

Cerney, B. February, 1996. "Cultural Allies" RID Views. Silver Spring, MD: RID Publications.

Cultural Allies

Brian Cerney, CI/CT

In the past few years there has emerged a perspective of the interpreter as Ally. At the 1995 New Hampshire RID Convention meeting there was discussion about the need for interpreters to "share their pain." This article is an attempt to define what "the pain" is, relate it to cultural experience, and then finally to an understanding of what is meant by the idea of the interpreter as an "ally."

So what is this "pain" that needs to be shared? The "pain" seems to be a set of lifetime experiences which allows some kind of affinity with the Deaf experience. This experience might be directly linked with deafness (having a deaf relative), or it might be being a member of an oppressed group. The closer a person's life experiences are to both deafness and oppression, the closer the person is to understanding the motivations and desires of deaf people.

When deaf people discuss what they value in an interpreter the words "good attitude" come up with higher regard than the word "skilled." I believe that we can relate this concept of "attitude" directly to the concept of "pain." In very rough terms, pain equals oppression, oppression leads to motivation, and motivation leads to attitude as related to interpreters. Having and expressing experiences of oppression begins to answer the deaf person's questions of "why?" "Why are you working as an interpreter?" "Why are you willing to earn money by using my language?" "What gives you the right to be a part of my personal interaction with the hearing community?"

When deaf people meet an interpreter and ask the question "How and why did you learn to sign?" this is really an attempt to justify how the interpreter fits into the deaf community. The interpreter who has experienced appropriate lifetime experiences and shares them is saying "I know something about the feelings you have because I have had similar experiences and feelings."

These experiences may be inherited by having deaf parents, a deaf sibling, or some other deaf relative. Alternatively, the experiences may be inherited by being a member of a minority group and experiencing oppression. The interpreter's first-hand experience of oppression may be a requirement in order for a trusting relationship to develop between the deaf person and the interpreter. This makes it difficult for interpreters who are European-American males in the United States to share in these experiences since they are traditionally the least oppressed group in American society.

Simply having oppression experiences is not sufficient. An interpreter must accept deaf people as members of a culture. Interpreters must also work to become a member of the deaf linguistic and cultural group. This cannot easily begin until the interpreter can first identify some form of affinity with deaf people. Both the experience of oppression and the linguistic and cultural acceptance of deaf people are required in order to move within the deaf community.

Some people have not inherited the deaf experience, but have chosen to experience it by dating, marrying, or adopting a deaf person. This choice leads to additional questions related to the issue of motivation and why the choice was made. Either there is a related experience in the interpreter's life that lead to empathy or there is instead a co-dependency which ultimately leads to the hearing person oppressing the deaf person.

If an interpreter has experienced oppression and has made a connection with deaf people as a cultural and linguistic group, how does the term "Ally" apply to such a person? The term ally has been misunderstood to imply that the interpreter must be on only one person's side. This is not the how the word should be understood. Instead we should think of the interpreter as being dually allied: connected to the hearing community and also connected to the deaf community. To understand this idea better, let's compare the interpreter's role with a physician's role.

The environment surrounding the physician includes tremendous support for the physician (people taking care of appointments, billing, medical histories, lab services, etc.) The patient prefers personal attention and communication that is not rushed, while the physician's support system encourages assembly line processing of patients in order to maximize the amount of money brought to the support system. Which side does the physician align himself with? In other words, to which group is the physician allied? To help answer the question of alliance, we need to understand the basic motivations which lead that person to become a doctor. Perhaps the doctor was seriously ill as a child and appreciated the caring hospital staff (or hated it and wanted to make sure no one ever had such a terrible experience again). Or perhaps the doctor had a relative or friend who had been seriously ill. The physician may understand the role of doctors from deeply personal experiences and therefore will feel more allied with the patients than with the medical support system.

Alternatively, the physician may have simply wanted to have enough money to live a certain lifestyle and becoming a doctor was one way to do it. Or the physician was always fascinated with the mechanics and chemistry of the human body and pursued those studies to the point of becoming a doctor. These kinds of lifetime experiences may lead the physician to feel more allied to the medical support system than with the patients.

If a physician is allied only with one side or the other, however, then the physician is not likely to be successful. If the medical support system is ignored, then the services needed will not be adequately provided. If the patients' needs are ignored, the bad reputation of the physician will reduce the number of patients who willingly use the services of the physician.

So how does this relate to the interpreting profession? Interpreters as allies do not align themselves with only the deaf or the hearing people. If an interpreter is hearing, then by physical qualities that interpreter has an alliance (or affiliation) with the mainstream hearing society (unless the interpreter entirely rejects all values held by the mainstream hearing society). The hearing interpreter, in order to be effective must also be allied (or affiliated) with the deaf community. This alliance is essential because it relates to the cultural aspect of language use. Where there is culture, there is language; where there is language, there is culture. It is not possible to accurately use any language and remain ignorant of the culture connected to that language.

Therefore the concept of interpreter as "Ally" implies that there is a dual alliance. In order to facilitate communication between two linguistic groups, the interpreter must also be affiliated with both of the cultural groups related to those languages. The interpreter must work to ensure that, regardless of other imbalances of power, the communication process does not add to the oppression or disempowerment of members of either linguistic and cultural group.

Being an ally requires being committed to the process of communication. Being committed to the communication process requires being both bilingual and bicultural. Being bicultural requires motivation. Motivation requires lifetime experiences of oppression, or "pain." Therefore, to become effective in the communication process, we must first acknowledge our "pain." "Why am I here? What has lead me to do this kind of work?" If the motivation is not connected to lifetime experiences of oppression then it may be difficult to be dually allied to both cultures.

Cerney, B. April, 1996. "Allies: Are You Connected?" RID Views. Silver Spring, MD: RID Publications.

Allies: Are You Connected?

Brian Cerney, CI/CT

I am glad that my musings on the New Hampshire RID conference of November, 1995 resulted in further discussion of interpreters as "Allies." As is always the case, more context leads to better communication and so I am happy to gain insight to how several people read and understood the article. My perspective may not have been as clearly expressed as I would have wanted it to be. All communication – whether on TV, radio, print, or face-to-face – is intended to get people to do things: either to get them to pay attention, to get them to think a certain way, or to get them to buy or sell something. By writing the article that was published in the February VIEWS, I participated in a discussion. One that we are continuing to share in right now.

The stimulus for the Interpreter as Ally article came from the NHRID Conference this past November. My thoughts prior to going were that we should not talk about being "allies" since that implies that we are against one side or the other. At the conference I understood that no one was suggesting any alliance against hearing people, nor an alliance that gave deaf people an advantage, but simply an understanding of how interpreters work with deaf people and the deaf community. It is a DUAL alliance that they were describing. A connection with deaf and hearing people when communicating across languages and cultures. Any number of other words could replace the words ally or alliance: friend, community member, connected, affiliated, associated. The point of being a "friend" to the deaf community is not to explain cultural values to the hearing community (and Terri Hayes is right when she says that the hearing population doesn't care). The affiliation is not something that takes over the role of interpreter; but is simply an acknowledgement that the person who is interpreting knows both languages and how people use those languages to do things with words.

Interpreters for deaf people used to come from the deaf community, just as interpreters for Vietnamese, Spanish, and other spoken languages overwhelmingly come from within their own communities. What has happened is that Federal Law started granting deaf people the right to interpreters. Once there was a mandated need, there was also a real responsibility to provide for that need. This resulted in the establishment of summer training programs for interpreters, which then became two-year programs for training interpreters (and a few four-year programs). As a result, we began to recruit people to the field who did not have an understanding of deaf people and their various language choices. Many (perhaps most) of the people who went through these programs came to understand deaf people as unique, independent and able people. But some interpreting students managed to maintain a view of deaf people as a substandard group of people needing help just to live subnormal lives. Others failed to develop their language training sufficiently to do the work required. Still others had no moral grounding to keep them faithful to providing accurate interpreting services. Unconnected interpreting students receive no direction for correction or improvement from deaf community members.

The point of the Allies article was to get people thinking about why they are in the field of interpreting in the first place. What lead them to pursue working with the deaf community? Terri Hayes' experiences reveal that she came to the field of interpreting after becoming a member of the deaf community. She may not know what it's like to be deaf, but she knows deaf people and the language that they use. Elizabeth Rothman comments, though cast in a more negative light, reveal that she and I are in agreement (and also reveal the difficulty of communicating only via writing). She stated "My childhood pain, my membership in oppressed groups, my friendship or long association with some Deaf people do not make me a member of their community and do not give me the right to speak for the motivations and desires of one deaf person, much less for all deaf people." I never intended to give the impression that any one is speaking on the behalf of others. I believe this reveals some of the confusion that exists about the concept of "interpreter as ally."

Every person who attended the New Hampshire conference took with them a different perspective of the conference events. The discussions held in New Hampshire got me thinking about issues that I had not really addressed before. I have long been aware of the questions presented by Elizabeth Rothman: “Are my skills up to the job? Am I behaving ethically? Am I treating my clients with equal respect?” Those are the old and obvious questions that anyone who went through interpreter training should be aware of. The issues of sharing pain and exploring the reasons for interpreters entering the profession were heavy on the minds of the deaf participants at the New Hampshire conference. The article was an attempt to consolidate some of these impressions and present them for public discussion. Have you asked yourself why you became an interpreter? If your reason is related to oppression, then have you acknowledged that fact? Are you able to separate it from the work you do as an interpreter? The only person who can answer these questions is you.