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Re-conceptualising communicative expertise in professional practice through the lens of sign language intercultural mediation

Jemina Napier

Abstract

When we consider language, communication and the professions, we know that talk (speech or signs) is critical to professional practice and to relationships between professionals and service users. In a multilingual and multicultural world where people do not share the same languages or language repertoires, they must either adapt the way they talk to others (intercultural communication) or, if they cannot communicate directly, allow others to mediate communication on their behalf – a process labelled intercultural mediation. The latter occurs through professional or non-professional interpreting or language brokering. Current theories in interpreting studies consider (professional) interpreters as co-constructors of meaning and co-participants in any interaction. Communicative expertise is usually conceptualized in direct, monolingual communication. Using an explorative illustrative case study, this paper extends this theoretical framework to examine how communicative expertise manifests in interpreter-mediated communication, and particularly in relational aspects of intercultural mediation between a signed language and a spoken language and how professional interpreters and non-professional interpreters (brokers) draw on and apply their expert or lay knowledge about communication in a mediated interaction.

KEYWORDS: BROKERING; COMMUNICATIVE EXPERTISE; INTERCULTURAL MEDIATION; NON-PROFESSIONAL INTERPRETING; PROFESSIONAL INTERPRETING; SIGN LANGUAGE

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1 Introduction

When we consider language, communication and the professions, we know that talk is critical to professional practice and to relationships between professionals and service users. By ‘talk’ here I mean it in the broadest sense, to include utterances that are produced as speech or signs in any number of possible languages, in any number of possible contexts. The study of monolingual spoken interactions has revealed that communication is mediated throughout conversation through embodied, multimodal languaging practices in the form of speech, eye gaze, body movements, posture, gesture and pointing (Norris 2004, 2011; Mondada 2014, 2016). Deaf signers also communicate multimodally, with their sign language mediated not only through the use of lexical signs but also through these other elements (Kusters 2017a, 2017b; Kusters *et al.* 2017). Communication can also be mediated through information technology (Jones 2004), but my focus in this paper is on communication *mediated through others*.

In a multilingual and multicultural world where people do not share the same languages or language repertoires, they must either adapt the way they talk to others (intercultural communication), or if they cannot communicate directly, allow others to mediate communication on their behalf – a process labelled *intercultural mediation* (Piller 2011). Intercultural mediation occurs through professional or non-professional interpreting or language brokering (Napier 2021). Professional interpreting is conducted in consecutive or simultaneous mode, either unimodally between two spoken or two signed languages or bimodally between a spoken language and a signed language, in real time by someone who has been trained and qualified to function in this role (Napier 2015). Non-professional interpreting is typically undertaken by bilingual adults who volunteer to interpret in contexts where no professional interpreters are available, for example in conflict zones, in churches or in hospitals (Antonini *et al.* 2017). *Language brokering* is the term used to describe the informal interpreting carried out by children in migrant or deaf families (Orellana 2009; Napier 2021). Although there are some nuanced cultural and political differences to the way that professional interpreters or language brokers mediate communication depending on whether they are mediating between spoken or signed languages, the practices are not markedly different (Napier 2015, 2021).

Current theoretical frameworks consider (professional) interpreters as co-constructors of meaning and co-participants in any interaction. So, talk in professional practice can be conceptualised by examining talk ‘in action’, in my case *sign language in action* (Napier and Leeson 2016). By analysing the way that bilinguals mediate communication as non-professional interpreters or lan-

guage brokers – how they *do* talk, and how they *mediate* talk – we cannot only re-conceptualise the nature of talk in the professional practice of interpreters, but also better re-define the nature of talk in other professional practitioners.

1.1 Reconceptualizing communicative expertise in professional practice

Drawing on my experience as a heritage signer,¹ child language broker, practising professional sign language interpreter and a researcher of interpreter-mediated communication (a ‘practisearcher’ – Gile 1990), this paper seeks to re-conceptualise and extend Sarangi’s (2018) notion of ‘communicative expertise’ as a framework for exploring the nature of talk in intercultural mediation. Sarangi (2018: 387) defines communicative expertise as

knowledge/skill about the mechanics of communication [and] the channels through which the other types of knowledge/skill (including scientific, experiential, relational, technological, organisational, legal and ethical) are communicated in real-life settings.

Describing what this involves, he explains that

communicative expertise includes appropriacy of language use and much more. In healthcare and other professional settings, the contingencies of the situation would require organisational, legal, ethical, technological knowledge bases, in addition to the discipline-specific knowledge acquired through formal education and training. In addition, communicative expertise has to embody relationality including empathy, affect, compassion etc. at an interpersonal level. (Sarangi 2018: 374)

He also emphasises the importance of the ‘explainer function’ in communicative expertise:

One basic way of making sense of expertise is by juxtaposing it to laity or lay knowledge. [...] Lay people possess knowledge, but this knowledge is differentiable from expert knowledge. (Sarangi 2018: 377)

Sarangi’s definition of communicative expertise is based on a problematisation of direct, monolingual communication (although he has written about interpreter-mediated encounters elsewhere – e.g. Sarangi 2020). Here, I am interested in how communicative expertise manifests in interpreter-mediated communication, and particularly in *relational* aspects of intercultural mediation between a signed language and a spoken language and how professional interpreters and non-professional interpreters (brokers) draw on and apply their expert or lay knowledge about communication in a mediated interaction. Thus, I ask the question: how can we re-conceptualise communicative expertise in professional practice through the lens of intercultural mediation?

In what follows, I present a wider framing of the argument, followed by an explorative illustrative case study – with exemplars from an as-yet unpub-

lished dataset comparing intercultural mediation between different professional and non-professional interpreters and brokers mediating between a signed language and a spoken language. By drawing on this data, it is possible to illustrate instances of both expert and lay communicative expertise and what we can learn about successful, rather than un-successful, communication through mediators, and about strategies for communication between professionals and service users to build working relationships. In presenting observations from my data, I seek to further extend Sarangi's (2005) notion of 'Applied Linguistics of Professions' to open a dialogue among communication researchers and professional practitioners, including professional interpreters, that will have practical relevance for professional practice.

I begin with a review of what we know about talk in professional practice and interpreting as professional and non-professional practice; I then share four exemplars of communicative expertise in sign language intercultural mediation, and finally conclude the paper with a discussion of how this informs our understanding of talk in professional practice.

2 Talk in professional practice

A discourse/communication approach to professional practice asserts that multimodal language use is central, and that talk (and text) is critical for relationships between professionals and service users (Sarangi and Candlin 2011). For example, Major and Holmes (2008) and Cribb *et al.* (2022) have examined talk between doctors and nurses and their patients, and have evidenced how critical the role of talk is in establishing a relationship between interlocutors, being the tool that is used to form relationships, to form allegiances, to develop relations and to achieve the goals of communication.

The work of Kaufhold and Wirdenäs (2021) in analysing the talk of professional stakeholders in the Swedish healthcare system illustrates how professionals mediate healthcare information multi-directionally to migrants from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds and to institutional representatives. The key, they assert, is the *knowledge positions* constructed by the professionals in their talk. Communication is situated in a wider context of institutional practices, and different interlocutors may perceive what is defined as successful communication differently (Myers 2021).

As such, in addition to relevant professional knowledge and skills, professional expertise draws on communicative expertise that extends beyond simply understanding the mechanics of how to communicate (i.e., lay knowledge), but also needs to include expert knowledge (Sarangi 2018). Sarangi argues that professional expertise also includes *distributed expertise*, which contributes to decision making by drawing on expertise of others and systems. Thus, profes-

sionals' engagement with distributed expertise could draw on the expertise of interpreters and their competence with language(s) and communication.

3 Interpreting as professional practice

Given that the field of applied linguistics 'connects knowledge about language to decision-making in the real world' (Simpson 2011: 1), the study of the complexities of interpreting practice is a rich field of inquiry for applied linguists (Napier *et al.* 2005; Chapelle 2013). Interpreting constitutes an applied linguistic socially situated activity (Napier and Leeson 2016) that happens in different contexts, in different institutions and in different settings, and as a professional practice is influenced by these variables. Any interaction, whether in spoken or signed languages or both, is predicated on talk: interpreters *mediate* between people that do not speak or sign the same language, and this often involves mediation of professional practice of some kind – between healthcare professionals and patients, between lawyers and clients, between academics and students, etc. And these days, in the sign language interpreting context the professionals increasingly are deaf themselves (Hauser *et al.* 2008; Haug *et al.* 2017; De Meulder *et al.* 2018; Holcomb and Smith 2019). So, when I refer to the term *mediate*, I mean that interpreters can mediate the relationship that the professional is seeking in their practice with whomever they are engaging with – for example, if the professional is seeking to connect with a service user. Interpreters mediate the *communication* between these two people but they also support and mediate the *relationship building*.

Not only is professional interpreting practice predicated on talk: interpreters also *do* professional practice. Interpreters mediate and support the professional practice of others, but they also engage in professional practice themselves; as with any professional practice, talk is critical, but even more so because their professional practice *is* talk! So, talk is both what interpreters do and talk is what they mediate.

Interpreters work in a vast array of settings, and there are strong parallels between the works of spoken and signed language interpreters (Napier 2015; Gile and Napier 2020). It could be argued that interpreters adapt the way that they practice according to the context and the communicative goals of the interlocutors – for example, according to the differing discourse demands in healthcare, legal, employment, educational and conference settings. Downie (2020), however, argues that 'interpreting is interpreting' and there are commonalities to interpreting practice and the way that interpreters talk about their work and mediate talk, regardless of the setting. With regard to professional practice, professionals are doing talk, interpreters are doing talk and they are doing talk together, all in the same contexts. Our understanding of how talk

happens and the kind of talk that interpreters engage in can perhaps enhance the communicative expertise of professionals in various contexts, with or without interpreters, and whether they are providing either direct services or mediated services through interpreters. Therefore, none of this talk can happen without understanding (a) that talk is an inherent part of the process, and (b) that mediated talk requires interpreters to be co-participants.

3.1 Interpreters as co-participants in talk

Since the seminal works of Wadensjö (1998) and Roy (2000), applied and sociolinguistic research has established that interpreters are actors in social, cultural and institutional contexts, and that all players contribute to shaping the nature of communication (e.g. Angelelli 2003; Baraldi 2009; Gavioli and Baraldi 2011). As a consequence of this research, we have shifted away from earlier notions of professional neutrality and impartiality (Metzger 1999), which were informed by the important move towards professionalisation of interpreting services in conferences and also in public service settings, where it was recognised that what interpreters do is legitimate professional practice. However, language brokers do not necessarily have the same perceptions of neutrality and impartiality (Hill 2011). This professionalisation process involved important strides in establishing codes of ethics and establishing formal interpreter training (Cokely 2005), but the codes perpetuated the idea of interpreters as being neutral and not contributing their own opinions (Leneham and Napier 2003), and metaphors were used to liken interpreters to conduits who relayed conversation (Roy 1993).

An important part of the professionalisation process, particularly in sign language interpreting, was to distance the role of interpreters from former welfare / social work roles that had previously encompassed interpreting (Scott Gibson 1992). Nevertheless, sign language interpreting students are still primarily trained to work simultaneously, to adopt seating positions that emphasise their neutrality by placing themselves equidistantly from the hearing and deaf interlocutor but in a position to facilitate eye contact with the deaf person (so either opposite the deaf person on in a three-point triangular position – see Figure 1), and to use first person when relaying the utterances of each interlocutor (Napier *et al.* 2018).

In dialogic communication where meaning is negotiated in interaction, by recognizing that the interpreter is a *co-participant* in the talk and a *co-creator* of meaning (Wadensjö 1998; Roy 2000; Napier 2007), interpreting can be considered a *relational practice* (Major 2012; Ticca and Traverso 2017). Interpreters have been found to employ strategic actions to modify other participants' original utterances (e.g., negative selection of information, i.e., 'gatekeeping', or expanding of explanations, giving explicit support for

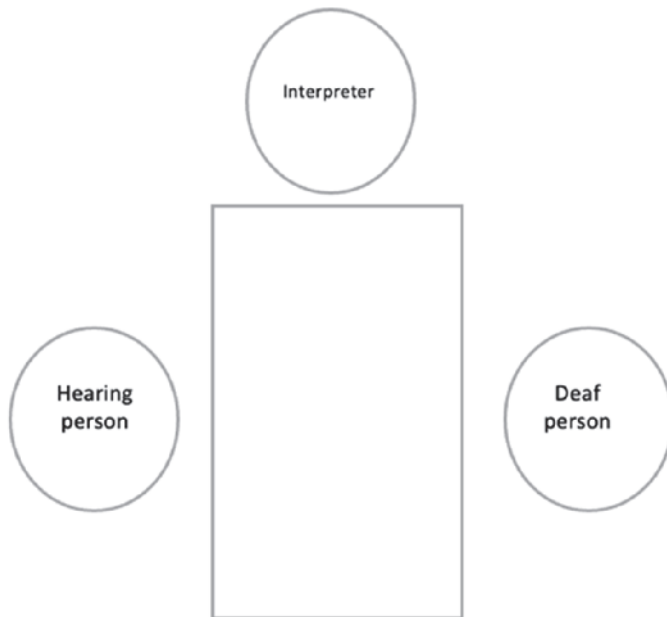


Figure 1: Three-point position

minority language user, hedging/softening of utterances) in order to reduce the gap between institutional discourse and service user discourse or to distance themselves from face-threatening acts (e.g., Lee 2013; Baraldi 2018).

Several studies have also examined how the way that communication is mediated through interpreters can have an impact on the positioning of interlocutors and the construction of their social and interactional roles (Mason 2012; Schäffner 2015; Skinner 2023), including how turn-taking is coordinated through the use of eye gaze and gesture (Roy 2000; Davitti and Pasquandrea 2017; Vranjes and Bot 2021) or source attribution (pointing towards the person who is speaking/signing while interpreting) (Metzger 1999; Marks 2013). Interpreters can be considered as ‘agents of empathy’ (Gutierrez *et al.* 2019) rather than as adhering to rigid role performance expectations (Merlini and Gatti 2015), as opportunities for empathic communication between interlocutors can be affected by the presence and decision making of interpreters (Krystallidou 2018, 2020; Theys *et al.* 2020; Theys *et al.* 2021). Llewellyn Jones and Lee (2014) suggest that interpreters should adjust their role practices and strategies according to the context and the status of the interlocutors, and to whether talking to interlocutors directly would enhance rather than impede the communication.

Therefore, it is important to recognise the importance of the talk that interpreters engage as contributing to how they mediate for others, both because they are facilitating this relationship between other people, but also because they also are part of this relationship themselves. To understand successful communication, we need to understand the perspectives from all *three* co-participants in interpreter-mediated talk (Napier 2011).

4 Informing talk in professional practice by examining communicative expertise in intercultural mediation

By analysing the way that bilinguals mediate communication as non-professional interpreters – i.e., how they *do* talk, and how they *mediate* talk – we can not only define talk in the professional practice of interpreters, but also better understand the talk of all professionals. The goal of this paper is to question how we can inform talk in professional practice generally by examining and contrasting the lay and expert communicative expertise used in mediated interaction. If we consider the way that bilinguals (or multilinguals) mediate communication when they are non-professional interpreters or language brokers, we can tap into what lay knowledge they may be drawing on that is informative in understanding communication. Professional interpreters are trained to work in a particular way in order to mediate communication: for spoken language interpreters typically to work simultaneously with equipment in conference settings, and consecutively in public service settings; and for sign language interpreters typically to work simultaneously in all settings. It is possible that we are training them so that their new professional expert communicative knowledge supersedes their previous lay knowledge, but by defining talk in a particular way this may go against the lay communicative expertise of bilingual mediators. It is worth considering examples of successful communication that are mediated by bilinguals who have not necessarily been trained in how to mediate communication professionally, and examining how they understand that talk should happen and that relationships can be aligned through talk.

By exploring the way that sign language bilinguals mediate communication, we can identify which elements of talk are central, and professionals who provide a service directly or via interpreters can also reflect on how it applies to their own practice. As such, we can learn from understanding the talk of professional and non-professional interpreters and language brokers to re-define talk in professional practice generally.

4.1 Non-professional interpreters/language brokers

Research on non-professional interpreters is an emerging field (Antonini *et al.* 2017), and there are two pillars of thought. One is that communication mediated

by non-professional interpreters is risky with potential negative consequences; for example, in hospitals where a bilingual cleaner or nurse might be brought in to mediate communication (Flores *et al.* 2012), or bilingual police officers interpreting for investigative interviews (Berk-Seligson 2009). That is, there is a focus on errors, and on unsuccessful communication. A contrasting pillar of thought, however, is that non-professional interpreting is a ‘coming together’, where bilingual people put themselves forward because they see that it is an essential aspect of their community to be inclusive in communication (Hokkanen 2012). This focuses more on the cooperative desire of bilinguals to help based on their lay knowledge and their own perceptions of their communicative expertise.

Another aspect of non-professional interpreting is *child language brokering* (CLB), which is my particular interest (Napier 2017, 2021; Gee *et al.* 2021). CLB is language mediation done by children for their parents or family members who cannot use or access the language of the wider majority (Hall and Guéry 2010). Despite the existence of professional interpreters, CLB occurs in a range of contexts, including schools, banks, government offices, shops and restaurants and doctor’s clinics (Tse 1995; Napier 2017). My research with brokers aged between five and 55+ who have mediated for their deaf parents at different points of their lives reveals that they consider brokering to be a normative, cooperative languaging practice, although many have mixed feelings (shame/ pride) and their feelings can change over time (Napier 2021). Essentially, though, the brokers feel that it is natural for them to want to help communication in their family, and they would offer to mediate rather than being forced to do it. I use the term ‘brokering’ deliberately, to distinguish between the nature of the mediation done by young people/non-professional interpreters and professional interpreters.

Ciordia’s (2019) comparison through interviews of different attitudes between Spanish–English professionally trained and non-professional (adult) interpreters who had never received training found that the non-professionals adopted a non-normative approach (in professional interpreter terms) that prioritised sociocultural skills (particularly the demonstration of empathy). As such, Ciordia recommends that professional interpreter training should take into account the natural approach taken by non-professional interpreters.

It would seem, therefore, that brokers/non-professional interpreters are tapping into their knowledge of what is typical communication. As such, we can consider what this looks/sounds like as compared to what they *say* they do, how non-trained bilinguals cooperate in mediating communication and what lay knowledge they may draw from as compared to professional interpreters’ expert knowledge, and what we can learn from this with regard to communicative expertise in mediated communication.

5 Considering communicative expertise in sign language intercultural mediation

In what follows I provide four exemplars from as-yet unpublished research involving seven pre-scripted simulated interactions between a deaf parent and a hearing schoolteacher discussing a problem with the deaf father's child, mediated by professional interpreters or adult or young brokers. I use this data to compare and contrast the communicative expertise demonstrated by the mediators and to present a conceptual discussion of how Sarangi's (2018) definition of communicative expertise can be expanded to include mediated communication. The methodology aligns with Stokoe's (2014) use of the Conversation Analytic Role-play Method (CARM), which seeks to analyse problems in institutional interaction by discussing and evaluating the talk used by people in doing their jobs. Stokoe's work focuses on monolingual conversations in English, whereas my data include mediated talk between English and British Sign Language (BSL). A more detailed overview of the methodology can be found elsewhere (Napier forthcoming).

The simulation involved the hearing teacher being in a room and the deaf father and mediator entering the room together. The chairs were set around the table, with the hearing teacher occupying chair 1 on the left side of the table, and chairs 2 and 3 being set up side-by-side on the right side of the table, as seen in Figure 2.

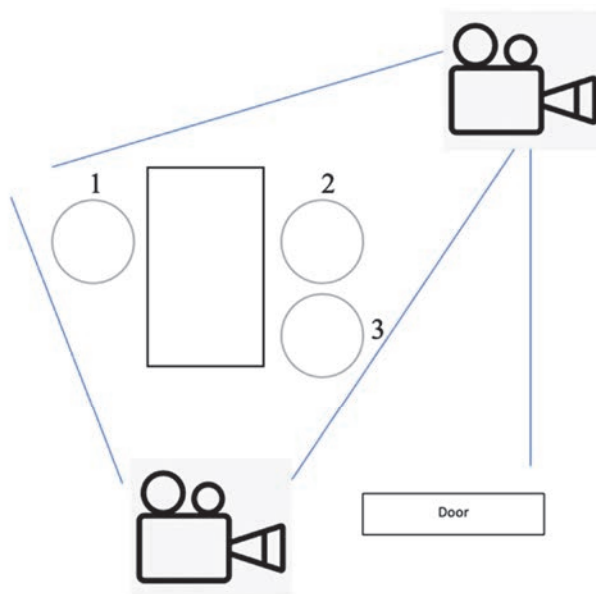


Figure 2: Pre-interaction set-up

The exemplars are used to demonstrate the actions of the mediator that appeared to align with, or contravene, lay communicative expertise in comparison with normed (taught) expert communicative expertise in interpreting practice. Here I have selected one example from each social role category to illustrate the communicative expertise, using pseudonyms for each person:

- an adult new signer who works as a professional interpreter (Ben);
- an adult heritage signer who also works as a professional interpreter (Matthew);
- an adult heritage signer who does not work as an interpreter (Timothy); and
- a teenage heritage signer (Sarah).

5.1 Exemplar: Ben

When Ben entered the room with Charles, the deaf parent, Charles moved towards the nearest chair (chair 3) and Ben immediately requested if he could move chair 2 around to the other side of the table to sit next to Thea, the head-teacher. Although this decision enabled Ben to more easily make eye contact with Charles so they could see each other's signing, Ben's action immediately created a spatial relational alignment between himself and Thea (see Figure 3).

Throughout the interaction Ben interpreted in first person in simultaneous mode, as would be expected by a professional sign language interpreter. When Thea frequently stated 'tell him that', Ben conveyed this phrase literally, as 'tell him', rather than either requesting that Thea address Charles directly or making it clear to Charles that she (Thea) was asking him (Ben) to tell him (Charles). When Charles stood up and stormed out of the room Ben stayed



Figure 3: Room configuration with Ben

seated and then turned to Thea with an apologetic look on his face and smiled before standing up and leaving the room.

All the actions carried out by Ben indicate that he aligned his positioning and empathic responses with Thea. Thus, it could be suggested that he aligned his socially constructed role with the ‘hearing’ dominant institution. For him, his communicative expertise was demonstrated by adhering quite strictly to the normed professional practices of trained interpreters and his perceived expert knowledge as an interpreter.

5.2 Exemplar: Matthew

Interestingly, when Matthew entered the room, he also requested to move the chair but moved chair 2 to the corner of the table (Figure 4). This seating arrangement allowed Charles to maintain eye contact with both Thea and Matthew, but Matthew was in more a neutral position between the two of them.



Figure 4: Room configuration with Matthew

As Thea began the interaction with ‘tell him...’, Matthew immediately asked her to address Charles directly, by asking ‘Would you just mind addressing him directly?’. Throughout the interaction, Matthew switched between first and third person, and often used source attribution strategies; especially when he was working from BSL into English, he would gesture towards Charles to indicate it was Charles who was talking even though he was speaking in first person. When interpreting from English into BSL, and when Thea said anything that could be perceived as face threatening, Matthew would actually point to the teacher and sign ‘she said’ and then mediate the information to Charles. Matthew also worked in simultaneous mode throughout, as would be expected from a professional interpreter. One difference though is that he managed the turn taking through eye gaze, so he would often move his eye

gaze to indicate who had the floor next. When Charles stood up and stormed out, Matthew stayed in his seat. He did not make eye contact with Thea when this happened. He muttered ‘Thank you’ quietly, stood up and left the room, but did not actually make any eye contact with her at all.

Matthew’s actions reveal that he attempted to position himself neutrally both in spatial and communicative terms by moving his chair to a neutral space, and also by indicating who was producing the utterance whilst still primarily adhering to professional interpreting practice norms by using first person. As such, he was drawing on his expert knowledge as a trained interpreter. However, his actions also allowed for him to demonstrate communicative expertise by drawing on his lay knowledge as a heritage signer and facilitate relational and empathic connections between the interlocutors, especially the use of eye gaze and source attribution, as is the norm in direct sign language interaction.

5.3 Exemplar: Timothy

The key difference between Ben, Matthew and Timothy is that Timothy entered the room first and headed for chair 2. He did not move his seat, so he sat next to Charles throughout. This meant that Charles had to turn his head to Timothy when he was signing, which made it harder for him to make any eye contact with Thea on the other side of the table (see Figure 5).



Figure 5: Room configuration with Timothy

Timothy consistently used third person and mediated consecutively throughout the interaction and particularly from BSL into English, when he would regulate the turn taking by using eye gaze. He would watch Charles sign for very long passages, and then when the chunk was long enough for him, he would look away to Thea and maintain eye contact with her while he relayed the utterance into English. He used a lot of co-speech gesture, so that

while he was relaying the interpretation to Thea, he would often be signing some of it as well at the same time (actual BSL signs, not just gestures). While Timothy mediated from English into BSL he worked more simultaneously but tended to produce summarised renditions. As Charles stood up and stormed out Timothy stayed seated and then said 'He really doesn't like it', repeated the statement and looked a little embarrassed, as if he was not sure what to do. He looked around the room continuing to look embarrassed and then stood up and slowly left the room.

So, it is interesting to see in this situation that Timothy's actions were strongly aligned with and empathic towards Charles. It is likely that he brokered in the same way that he might have for his parents, tapping into his lay knowledge and communicative expertise as a heritage signer, and did not follow any normed practices for professional interpreting at all (especially signing while translating the BSL to English utterances).

5.4 Exemplar: Sarah

Sarah, like Timothy, chose chair 2 and did not move it to be next to Thea – indeed, she actually adjusted it to be slightly closer to Charles. This made it even more difficult for Charles to maintain any eye contact with Thea, as he had to turn around to Sarah directly to see her signing. Sarah was also a lot more present as 'herself' in the interaction, for example, when Thea addressed her saying 'Tell him...'. She responded by saying 'Yes, I will', taking the instruction literally and interacting directly with Thea. Sarah switched between first and third person throughout and also switched between consecutive and simultaneous mode of mediation, like Timothy, mostly using simultaneous mode into BSL and producing summarised renditions. Sarah often gestured when speaking. Sarah also managed the turn taking by breaking eye contact with Charles after he had produced a long utterance in BSL and turning to Thea to render consecutively into spoken English. What was different was that when Charles stood up to start leaving the room, Sarah actually stood up and started walking with him, leaving the room with him while still verbally rendering what he was signing (see Figure 6).

It is clear from this exemplar that Sarah showed strong empathy for Charles, and also likely used the same brokering technique that she uses with her own deaf parents. It is evident that Sarah's communicative expertise did not align at all with the expert knowledge expected of professionally trained interpreters and was strongly marked by her lay understanding of sign language communication.



Figure 6: Sarah standing up with Charles

6 How does this inform our understanding of talk in professional practice?

From these examples it can be seen that the heritage signers (Matthew, Timothy and Sarah) all appeared to demonstrate communicative expertise that is typical for lay signers in the way that they mediated the communication. They each coordinated the talk through the use of eye gaze, shifted between simultaneous and consecutive mode and employed gesture and source attribution strategies to indicate who was producing the utterance. Although a trained professional interpreter, Matthew still displayed many of the communicative traits as Timothy and Sarah, whereas Ben clearly followed what he had been trained to do: working simultaneously, using first person and attempting to ‘neutralise’ his own presence in the interaction. Thus, Matthew seemed to draw on both his lay and expert knowledge to manage his communicative expertise in mediating the interaction, whereas Ben gave priority to his expert communicative knowledge as a trained interpreter. The physical positioning was also treated differently, with the heritage signers sitting closer to Charles, and even though Matthew moved his chair it was to a position where he could still maintain eye contact with Charles.

In sum, the actions of the three heritage signers (Matthew, Timothy and Sarah) reveal that by following their lay communicative expertise, brokering/interpreting was enacted as a cooperative, relational languaging practice (cf. Napier 2021), where the responsibility for talk was distributed (cf. Wadensjö 1995). The new signer interpreter (Ben) followed what he had been taught and

the brokers did what came naturally, but the professional interpreter who was a heritage signer sat somewhere in the middle (both physically and relationally). The heritage signers engaged in relational work by displaying more empathy towards Charles, whereas Ben was more rigid in following the traditional 'neutral' role category. This relatively superficial analysis evidences the heritage signers as co-participants in the talk, and that the positionings of Thea and Charles were influenced by the actions of the mediators. The interpreters had obviously been taught to perform in certain ways as interpreters, but the lay communicative expertise that was demonstrated by the heritage signers who were not trained interpreters still manifested in the professional practice of the interpreter who was a heritage signer. So, there are lessons to be learned from this in relation to communicative expertise and professional practice.

7 Conclusions

Successfully mediated talk contributes to professional practice. Interpreters *do* talk professionally, so other professionals can learn from them by observing their communicative expertise both in terms of lay and expert knowledge. But it is also important for professional interpreters to consider the communicative expertise that can be drawn from lay as well as expert knowledge as a professional. In considering the lay communicative expertise of bilinguals, what Ciordia (2019) refers to as 'natural' interpreters, professional interpreters can review whether a rigid approach to communication guided only by expert knowledge formed through professional interpreter training is always for the best. Considering how people align in direct or mediated talk illustrates impact on relations and relational practice. All professionals can learn from the communicative expertise of bilinguals to develop strategies for communication. As noted by Ciordia (2019), it is possible for interpreters to consider non-formal mediating procedures on which brokering is based, and interpreters can use a more flexible active approach to foster relational practice based on empathy.

When we consider how this applies more broadly to professional practice, i.e. whether professional (new signer) interpreters can learn from heritage signers, we can view talk in professional practice more broadly through the lens of interpreter-mediated talk. We can understand more about communicative expertise from the way that talk is mediated, either by professional interpreters or non-professional interpreters/brokers. One of the things we can learn is that bilinguals do have communicative expertise that draws on their lay knowledge. They understand very early on what is needed in order to communicate with another human being, to understand another human being, and from a young age they develop strong empathic skills. Thus, when

we train interpreters perhaps we focus so much on a more polished approach that some of the natural elements of communicative talk are lost. We need to consider how to reintroduce these in interpreter training, as well as to think about how we introduce them into professional talk generally.

The exemplars presented in this paper allow us to re-conceptualise communicative expertise through the lens of intercultural mediation. Lay knowledge of communicative techniques can be just as important for relational aspects of interaction as the expert knowledge required for communicative expertise in professional practice. More research is needed to understand communicative expertise in professional practice that involves mediated, rather than direct monolingual, communication.

This exploratory, conceptual paper seeks to open up the debate about how we define communicative expertise and to extend Sarangi's (2018) definition to include mediated communication. It has presented a case study of four sign language mediators, but this topic could be examined more broadly with any heritage language speaker. What is it about the way that they do talk that we can apply in our professional practice? In how we form relationships? And in how communication is successful? What are the slightly nuanced, natural approaches drawing on lay knowledge that they use that we can apply? In this sense we can 'make applied linguistics matter' (Candlin and Sarangi 2004).

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Notes

1. A heritage signer is a deaf or hearing person who has been exposed to a sign language from birth or a very young age through deaf parents (Müller de Quadros 2018). New signers are deaf or hearing people who learn/acquire a sign language later in life, typically in their late teens or as adults (De Meulder 2018).

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