate for *this* given interaction. This is why prescriptive rules such as exactly how one must introduce oneself in every interaction are not only not successful, they are nonsensical. In addition, many of the strategies employed by interpreters in successful interactions are not special; they tend to be those behaviours (both linguistic and non-linguistic) used by the other participants in the interaction. In fact it is the skilled employment of normal expected communicative behaviours by an interpreter that makes the interaction so successful; they fit in with the expectation of all the participants (both Deaf and hearing) about how one behaves in interaction. Those that do not fit in with expected behaviours (statements such as, "Interpreter error..." made before a repair in an interpretation) tend to make the interaction seem less normal, and therefore, less successful.

It also follows that that different interpreters might manifest role differently (as they are fundamentally different people) but these different manifestations can essentially achieve the same ends; that is, a successful interaction for all participants. It is the fundamental assumption that an interpreter, acting with integrity and making informed decisions appropriate for the domain, goals and characteristics of the interlocutors allows successful interactions to occur. This paper outlines the model in brief detail; more explicit elaboration can be found in Llewellyn-Jones and Lee (in prep).

Older models of interpreting (indeed, even used by some interpreters and educators to this day) have spoken of the interpreter needing to be 'invisible' (which, even if possible, would be problematic when one is expected to produce a visual language!) at one extreme or, at most, spoken of as a conduit (such as a telephone). The problem with these metaphors (as discussed in Roy, 1993, 2000) is that they detract from the fundamental characteristic that the interpreter shares with ALL participants - their personhood. We propose that it is this basic connection that the interpreter shares with everyone in the situation that allows trust to develop between and amongst all the participants. We do, however, agree that the interpreter has a different reason for being in the interaction compared with the other participants; however, interpreters can avail themselves of some of the same strategies used by

the other participants to present themselves in the interaction. We feel that this is a core principle; interpreters should make use of many of the same behaviours that the other participants make use of in an interaction, rather than calling upon some special interpreter-specific behaviours that might come across as strange and alien to the interlocutors.

### **Dimensions of interpreter behaviour**

We posit that there are three primary areas that interact to define and delineate the role that an interpreter takes within a given interaction: presentation of self (see, for example, Goffman 1990, Malone 1997), interaction management and participant alignment. Most (if not all) interpreter-initiated utterances fall into one or more of these categories.<sup>1</sup> Indeed any single behaviour can be a combination of more than one of these categories as will be shown below.

In addition, these do not have to be expressed verbally: other examples include: smiling, nodding when one's name is mentioned, joining in the laughter at a joke made by one of the interlocutors, etc.

**Presentation of self** refers to those behaviours where the interpreter speaks/acts for and/or about him/herself (again these can be non-linguistic).

Examples include: introductions (“Hello, I am James, I’ll be interpreting today.”), answering direct questions (“I have been interpreting professionally for 15 years.”) giving insights into personal likes/dislikes (“I tend to specialise in legal interpreting.”, “I always enjoy events like these”, “I’d love a coffee, thank you.”)

**Interaction management** refers to those behaviours (or, even, interventions) that an interpreter uses to actively manage how the interaction is proceeding. These are not

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<sup>1</sup> Hale, 2007: 213, cites Rosenberg’s (2002) research that found that only 40.8% of interpreters’ utterances were ‘close renditions’ of what was said by the interlocutors. The majority were made of up of ‘clarifications’, ‘phatics’, ‘banter’, ‘repetitions’, ‘understood’ and ‘off task’ utterances.

done capriciously, rather they are limited to those specific things which the interpreter feels have an effect on the ability to effectively interpret. It should be noted that any participant could make these same requests but for different reasons - one participant might ask another to repeat something because they like the sound of the other person's voice, or to make them listen to what they said to engage them or for a host of other reasons. The crucial difference is the reason why the interpreter makes such requests; specifically that they are a request to change something in the interaction that is impeding effective interpretation.

Examples include: requests for clarification, management of turn-taking (overt – “Can you please speak one at a time.”; covert – “I’m sorry, I missed that.”), requests for specific actions of one or more participants (“Can you please speak a little louder/slower.”), requests for change in the environment (“It’s very difficult to hear/see because of the fan/window.”).

**Participant alignment** refers to how much the interpreter is directing their communication to, or seeming to identify with, a specific participant (or, possibly, a sub-group of participants). In addition it may be that the interpreter is reacting directly to utterances made by one of the interlocutors.

Examples include addressing a specific participant directly to make a request (“Mr Smith, can you please repeat that last statement?”), smiling when a participant make a humorous contribution, or explaining some aspect of the interpreting process (e.g. explaining to Deaf members of an audience in a large conference that you cannot hear the speaker very clearly so may need to summarise what he or she is saying).

Utterance	Presentation of Self	Interaction Management	Participant Alignment
Hello, Mr Smith, my name is James Jones and I'll be interpreting the meeting today.	X		X
I'm sorry, can you repeat that?		X	X
I'm sorry to interrupt but, as the meeting is running longer than expected, I will need to take a break soon.	X	X	

Even if an interpreter is not overtly manifesting behaviours in one or more of these categories, s/he should still be conscious of where they are in relation to each of these dimensions. We refer to this interaction and combination of these three dimensions as the 'role space' occupied by an interpreter at any point during a given interaction.

In some community interpreting settings (such as a court proceeding), a very confined role space is warranted (i.e. very little presentation of self, limited process management and minimal but balanced alignment with participants; although this might not be how your alignment is perceived). Other settings (for example working with children) might require more presentation of self and participant alignment (in order to engender trust) but may allow for less process management in order to allow the interaction to work most effectively.

In this paper we have only been able to give a flavour of the issues that we think are fundamental to the definition and delineation of 'interpreter role'. We feel strongly that interpreters are past the time when they should think they are not present in interactions and have no effect; rather we feel that we should be guided by the size and shape of the 'role space' that we take up in an interaction to determine the most appropriate and effective behaviour.

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