

Effective Communication or Robotic Repetition?

by Randi C. Friedman, RPR, CCP, CRR

In June 2008 I provided open captioning for a live audience at a conference on mental health and deafness. One of the speakers was an interpreter at a well-known psychiatric hospital. She discussed effective communication in that setting and described choices professional interpreters make when verbatim translation would be misleading, could cause confusion or, in some cases, could be fatal to the person who is deaf. I have discovered that literal, verbatim speech-to-text translation is not always the best choice for me as a CART provider and open captioner. Since sign language interpreters have been in the interpreting business much longer than most of us first- and second-generation CART providers and open captioners, I took a look at the language in the Registry of the Interpreters for the Deaf, RID's Code of Professional Guidance. It gave me more insight about our role as carriers of language and communication access providers. Some Code provisions are footnoted in this article.

The following discussion is not intended to suggest that CART providers take shortcuts or summarize for their own benefit or because they lack the skills or knowledge needed for the situation. The open captioner/CART provider's duty is to uphold NCRA's

minimum professional standard of 97% accuracy via verbatim translation. Any choice to deviate from verbatim writing would be strictly for the consumer's benefit.

Know Your Consumer

Consumer needs and preferences differ.¹ When captioning large events before an audience, we can't always get to know consumer profiles and preferences in advance. The consumer base of a large audience, especially for public events such as town halls, can vary widely in education and linguistic ability. So, for a general audience, I rarely move away from verbatim translation. However, if consumers come up afterwards to thank me, I ask if they have suggestions for improvement.

When working regularly with one consumer or a group of consumers, over time, you can ask questions, using discretion. What is your consumer's education and background, vocabulary level? Is English their first language? second? third? When did they lose their hearing? Are they culturally—big D—Deaf and fluent in American Sign Language? Were they born deaf, early deafened, late-deafened?

CART/open-captioning consumers who were born deaf or became deaf early in life and hard of hearing consumers tell me that, for communication access, they rely on the following, in this order:

1. Their residual hearing with hearing aids or cochlear implant(s)
2. Lipreading
3. CART or open captions

For these consumers, where CART or open captioning is the third level down in communication access, they say I “fill in the blanks.” I don't have to explain gestures.

¹ RID Code, Under Professionalism, Illustrative Behavior, 2.2 reads: Assess consumer needs and the interpreting situation before and during the assignment and make adjustments as needed.

They usually see them, because they are looking at the speaker most of the time. They want me to translate exactly what is said and prefer to ask for clarification themselves, if needed. Others, such as late-deafened, nonlipreaders or people who've lost all of their hearing because of a disease or other, unknown reason, rely heavily on a line-by-line interpretation viewed on my laptop. I write differently for the various populations. By observing where their attention is, I can observe if they miss a shrug or other gesture and if they do, I will describe it.

Other questions to ask, if you become familiar with the consumer, are: Are the family members of your consumer hearing, deaf, big D Deaf? Has your consumer become suddenly deaf? Does your consumer wear hearing aids, read lips, wear a cochlear implant? Does s/he want every "uh" and "duh" uttered to be translated or do they get tired and lose focus by reading the screen and want you to leave out redundant speech such as "when I--when I"? Does s/he prefer that you interpret speech to text "mostly verbatim" and sometimes summarize? When?

One of my student consumers is hard of hearing and wears hearing aids. English is his second language. He uses his residual hearing and hearing aids when in conversation. During class, he relies on my CART screen for communication access. His master's degree studies are in state-of-art computer technology and he's fluent in the technical language. We discussed his English comprehension before the semester began. Since his eyes would be darting back and forth between my screen and his professors' demonstrations on their projected screen, he asked me to simplify the English, but not the technical terms, so he wouldn't fall behind trying to guess at the meaning of an English word. Also, one of the professors was not a native English speaker. His syntax (word

Effective Communication or Robotic Repetition by Randi C. Friedman, RPR, CCP, CRR order) was sometimes unexpected. When I thought the syntax would confuse the student, I changed the syntax, but not the meaning. If the student were an early deafened, native English speaker, he could easily read through the unusual syntax, and so I would write exactly what was said.

Create Communication Bridges Not Obstacles

Extensive preparation is crucial to the provision of professional quality communication access. When I was a freelance court reporter, preparation consisted of obtaining, onsite, the title of the case, the parties' names, and briefly previewing the Bill of Particulars. In my role as CART provider/open captioner, I start to prepare weeks in advance. I contact and explain to event planners, professors or other parties what I do and what I need from them. Sometimes it takes two or three polite reminders to obtain speaking points, scripts, PowerPoints and speaker bios that I upload before the event or class. Onsite, when possible, I ask if there are any surprise guest speakers and "Will you be referring to anyone, thanking anyone? Will proper names come up that are not in the materials?" I review programs, agendas, students' texts—any relevant piece of paper I can. For large events, I search the web to gain an even better grasp of the speakers, articles they've written and the event topics, so my fingers can fly when I'm "live."

Barbara Bryan, a CART/open captioning consumer and board member of both the Hearing Loss Association of America and Advocates for Better Communication (a.b.c.), wants her provider to "do her homework," by gathering documents and preparing a substantial job dictionary, familiarizing herself with the terminology to be used, so the translation is accurate. She appreciates our accuracy so she can "forget the open captioner is there" and concentrate on the board of directors' discussions.

Convey the Content²

Sometimes I have only a split second to decide whether to robotically repeat what is said and risk losing the communication thread, or do something different. If verbatim recording will lead to confusion, not clarity, I make a better choice.

The other day, at a business meeting, several attendees had hearing loss, some wore hearing aids, some had cochlear implants and other participants were hearing. The subject and exact quote below have been changed to protect client privacy.

One participant said, “I just hear the words again and again, consumerism, consumerism, consumerism, and, well” – then the speaker made a gesture.

A gesture’s worth a thousand explanations, I thought. However, none of the participants who were deaf or hard of hearing were looking at me to see me imitate the gesture. Most were watching the LED screen. Had I written “[she’s pointing two fingers towards her open mouth]” I doubt the meaning would be clear.

I made the interpreting decision to write:

“I hear the words again and again, consumerism, consumerism, consumerism, and, well . . . gag me with a spoon.” Chances are this sophisticated lady never would have said that, but the meaning was clear and communication effective. When a participant with hearing pointed to my screen and laughed, a CART consumer who saw the gesture said, “she’s right.”

Learn From Others and the Culture³

² RID’s Code of Professional Conduct Section 2.3 says: Render the message faithfully by conveying the content and spirit of what is being communicated, using language most readily understood by consumers

³ RID Code, Section 2.0, Professionalism, Guiding Principle, reads: Interpreters are expected to stay abreast of evolving language use and trends . . .

My continuing education often takes place on the job. After my consumers, American Sign Language interpreters are my best teachers. I recently captioned a fundraiser which took place at a New York City comedy club. Two sign language interpreters were present as well. An African-American comedian, during his act, said “nigga.” I wrote “nigger.” The offstage interpreter giggled when the comedian made a joke about what was on the captioning screen. Later, I asked the interpreter what I’d missed. My word choice, she explained, was culturally incorrect. “Nigger” is a racial slur. The comedian didn’t say that. He said “nigga,” which is used principally among young men of color to mean “bro,” “dude” or “man” and is not racist.

In another situation, I got a good laugh from the students in a classroom setting when I asked the professor for clarification: “Did you just say “Whatup?” “Whatup,” he confirmed with a chuckle.

In Summary

Good communication brings people together. If I treat language mechanically, a more perfect machine will replace me. Like language, I am alive and, I hope, evolving from robotic repetition of well-punctuated words to the thoughtful interpretation of a changing language. My goal is to give society the benefit of a good communication bridge so that people with hearing loss and people with hearing can share their intelligence, intuition, reason and common sense.

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References: Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf's Code of Professional Guidance;
"Effective Communication Techniques," Disability and Business Technical Assistance
Centers (DBTAC)

MARY: Bullet Points for a Sidebar:

- Interpret With Discretion
- Know Your Consumer
- Come Prepared to Each Assignment
- Keep Up With Language and Cultural Trends