



**Be aware!**  
**Power and responsibility in the field  
of sign language interpreting**

Proceedings of the 20<sup>th</sup> efsli Conference  
*Vienna, Austria, 14<sup>th</sup> - 16<sup>th</sup> September 2012*



efsli 2012 **power and responsibility**

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## **Power and Responsibility in Interpreting Situations: The Views of Austrian Deaf customers**

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Austria

Keywords: Power and responsibility, Deaf consumers, Austria

### Abstract

This paper presents the results of a research study of 21 Austrian Deaf customers aged from 22 to 51 on their view of power and responsibility in interpreting situations. The results show that most Austrian Deaf consumers are aware of power imbalances in interpreted communications (18), that they have been disempowered by the lack of competence of their interpreters, by the lack of interpreters and by their hearing interlocutor. Some 50% of the Deaf consumers - those with secondary education - are aware of their power over the interlocutor and the interpreter; they document—how they exert it and what measures they take to maximize their power. The paper also discusses the power of interpreters over deaf customers as well as their mutual responsibilities.

### 1. Introduction

In order to get a picture of the situation of sign language interpreting in Austria, it is necessary to offer some background information on the Austrian Deaf and SLI communities.

#### 1.1 Deaf Education

Austria is a small country with 8,000,000 inhabitants and a Deaf community of about 10,000 people. They are not evenly distributed over Austria, about 25% live in the capital of Vienna where they find the best

opportunities for their education and the widest choice of potential professions.

For historical reasons, education for the Deaf has been given mostly in special Schools for the Deaf or hard-of-hearing following the oralist approach that uses only spoken language in class. Upon finishing compulsory school (at the age of 15 or 16), Deaf students' competence of written language is comparable to an 8 year old hearing child. Few of them continue their education and successfully take their A-levels, which would enable them to study at a university (*Zentrum für Gebärdensprache und Hörbehinderten-kommunikation*). Professional education opportunities for Deaf students are scarce and oriented more toward skilled crafts and trades, for which training is offered at schools for the Deaf.

Since 1991, several pilot projects of bilingual classes have been conducted in Klagenfurt, Graz, and Vienna. They have shown that apart from the sign language competence of the teachers, the institutional framework and the composition of the team of teachers are of utmost importance for the project's success.

In recent years, integration of disabled students into mainstream schools has become more and more common. Unfortunately, the state does not provide enough support in sign language to make up for the lack of communication with peers and teachers. The teaching assistants must work in several schools. Each student is entitled to only four hours of support per week (!).

Since the ratification of the UNCRPD (UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities) by the Austrian parliament in 2008, the situation has started to change, albeit at a very slow pace.

## 1.2 Sign language interpreting

Today, there are about 110 sign language interpreters in the interpreter community in Austria.

Deaf and hard-of-hearing persons are entitled to sign language interpreters in their professional life. They may use them for team meetings, to further their education, for customer meetings and the like. Theoretically, there is no limit; they may use as many interpreting hours as needed. Nevertheless, they have to make formal requests for any interpreting settings that exceed one day (e.g. seminars or training courses).

In contrast, the budget for their private life is strictly limited and amounts from € 2,400 to € 2,600 per year.

Sign language interpreters are used in secondary schools and professional training, but due to the lack of interpreters, not all of these needs can be satisfied. At university level, the GESTU project - *Gehörlos erfolgreich studieren an der Technischen Universität* [Successful Studies for the Deaf at the University of Technology] offers several kinds of services for 13 Deaf and hard-of-hearing students at institutions of higher education in Vienna. GESTU has set up an information centre for Deaf students where information is given in sign language. The project provides tutors, note takers and SLIs for lectures/seminars, conducts research on the use of technical support for the Deaf (remote interpreting, recording of lectures with interpreters) and develops technical vocabulary in various fields where Austrian Sign Language has not yet fully developed. Unfortunately, there is a serious shortage of interpreters, especially for highly specialized settings like university lectures. Therefore, interpreting teams or even a single interpreter cannot be provided for all the lectures/seminars as required by Deaf students.

Although the number of sign language interpreters is growing slowly, densely populated areas like Vienna still suffer from a lack of qualified interpreters. Deaf consumers have to book interpreters four to six weeks in advance to be sure that they will have interpreters for their assignments.

## 2. Research Focus

Having worked as a sign language interpreter for more than 10 years now, I have grown increasingly aware of power imbalances in interpreting situations. All the available literature has been authored by interpreters and only very few of them included the views of Deaf customers. So I decided to look into

- the perception of power between/amongst Deaf people and hearing interpreters;
- the awareness of Deaf consumers of *power/responsibility* of their interpreters and of Deaf people themselves;
- the *strategies of empowerment* used by Deaf people in interpreted interactions.

## 3. Study design

The study was conducted among 21 Deaf consumers, 11 women and 10 men, aged 22 to 51 years. Seven of them were from Vienna where 25% of the overall Austrian population lives and 37% to 46% of the Deaf population is located. Another 14 came from four federal provinces (Lower Austria, Styria, Carinthia, Vorarlberg). Due to time and budgetary constraints, it was not possible to find Deaf participants from all nine Austrian federal provinces.

As to their education (see Figure 1), nine participants had undergone professional training, three had completed a trade school, eight had taken High School diplomas and one of them held a university degree.

The data were gathered by interviews conducted in Austrian Sign Language. The 19 questions asked were open-ended questions. However, I must point out that, because of a miscommunication with one of interviewees, five of the interviewees answered only 15 of the 19 questions.

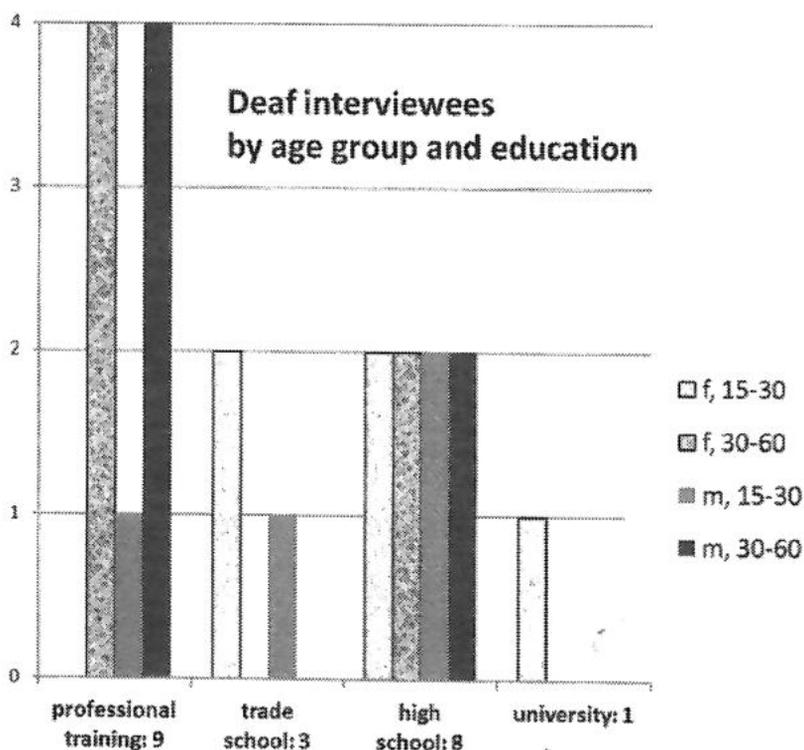


Figure 1

The results were organized in tables, the answers were classified and tagged. The results were evaluated and the occurrences of similar items were tallied.

#### 4. Results

For each of the interview questions presented I would like to use quotes from the interviewees' answers; these are presented in italics below. I chose those that seemed the most representative ones.

##### 4.1 Power imbalances in interpreting? Who has the power?

*I would say most of the power is with the hearing person, second is the SLI and the Deaf person is last.*

Out of the 21 Deaf consumers, 18 reported to have felt power imbalances, two had not realized any and one person did not know who in the interpreting setting had the most power, six mentioned the

hearing person and the hearing interpreter, three thought that the interpreter was the most powerful, four answered that the hearing interlocutor and the Deaf consumer were the ones who had power, one mentioned the Deaf person and four thought that it depended on the situation.

#### 4.2 Disempowerment of the Deaf person?

By whom/what?

*If the SLI has not got enough education or background knowledge of the topic/situation, I do not get the full information or it may be confused. In such a case I refuse to ask questions, because I know that she will use a lower register when voicing my message.*

Twenty Deaf consumers were convinced that they were disempowered; only one of them did not think so.

The most important factor mentioned was the interpreter's lack of interpreting skills (10) (cf. Brown Kurz & Caldwell Langer, 2004:22). Nine thought that it was the hearing interlocutor who disempowered them, four Deaf consumers mentioned that the lack of sign language interpreters was a barrier to their self-fulfilment, four reported that they were disempowered by the interpreting process itself (lag time, information loss, presence of a third person) (cf. Brown Kurz & Caldwell Langer, 2004:19, 42), and four mentioned the behaviour of the sign language interpreter.

#### 4.3 Do you have power? How do you exercise it over the SLI?

*I used a SLI for the first time at the age of 15. I did not know who had the power, until I realized it was me. I am the interlocutor of the hearing, the SLI is only interpreting.*

Only 10 Deaf consumers out of 16 said that they had power in interpreted communication, two felt they had no power at all, three felt powerful at times and one said that s/he did not know. I think that this

result shows that there is much to be done about this problem in the future.

When asked in what way they had power over the interpreter, six interviewees mentioned the physical position of the interpreter and four the choice of interpreter. Another four said that they arranged the appointment themselves (they felt that this alone already gave them power over the interpreter!). Four mentioned that they signed without regard to the interpreter which indicated their trust in the interpreter's skills, four mentioned that they provide information about the setting to the interpreter before the appointment. Not all items that were mentioned are listed, rather only those that were mentioned most often.

#### 4.4 How do you exercise power over the hearing interlocutor?

*If I am the customer and have a self-reliant attitude, I can exercise power if my SLI is able to relay it. Power comes from my role and my education, my knowledge, self-esteem and self-reliance.*

#### How do you exert power over the hearing?

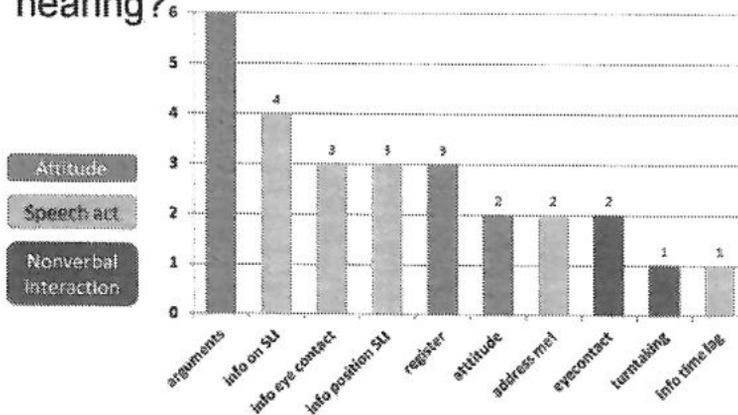


Figure 2

As you can see in Figure 2, six of the 21 consumers think that they can exert power over the hearing interlocutor by using solid arguments to convince them. Four think that they can influence the situation by showing expertise when informing the hearing interlocutor about sign language interpreting; three when informing about the need for eye

contact with the interpreter and not so much with the hearing person and about the placement of the interpreter. I find it interesting that most Deaf customers believe that attitude is what most influences the hearing person most (arguments, register, behaviour in the situation), speech acts that show expertise (information on SLI, on shifting eye contact, positioning, time lag, addressing the Deaf person directly) are rated second; only two items were mentioned that refer to nonverbal interaction (eye contact per se, turn taking). I have experienced that Deaf people tend to underestimate the power of nonverbal signals on hearing people.

#### 4.5 How do you maximise power?

*If I have to give a speech, [...] I talk about how I want to have my signs interpreted into German (word choice!), ask if the SLI wants the technical terms to be finger spelt or if she prefers to use an intermediate sign that we define beforehand. I inform her about my preferences as to register and word choice (e.g. instead of 'change' pls. use 'modify').*

### How do you maximize your power?

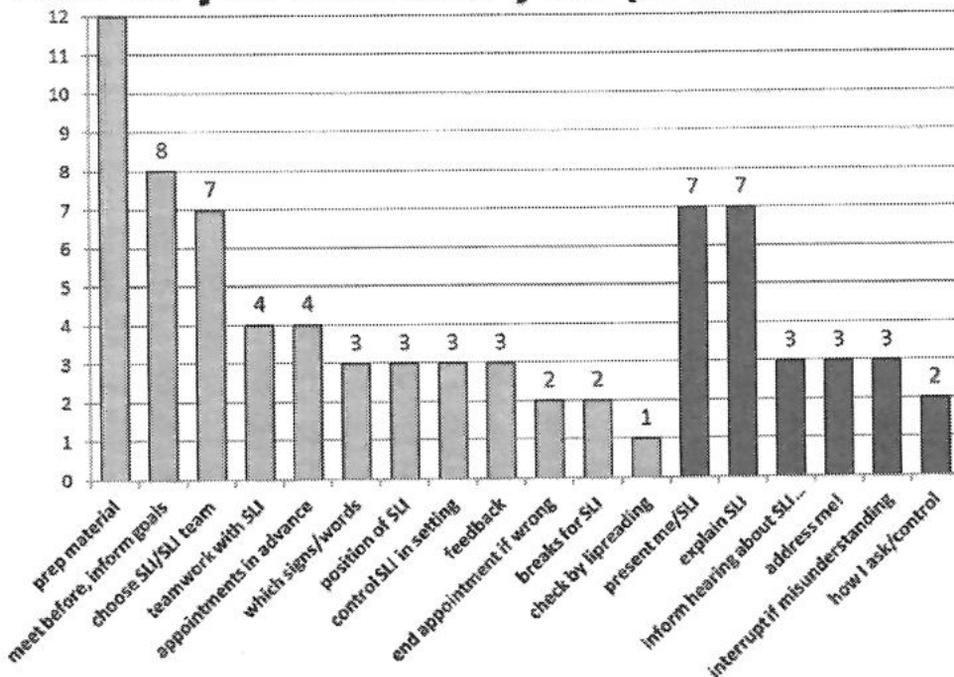


Figure 3

When asked how they maximise power in the conversation (see Figure 3), Deaf consumers mentioned preparation material (12), meeting the SLI before the assignment and informing them about their goals (8), carefully choosing the SLI/SLI teams (7) and other criteria that can be found in the graph above. All these strategies are involving the SLI (dark bars). It is interesting that only few of these tactics aim at monitoring the production of the interpreter (control SLI in the setting (3), check by lip reading (1)). Most of these are team working strategies which I find most promising. Among the strategies aimed towards the hearing person are presentation of the Deaf and the interpreter, the Deaf clients' informing her/himself about SLI (7) and informing the hearing about SLI beforehand (3), asking for recognition as the interlocutor (address me! (3)), interrupting the dialog if s/he feels to have or been misunderstood. Only two interviewees answered that they maximise power by asking questions and controlling the conversation in this way.

#### 4.6 Does the SLI have power? What kind of power?

*The SLI exercises power by giving more preference to the hearing person than to my input and not giving me her voice (I cannot shout to make the speaker aware of my input).*

When asked if the interpreter had power, 14 respondents answered yes, two said no, and five did not know.

The power of the SLI was to interpret faithfully (5), to take turns (4), to interpret emotions (4), to ask for clarification if she has not understood (cf. Brown Kurz & Caldwell Langer, 2004:27), to choose the right register (4), to take an assignment (2) (among other criteria). I was very surprised by the fact that so few consumers thought of the power of the interpreter to refuse assignments, although several of them had complained about feeling disempowered by the lack of interpreters.

4.7 Do you have power over the SLI outside of the setting? How?

*I talk about interpreters to other Deaf people.*

*As the Deaf community is so small, bad news travels fast - it spreads like oil on water.*

When asked if they had power over the SLI outside the interpreting setting, 14 respondents answered yes, six answered no and one person did not know. As to how they had power, six mentioned that they talked about SLIs in the Deaf community, five answered that they would not give an assignment to an interpreter with whom they were dissatisfied, three mentioned that they would provide feedback and three said that they had influence over the SLI by their private contact.

4.8 Does the SLI have power over you outside of the setting?

*If there is no personal relationship, they have no power, but if so, their power is huge. I try to have personal relationships with only a few whom I trust and get along with. If there is personal relationship, their moral power is huge, there may be an impact on the relationship if problems in interpreting spill over to our private relationship and the other way round.*

When asked if the SLI had power over Deaf consumers outside of the setting, 11 consumers answered yes, nine said no, and one person did not know.

When asked of the kind of influence, they mentioned personal relationships (6), the SLI's influence on their clients' opinion (4), the SLI's choice of assignment (2), choice of the time of assignment (2) and one person mentioned that interpreters may well talk about deaf consumers amongst each other. That only one person mentioned this was a surprise to me, I had expected this aspect to be mentioned more often.

#### 4.9 Do you have responsibilities? Which ones?

*I observe the reactions of the hearing person to see if s/he has understood and I ask for clarification, if I something is unclear to me.*

When asked for their responsibilities, one person said that s/he did not know about these. The other respondents mentioned 17 items, many of these aiming at the SLI (preparation material (10), organising work breaks (4), signing clearly in order to be understood by the SLI (3), seeing to the SLI's fee (3)), only few aiming at the hearing interlocutor (informing her/him about sign language interpreting (6) and some referring to her/his self-control (control of the situation (4), arranging the appointment (3)).

#### 4.10 Does the SLI have responsibilities? Which ones?

*The interpreter's responsibility is also to support the deaf person and even out some of the power differential - her role is that of a cultural mediator.*

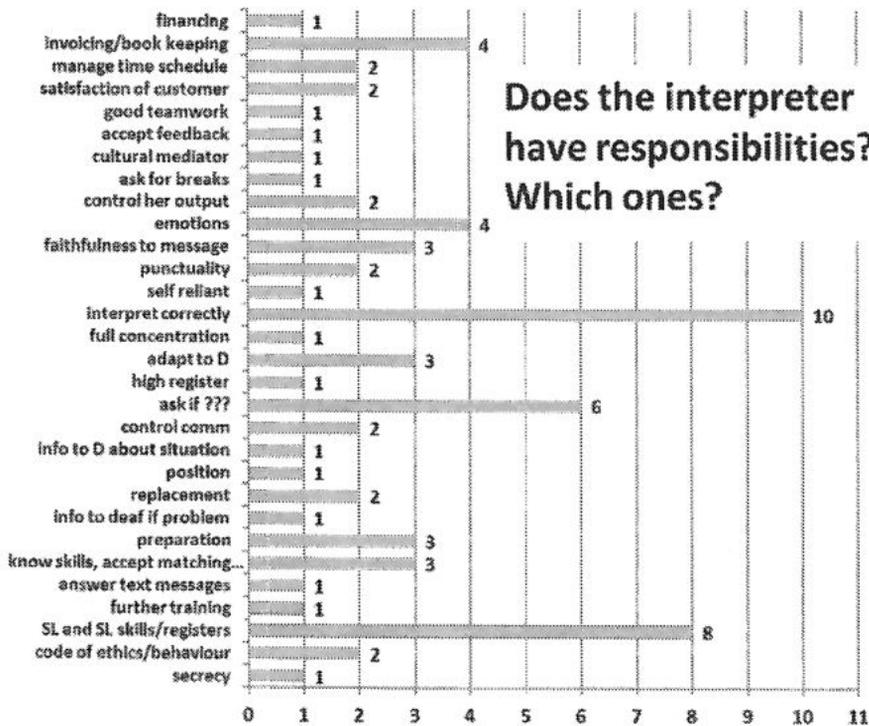


Figure 4

Figure 4 shows that all respondents were convinced that the interpreter has responsibilities. Of the 28 items mentioned, the following scored highest: interpreting correctly (10), having good SL and SLI skills and having many registers in both languages at her disposal (8), asking if the SLI has not understood something (6), interpreting emotions (4) and invoicing and book keeping (4).

## 5. Conclusion

In general, the results show that Deaf consumers who have received secondary or more education are aware of power imbalances in interpreted situations. They often feel disempowered by the hearing interlocutor and the interpreter, many feel the interpreters' lack of interpreting skills to be a problem.

Only half of the respondents have the feeling of power in the setting, not even a third believe they are in a position to influence the hearing interlocutor by arguments. Most of the strategies used to maximise power are aimed at co-working with the SLI. Two thirds of the respondents think that they have power over the interpreter outside the setting.

Two third of the respondents believe that the SLI has power in the setting, only half of them think that SLIs have power over them outside of the setting.

They believe that they have responsibilities toward the SLI and the hearing person, but they are more concentrated on team working with the interpreter than with the hearing person.

Deaf consumers think that the SLI has a lot of responsibilities. Most of the items mentioned refer to interpreting and quality of interpretation (emotions, registers, etc.).

What I found interesting was the fact that many more Deaf consumers thought they had power over SLIs by talking about them to

other Deaf people than they thought of interpreters talking amongst each other about Deaf consumers. I think that they trust in our compliance to the Code of Ethics.

In general my respondents and I have experienced problems with the concepts "power", "responsibility", and "trust". They are blurred and sometimes overlapping so that it is hard to define their boundaries.

I am convinced that we need to work co-operate more closely with our customers to improve the quality of our work and meet their goals more accurately. A lot of exchange will have to be needed in order to find more common ground to help interpreters make more informed choices. Because, as one interviewee put it: *An interpreter has to take decisions all the time!*

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