The Dialectic of Second- Language Learning: On Becoming an ASL- English Interpreter

Abstract

A small group of interpreters was interviewed with regard to their view of learning ASL and becoming bicultural. A model of identity was then postulated based on Hegel's dialectic (Wheat 2012) of thesis (presuppositions, stereotypes, or theories about ASL and the Deaf community), antithesis (conflicting experiences), and synthesis (new understanding and acceptance). Also utilized were various identity constructs from the literature on bilingualism/biculturalism, which suggests that identity is ascribed or constructed in relation to others and constantly negotiated (Tropp et al. 1999). Evidence was found of a period of thesis or position, during which some interpreters had no presuppositions about Deaf people or ASL; some perhaps had a disability perspective. Next they went through a process of antithesis or opposition, during which they discovered the complexities of ASL and Deaf culture and values that conflict with their own. Here the participants described confronting the "hearing line" (Krentz 2007), society's negative view of Deaf people; some of them may have developed a sense of bilingual fatigue (McCartney 2006; Schwenke 2011; Watson 1987). Finally, the participants arrived at a level of synthesis or composition, during which they had a more complex and nuanced understanding of their identity in relation to the Deaf community. At this level, they viewed Deaf people as a positive foil to the hearing world; for them, Deaf people modeled a collective and egalitarian approach to others and stimulated reflection on the meaning of diversity and inclusion.

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HISTORICALLY, children of Deaf parents or various professionals working with Deaf people have taken on the role of sign language interpreter. Recently, however, individuals are learning American Sign Language (ASL) and becoming interpreters as monolingual English speakers and with limited or no understanding of Deaf people. Their subjectivity as emergent bilinguals working with Deaf people has not been explored in any detail, though a distinct “third culture” has been suggested (Bienvenu 1987). Such a “culture” occurs when two different groups interact and establish “a temporary set of cultural rules and values” (*ibid.*, 1).

With regard to what is known about hearing English speakers who are becoming bicultural, it has been theorized that they may have value systems that conflict with those of the Deaf community (Pfanner 2000) and that some interpreters may hold audist beliefs (McDermid 2009) (i.e., the denial or denigration of Deaf ways of being; Lane 1992). Students of ASL may experience culture shock (Kemp 1998) and performance anxiety (Pfanner 2000); conversely, they may develop an inflated sense of their abilities and believe that ASL is easily acquired (Peterson 1999).

One study that specifically addressed beliefs about Deaf people found that interaction alone did not have a significant impact, although women, younger participants, and trained professionals shared “more positive attitudes” toward Deaf people than did their counterparts (Cooper, Rose, and Mason 2003, 317). The same study also found that social status seemed important, as “a significant correlation was found between [more positive] attitude scores and contact with deaf people of equal or higher status” (*ibid.*, 317). Another study found that its hearing participants favored English (spoken or signed) over ASL for communication with Deaf people (Leigh et al. 1998, 332).

A longitudinal survey of 1,110 beginning ASL students (Peterson 1999) found that 79.2 percent responded “no” or “only rarely” when asked how much contact they had with Deaf people (*ibid.*, 189). Although 58 percent of the respondents did not “consider Deaf people as disabled” (*ibid.*, 191), 62 percent wanted to help Deaf people, and 71.4 percent believed they “[could] make a contribution to the lives of Deaf people” (*ibid.*). A total of 67.2 percent selected “Deaf people’s values and hearing people’s values are more alike than they

are different” (ibid., 193). Fewer than half of the respondents (42.7 percent) “strongly agreed” or “agreed” that Deaf people had their own culture (ibid., 195).

Canadian Context

To explain the complexities that a hearing person encounters when acquiring ASL, I first situate the research discussed here in a broader context. This study was undertaken in Canada, whose federal government has historically promoted a multicultural statehood (Clément, Baker, and MacIntyre 2003), as evidenced by the Canadian Multicultural Act of 1988 (James and Schechter 2000). The government’s support has brought about an increased respect for the language and culture of native Canadians (Fontaine 2007), and Quebec has been recognized as a distinct society (Barker et al. 2001). There is an expectation of equal access for all in Canada (Esses and Gardner 1996; Kymlicka 2003) and acceptance of minority languages and cultures (Barker et al. 2001; Esses and Gardner 1996; Kalin 1996). Further, there appears to be no overt requirement of assimilation into the dominant Canadian cultures (Kalin 1996; Kymlicka 2003), although the adoption of the “societally dominant language was expected” (James and Schechter 2000, 30).

Through various pieces of legislation, the federal government has particularly recognized the rights of Deaf Canadians. For instance, Deaf Canadians now have the right to a sign language interpreter for legal proceedings (*Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms of 1982*, §14) and medical procedures (*Eldridge v. British Columbia [Attorney General]* 3 S.C.R. 624, 1997). In addition, Manitoba, Alberta, and Ontario have passed laws granting Deaf Canadians access to instruction in ASL (Carbin 1996). Moreover, provincial schools for Deaf children have been established (ibid.), and here the Deaf children of hearing parents are typically enculturated into ASL and Deaf ways of being (Padden and Humphries 1988).

Thesis, Antithesis, Synthesis

For this study, a model of bicultural acculturation was proposed that drew upon Hegel’s dialectic (thesis, antithesis, synthesis) (Mueller 1958; Wheat 2012). Marx (1892) described it as first adopting a “position”

(thesis), then experiencing “opposition” (antithesis), and finally, experiencing the development of new insights, a stage of “composition” (ibid., 117), or synthesis. In this study, “thesis” could be thought of as an identity (conscious or not) as a monolingual individual and one’s presuppositions (stereotypes) about the Deaf community. Eventually the individual might go through conflicting experiences of the self and the “Other” (Smith 1848) (the antithesis of the original knowledge), in this case when a hearing person is confronted by differing values. Finally, a bicultural individual can engage in an act of synthesis, where a new understanding leads to a higher or more nuanced understanding of the self and the “Other.”

Using this triadic model of identity, the following questions were posed:

1. How may we characterize the dialectic of identity formation for an English speaker who is acquiring ASL as a second language?
2. What aspects of that person’s self-concept change when becoming a signer of ASL?
3. How do that person’s conceptualizations of Deaf individuals and Deaf culture transform?

Becoming Bicultural

A bicultural identity is constructed socially and in relation to others (Noels and Clément 1996). This process is seen as an ongoing act of negotiation (Tropp et al. 1999), in which individuals try to “assume the most positive group identity possible” (Noels and Clément 1996, 215). Factors that may enhance the formation of a bicultural identity include identification with the second-language (L2) community (Clément et al. 2003) and regard for one’s own ethnic identity (Noels and Clément 1996). Other factors include willingness to use a second language (Schecter and Bayley 2004) and to adopt different values (Barker et al. 2001).

Antithesis/Opposition

Several impediments appear on the route to a bicultural identity, however. Some who become bicultural may feel transient in their L2 community and perceive themselves to be a visitor (Mendoza 1989). With

regard to ASL, bilinguals may confront the “hearing line,” an “invisible boundary separating deaf and hearing people,” such as the image in American literature of Deaf people as lonely, unhappy, and infantilized (Krentz 2007, 2). Or, as one study noted, some hearing individuals may perceive Deaf people as “*happy, alone, angry, and friendly*” (Kiger 1997, 558). The hearing participants in another study expressed reservations about the ability of Deaf persons to run an organization, work in management, order without help, communicate with their children, and make independent decisions (Berkay, Gardner, and Smith 1995).

Not surprisingly, individuals who become bicultural may experience burnout or “bilingual fatigue” (McCartney 2006; Schwenke 2011; Watson 1987). Harvey (2003) describes vicarious trauma in sign language interpreters. He writes that interpreters were “in danger of affectively drowning, of becoming deluged, flooded, and overwhelmed” when they identified with Deaf people (ibid., 210).

Synthesis/Composition

Individuals who eventually become bilingual and bicultural experience many benefits, many of which are important in a multicultural and global society. These include a broader range of employment opportunities (Lazaruk 2007), enhanced tolerance for a second language community (Rubinfeld et al. 2007), and increased sensitivity to cross-cultural differences and norms (Capirci et al. 1998; Marilyn 2001). A heightened sense of fulfillment was also noted (Lazaruk 2007), as was an increased metalinguistic awareness (Clément, Baker, and MacIntyre 2003). Adults who studied the grammar of ASL, for example, became more aware of the grammar of English (Buisson 2007). Children who were taught British Sign Language demonstrated enhanced reading comprehension in English (Marilyn 2001). Again, these benefits are particularly relevant to both Deaf and hearing people who live in a global, multicultural society.

Third Culture

As an act of synthesis or composition, the literature identifies a potential “hearing” subjectivity, which Bauman (2008) became aware of when he began working at a school for deaf children (ibid., viii). Spoken-language bilinguals may undergo a “cultural transmutation,”

or emergence into a new hybrid group as they choose a new, third culture or subculture (Cuéllar, Arnold, and Maldonado 1995, 280). This may be in response to feeling transient in both cultures, as noted earlier (Mendoza 1989). Other terms found in the literature are a constructed “speech” community (Pratt 1987) and a “parallel society” (Kymlicka 2003). Bienvenu (1987) has identified these as a “third culture” for sign language interpreters.

Study Design

A narrative inquiry methodology was utilized for this study, which included semistructured interviews. Based on the belief that people’s knowledge of themselves is held in narrative form, narrative inquiry looks at the stories people tell about themselves (Bell 2002, 210). Short-range narratives of limited focus (referred to as “language-learning stories”; Murray 2009, 48) were solicited (Lucius-Hoene and Deppermann 2000).

A narrative inquiry can explore a participant’s “life-span perspective” and the “social foundation” of the participant’s subjectivity (*ibid.*, 206), or at least the identity shared during an interview. The participants can describe “reactive sequences” (i.e., their reactions to events) (McCabe, Capron, and Peterson 1991, 149), “personal parables,” or lessons they have learned (*ibid.*, 158); they may also make metacomments on the authenticity of reconstructed events by admitting they forgot or were unsure of something. The data collected are therefore very subjective (Bell 2002).

Participants

Twelve interpreters, both experts and novices, in Canada volunteered to be part of this study, and all had acquired ASL as an adult. Experts were nationally certified and had a minimum of 20 years of language experience. The novices had 5–7 years of ASL study and were selected by convenience sampling as they had graduated from the same interpreter education program. The percentage of females (83 percent, $n = 10$) to males (17 percent, $n = 2$) was similar to what Peterson (1999) noted for ASL classes (80.4 percent female, 19.6 percent male).

This range, expert and novice, with at least five to seven years of language use was chosen because it was believed that these individuals

TABLE 1. Demographics

	Experts <i>N</i> = 5	Novices <i>N</i> = 7
age 45 and over	5	
age 35–39		2
age 26–29		3
age 20–25		2
white, Caucasian, Irish Canadian, European	5	5
Jewish		2
first language English	5	7
female	5	5
male		2

would provide very different insights into becoming bicultural. For the novices, the development of their bicultural identity had begun only a few years ago. The experts, on the other hand, were much further along and perhaps had different impressions of being bicultural (table 1).

The novices in this study were designated by a capital letter *N* appended to their pseudonyms: Adam*N*, Barry*N*, Christine*N*, Darlene*N*, Elizabeth*N*, Francine*N*, and Gloria*N*. A capital letter *E* was appended to the pseudonyms for the expert interpreters: Alice*E*, Bea*E*, Carol*E*, Denise*E*, and Erin*E*.

Situating the Investigator

As part of a narrative inquiry, it is important to situate myself as I myself designed the data collection and analysis process (Patton 1999). This study is emic in that I am a native English speaker, hearing, male, and Caucasian. I studied French as a second language, learned ASL as an adult, and became a nationally certified interpreter in Canada. Much of my background, therefore, is similar to that of the participants, though I am different in gender from most of them and perhaps am more similar to the Expert group in terms of years of language study and biculturalism. The participants knew of my background from personal experience as a colleague or former educator.

A synopsis was also shared in the letter of introduction to the study, as recommended by the literature (Larson 1997; Lucius-Hoene and Deppermann 2000).

There were multiple roles I could have assumed or been ascribed (e.g., peer, former teacher, friend, former student, researcher) (*ibid.*). I endeavored to be a peer by being “in” the story instead of establishing an asymmetrical “vantage point outside of it” as an expert (Larson 1997, 459). This was done by spending time establishing rapport both before and after the interviews. I also included the participants in the data-analysis process as coanalysts, as they were sent copies of the initial findings and a synopsis of the interviews to comment on.

An emic study presents both benefits and limitations. Because I, as the principal researcher, was an “insider,” I believed the participants would share more detailed information with me than they would with a naïve listener (McCabe, Capron, and Peterson 1991). This seems to have occurred as the participants discussed intimate information about the internal changes they experienced and their feelings about some of the internal conflicts they faced. Of course, however, I was not completely neutral, and the study was shaped by my “selective perceptions” (Patton 1999, 1200). For example, as a male I may not have privileged aspects of the acculturation process that were important to female language learners. My role as a former educator of some of the participants no doubt affected the amount or type of information they shared. To address these limitations, a process of triangulation was considered (*ibid.*). This included a number of theoretical frameworks on identity and bilingualism and the incorporation of the participants as coanalysts of the data.

The goal of a qualitative study is to document the human experience of the participants and “reveal commonalities of experiences” (Murray 2009, 58) rather than universal truths. The importance of this study lies in the reader’s view of its authenticity and plausibility (Connelly and Clandinin 1990).

Findings

Categories and Properties

The data provide evidence of a process of thesis/position, followed by antithesis/opposition, and ending at synthesis/composition and

various properties within each.

Thesis/Position

False Assumptions

The first property of the category Thesis/Position was described by GloriaN as “false assumptions” (table 2). For example, she believed that her first ASL instructor would be hearing, and DeniseE, one of the experts, “didn’t equate it [learning ASL] with meeting anybody who was Deaf.” A novice, GloriaN, initially believed learning ASL meant learning to fingerspell, and both she and another novice (BarryN) believed ASL was universal.

GloriaN’s advice to new signers was “Be prepared to change your views and challenge your assumptions,” and BarryN, ChristineN, and ElizabethN, three other novices, agreed. BarryN said, “It is not what I expected it to be, and it is not like learning another spoken language.” New signers should keep an open mind (ErinE, GloriaN) and avoid “black and white” thinking or the need for a single right answer (ErinE, FrancineN). FrancineN added, “That was totally me when I started signing. But I later realized there is no black and white, and it was all kind of gray. This was hard to get over when I first started

TABLE 2. Major Categories

Category	Property
thesis/position	false assumptions
	deafness as disability
	tabula rasa
antithesis/opposition	acculturation resistance
	second-language interference
	hearing line
	bilingual fatigue
synthesis/composition	need for balance
	behavioral changes
	hearing identity
	signer or interpreter?
	Deaf peers
	third culture or new identity?
	parallel societies
	values

learning.”

Deaf as Disability

All of the participants said their view of Deaf people had changed in some way. Three novices described initially seeing Deaf people as having a disability (AdamN, ElizabethN) or in a negative light (ChristineN). ElizabethN said, “I was the person that was, ‘How do you drive if you’re Deaf? How do you read if you’re Deaf?’” ChristineN said, “But I was the same [as everyone else] . . . I guess just more ignorant of the fact that there was a culture. There was a community. And that there’s nothing wrong with them.”

Tabula Rasa

All of the participants said they initially knew little about ASL and Deaf people. ErinE used the term “blank slate” to describe her prior knowledge of Deaf people. Table 3 presents examples of the comments the participants shared on this topic.

TABLE 3. Tabula Rasa

Property	Who	Example
tabula rasa	BeaE	“It didn’t cross my mind, so I had no opinion. They were kind of at arm’s length.”
	ChristineN	“But not necessarily changed. But, it just appeared, from nothing. The absence of thinking about it, to thinking about it a lot.”
	DarleneN and Denise E	“I didn’t really know what I was getting into.”
	ElizabethN	“That moment when you start to learn sign language . . . but can swear you have only seen maybe two or three Deaf people in your life. Then all of a sudden you are exposed and immersed in this language and culture and realize Deaf people are everywhere and have been everywhere . . . it is that you have not noticed due to your absence of thinking.”
	ErinE	“And so . . . yeah, I can remember that process, for sure . . . of, um . . . discovering ASL and discovering the people who use it and the Deaf community.”

With regard to the category Thesis, many of the participants began learning about Deaf culture from a position of false assumptions or “blank slates” and thus had few to no expectations. Others began the process of becoming bicultural with a disability framework for Deaf people.

Antithesis/Opposition

Having begun their journey to becoming bicultural, the participants had their preconceived notions challenged. Next is a discussion of their views of Deaf culture and ASL. Their comments should not be seen as exemplars of Deaf culture but instead as an exploration of starting as an outsider and gradually becoming bicultural.

Acculturation Resistance

Some participants resisted adopting values they believed were part of Deaf culture. Several did not adopt the consensus decision-making process, which is believed to be part of the Deaf community (DeniseE, ElizabethN, FrancineN). Two described the long consultation process to arrive at a consensus as “frustrating” (DeniseE, FrancineN). DeniseE explained that, in life, we have “deadlines” to meet, and FrancineN stated that discussions went “around and around and there was no resolution.” In a similar vein, CarolE and ElizabethN said they did not emulate the Deaf community’s view of time. ElizabethN described this view as “Deaf standard time,” and yet she “hated” being late for events. See table 4 for additional examples.

Second-Language Interference

According to the novices and the two experts, learning ASL initially affected their English in a negative manner. They described a number of language aspects that they, as second-language learners, believed were not part of their English language use and instead reflected interference from ASL.

ElizabethN said she had “started second-guessing” how she spoke. DarleneN frequently overused “gloss words,” spoken English words for signs she had learned, such as “appropriate,” “match,” “patience,” and “supportive,” and ElizabethN said she did the same with the word “like.” Seven talked about sharing more and perhaps inappropri-

TABLE 4. Acculturation Resistance

Property	Who	Example
resistance	AliceE	<p>“And I suppose I’m not very keen on the behavior where I see, sometimes in the Deaf community, where people have a lot of personal baggage, and a lot of personal anger toward people who hear.”</p> <p>“Maybe I am not very patient with what sometimes I view as the ‘crab’ theory. That I see in the Deaf community.”</p>
	BeaE	“I don’t think ‘I-love-you cookies’ are [part of the] Deaf culture. Sorry.” [Laughs]
	CarolE	“Like the anger . . . the hurt that becomes anger. I’m not interested in taking that on.”
	DeniseE	“So that automatic ‘I accept this as truth because my friend told me’ . . . is something I don’t embrace. In fact, maybe to a fault sometimes.”
	ErinE	<p>“I have actually tried consciously not to get sucked into . . . you know, gossip, that isn’t . . . positive or constructive about people.”</p> <p>“I’ve . . . I have to, as an interpreter, keep my boundaries. Keep aware of the boundaries between professional relationships.”</p> <p>“I went to every event [in the Deaf community]. And consciously pulled back at some point . . .”</p>

ate information in English (AdamN, BarryN, ChristineN, DarleneN, DeniseE, ElizabethN, ErinE). For further examples see table 5.

Hearing Line

The participants described coming up against what could be considered the “hearing line.” Most of them believed that society viewed Deaf people as having a disability or a handicap (AdamN, BarryN, DeniseE, ElizabethN, GloriaN) or from a “pathological” (BeaE, BarryN), “deficit” (ElizabethN), or “paternalistic” perspective (BarryN, CarolE, DarleneN, FrancineN). The public “would scoff” if told about Deaf culture because people in general believed “there’s no culture in disability” (ElizabethN). BarryN added, “There’s a big crowd wanting to make Deaf people hearing people and not realizing that they are fine, being who they are, and what they are.”

TABLE 5. Second-Language Interference

Property	Who	Example
L2 interference	AdamN	“The nose twitch for a ‘yes, I agree’ or ‘I understand.’ I do it all the time. My friends don’t know what I’m talking about.”
	BarryN	“Since I started learning sign language . . . I have become more blunt in my hearing life.”
	ChristineN	“Now I feel like I need to know [everything] . . . I feel like I don’t understand English anymore!”
	DarleneN	“I tell everybody when I have to go to the wash-room. When I’m leaving the room. Everybody needs to know.” “I find sometimes I speak in ASL discourse now. Even though somehow I can’t do it in ASL. But, you know, I do the whole repetition, or expansion. . . . Well, you know the negation. It’s this, not this. I will do that in English. But, before, I would just say, ‘It’s not this.’”
	DeniseE	“If I . . . say ‘no’ to an invitation or can’t do something, I always seem to . . . with my hearing friends, I always seem to offer a big explanation of why I can’t do it or what I am doing or where I am going. Whereas a lot of hearing people don’t do that. They just say, ‘Oh I have a conflict.’”
	ElizabethN	“I only noticed it because sometimes it will cross over into my hearing friends, who don’t know anything about sign language or Deaf people. And they’ll be, like, ‘Why are you telling me that?’ Or I will go on about a story and probably overexplain it.”
	ErinE	“I always feel compelled to . . . tell a story from the beginning to the end. You know, in chronological order, with a fair amount of detail. Sometimes to the chagrin of the audience, like my [offspring].”

Five participants (three experts and two novices) (AdamN, AliceE, CarolE, ChristineN, ErinE) suggested that acceptance of ASL and Deaf culture was growing and that younger people seemed more receptive than older people. For example, more Deaf people were beginning to appear in the media (AdamN, AliceE, CarolE, ChristineN). According to AliceE, the “tremendous interest in learning ASL showed a shift in

attitude.” College-credit courses were available in ASL; interpreters and captioning were appearing on television; children with cochlear implants were learning ASL; and some provincial governments were funding Deaf students who were attending Gallaudet (AliceE).

When asked about ASL, more than half (eight) believed that the public rejected it as a legitimate language (BeaE, BarryN, ChristineN, DarleneN, ElizabethN, ErinE, FrancineN, GloriaN) and instead considered it either a manual form of English (ChristineN, DeniseE, ErinE, FrancineN, GloriaN) or a universal form of sign language (BarrN, GloriaN). People were “very shocked that there is grammar, and that it’s on the face” (BarryN). ChristineN explained, “A friend asked me why was it so hard to learn ASL, and how many signs could there be anyway?” ErinE mentioned a similar misconception: “The classic question is ‘How long did it take you to learn that?’ and they expect you to say a couple of weeks, actually.” On the other hand, Deaf people who could speak were looked up to (ChristineN). ErinE explained, “I think it is very common for people to think . . . even though they might not say it in so many words . . . think that it [ASL] is inferior to speaking. That Deaf people who have learned to speak have done something superior to Deaf people who haven’t.”

When asked whether these attitudes affected their use of ASL, all twelve said “No.” However, inasmuch as the use of ASL was negatively viewed, six were initially conscious of using their hands or the facial grammar of ASL with non-Deaf friends or in public (AliceE, BarryN, CarolE, DarleneN, ErinE, FrancineN). AliceE found herself signing “low on a subway” and in another context was told to sit at the back of a conference room, out of sight while interpreting. In Canada, she had seen university professors request that interpreters sit at the back of classrooms and lawyers had refused to pay for interpreters (AliceE).

Although the “hearing line” stigmatized the use of ASL, it paradoxically gave the participants social status. The public held them in regard for learning ASL and working with Deaf people. They had been ascribed the role of “helper” (BarryN, DarleneN, DeniseE, ElizabethN, FrancineN) or “teacher” (BeaE, BarryN). Such comments may have come from the older generation of “60 plus” (BarryN). Interpreters were “looked up to” as “experts” (ChristineN) or told that what they did was “wonderful” (DeniseE), “neat” (CarolE), “cool,” or interesting

(ElizabethN, GloriaN). DeniseE described it this way: “It is almost like it’s got this sort of cool factor instead of a stigma.”

Bilingual Fatigue

Six participants were exhausted from having to debunk the myths naïve people held about ASL and Deaf people. They were weary from trying to convince them that ASL was a language (BarryN, DeniseE, ErinE) and tired of explaining their role (BeaE, ChristineN, DeniseE) or being an ally (AliceE). AliceE talked about how “many of us get tired and burnt out.” DeniseE said, “It gets kind of tiring, trying to explain it.” BeaE noted in her interview that “I can only beat my head against a wall so many times before my head starts to hurt.” In a follow-up discussion, ChristineN again said that she had “heard lots [of interpreters] say they were sick and tired of explaining to hearing people” but she also said, “I wonder how Deaf [people] feel about it? Tired, too?”

ErinE recounted the politics in the field that led her to be less involved in social events in the Deaf community, whereas, in the beginning, she “was blissfully oblivious to most of the politics for the first few years :-).” BarryN talked about how, perhaps because of fatigue, it was necessary to take sides: “Whose side of the fence are you on? Are you on the Deaf side? Are you on the hearing side? Are you neutral? Is there such a thing as ‘neutral’?”

Again possibly because of fatigue, ElizabethN said the following when asked what advice she would give a hearing person learning to sign: “Run . . . run! [Laughs] No, I’m kidding.” [Laughs again]

In summary, the participants seemed to have run into some opposition or the antithesis of their beliefs when they began their journey into biculturalism. They learned about values and behaviors that they believed were part of Deaf culture and resisted adopting some of them. They found that learning ASL negatively affected their use of English, their first language. They also confronted the public’s negative views of Deaf people and ASL, which paradoxically gave them status but led some to become fatigued from defending a cultural perspective.

Synthesis/Composition

Finally, there was evidence that the participants had reached a stage of synthesis or composition, where they had come to a more nuanced

understanding of their identity and changes in their behaviors and values.

Need for Balance

Both the novices and the experts said they needed to find a balance (AdamN, AliceE, BeaE, DarleneN, DeniseE, ErinE) in their lives. DarleneN described this need as follows: “My interests, um, once getting into school and the [Deaf] community have kind of narrowed to include only the community. . . . I lived and breathed interpreting . . . I lost the ‘DarleneN’ part of things.” ErinE described this feeling as “overdosing” on everything related to the Deaf community. AliceE explained, “And I think that certainly one of the lessons I’ve learned over the last 10 years is to try and find a bit more balance between both worlds [hearing and Deaf].”

TABLE 6. Specific Behavioral Changes

Property	Who	Example
a need for more interpersonal space	AdamN, BeaE, DeniseE	“That whole arm’s-length-away kind of thing.” (BeaE)
more physically demonstrative	ChristineN, ErinE, FrancineN	“Greeting people with a hug and a kiss.” (ErinE) “I tried to hug an employer I had just met. I started to reach for it, but then stepped back!” (ChristineN)
more expressive while talking	AdamN, AliceE, BarryN, ErinE, FrancineN	
need for eye contact	AdamN, AliceE, BeaE, BarryN, ElizabethN, FrancineN	“I can’t stand it when people don’t look at me when they’re talking.” (AliceE) “[W]hen eye gaze is broken, I feel like the person is not paying attention.” (FrancineN)
changes in attention-getting behaviors	AdamN, CarolE, ChristineN, ElizabethN, FrancineN, GloriaN	hand waving (ChristineN, ElizabethN); flashing lights or running after people (ChristineN); tapping shoulders (AdamN)

Behavioral Changes

Both the novices and the experts had adopted what they believed were Deaf cultural behaviors. Table 6 outlines a number of these.

Code Mixing

Everyone in this study began to code-mix (sign and speak) at some point during the interviews, a potential behavioral change. When asked about this, they said they usually code-mixed with other bilinguals (BeaE, CarolE, DarleneN, DeniseE, ElizabethN, ErinE, FrancineN). They did this to discuss interpreting (AdamN, DarleneN) or emotional issues (AliceE, CarolE), to describe something (AdamN, DarleneN), to emphasize something (BeaE), to refer to things in space (AdamN, BarryN), to find the right English word for something (ErinE), to work through things (AdamN, AliceE, CarolE), or to relax after a long period of signing (DeniseE).

Hearing Identity

Some discovered a “hearing” identity (ChristineN) or said they were no longer just a “hearing person” (AliceE). AliceE explained it as someone who knew a lot about Deaf people and about the challenges they faced. However, she found “...I’m not 100% hearing. You know [a famous interpreter educator] sometimes talks about us as we are the ‘spoiled’ hearing people.” ChristineN added that while she was “hearing” like her family and friends, she had a different level of interest in the Deaf community or interpreting.

Several said they were not experts on Deaf culture and not culturally Deaf (AdamN, BeaE, ChristineN, FrancineN). AliceE instead described it as having “a comfortable place” in the Deaf community. DeniseE and FrancineN described it as an “ally” but not part of the “inner core.”

Signer or Interpreter

Interpreters and bilingual signers were seen as having different roles. Deaf people expected interpreters to be fluent but forgave signers their mistakes (BarryN, BeaE, ChristineN, FrancineN). BeaE described this as the expectation of “a perfect job” of interpreting all of the time,

and FrancineN said she was expected to have a “greater understanding of the subtleties of each language,” including the “nuances, implications.” There was also a fear of being labeled dysfluent (BarryN, BeaE, ChristineN), and BeaE said that people “don’t think that we [interpreters] struggle with stuff and that it all comes absolutely naturally.”

Unlike signers, interpreters could have their reputations “marred” (AdamN, BarryN, ChristineN) and needed the Deaf community’s approval for some of their actions (DarleneN). A more stringent set of ethics existed for interpreters (BarryN, ChristineN). DarleneN commented, “It sounds as though I am looking for approval, but I am not. I don’t want to be a person . . . ‘that name’ that floats around . . . that no one wants to work with. Maybe that is approval?” GloriaN tried to be an ally, “much as in any other profession.”

Deaf Peers

To better understand their bicultural identity, the participants were asked to describe their closest Deaf friends or acquaintances. Eleven had Deaf peers with a postsecondary education or who were pursuing a degree. Five said their close Deaf friends had graduate degrees or were pursuing graduate work. Nine of the interpreters described their Deaf friends as “middle class,” “upper middle class,” or working in “high-paying” (AdamN) or “stable” jobs (FrancineN). Four knew Deaf professionals (AdamN, AliceE, CarolE, DeniseE), work colleagues (DeniseE), or Deaf people of “elevated status in the Deaf community because of their jobs and because of their education and their abilities” (ErinE). Only BeaE, BarryN and ChristineN characterized the income of their closest Deaf friends as “low,” and only BeaE stated that her Deaf friends were not well educated or well employed.

The participants advised new signers to attend Deaf community events only if they had a genuine interest (DeniseE, ElizabethN, GloriaN). DeniseE, for example, didn’t care for sports and thus didn’t attend Deaf sporting events; she did, however, go to Deaf art exhibits. GloriaN explained this as follows: “But I often found that inserting yourself somewhere where naturally you wouldn’t be, is a little bit odd” (GloriaN). Similarly, ElizabethN explained as follows:

It took me a little while to realize that I didn’t have to be friends with somebody because they were Deaf or assume they had my

best interests in mind. I soon realized that someone could be an [expletive] *and* be Deaf. It was at this point I think my role and self-identity in the community changed for the better. (ElizabethN)

Third Culture or New Identity?

Six of the participants brought up or supported the concept of a “third culture” or an interpreter identity. ChristineN described this as follows: “But there is Deaf culture, and there is hearing culture, and there is interpreter culture Some people say there is a third culture, and if you are an interpreter you are halfway between both.” ErinE explains this third culture as follows:

[I]t is not a hearing gathering. It’s not a Deaf gathering. It is a gathering of hearing and Deaf but certain hearing and Deaf people, the hearing people who are comfortable with Deaf people and the Deaf people who are comfortable with hearing people. So it is almost like, in those circumstances, there is a third set of values and norms that are in place. The rules for interaction aren’t exactly like hearing rules, but they aren’t exactly like Deaf rules. They are something that comes out of combining both. (ErinE)

Four, however, questioned the concept. AdamN thought it “was interesting” but characterized it as “a bond,” and GloriaN remarked, “I think that any profession has its own set of commonalities.” AliceE asked, “Who can claim it?” and wondered whether interpreters had their own language, traditions, and values. She did not want people to uncritically accept a third culture and explained as follows:

I think just learning to interpret between two languages and two cultures, um, can’t help but shape me in really different ways, as opposed to being monolingual. So I think there is a whole piece on . . . maybe some pieces around social identity that come with using two languages and having a foot in two . . . two communities. (AliceE)

CarolE commented that “it is probably like any bilingual identity. Maybe we’re not so special, you know, in that sense.” As an example, she added, “Maybe the Arab Canadians and the Italian Canadians, they’ve got it, too,” or their offspring do (CarolE). ChristineN found the comparison to Arab Canadians interesting but wondered, “We are not Deaf. So are we hearing first or Deaf first?” (ChristineN).

Parallel Societies

Evidence of the formation of “parallel societies” has been documented (Kymlicka 2003). When asked about their social interactions, all twelve of the participants reported having spent time with bilingual/bicultural peers, for example, in their provincial interpreting chapter. BeaE wondered whether any of her friends were *not* interpreters and could think of just two.

The participants could relate to bilingual/bicultural peers (ChristineN, DeniseE, ErinE, FrancineN) inasmuch as they shared the same goals (FrancineN). DeniseE liked being with others “who really get it, rather than hearing people, [to whom] I have to do so much explaining about why I might be doing something or why it might bother me. It almost loses its impact.” FrancineN did not want to spend time with friends who had “a bad attitude about interpreting or deafness or who thought they knew everything” or were “closed minded.” Trust (ChristineN) and confidentiality were also issues (BeaE, ChristineN).

Parallel societies may have been a response to involvement in mixed groups that had no common language. Five specifically did not enjoy such groups, and eleven felt a responsibility to ensure successful communication and would end up interpreting. BarryN was uncomfortable when there was unequal access: “I just want everyone to be on the same page.” ErinE said, “It’s not that fun, for example, to be the only woman in a social setting that knows both ASL and English.”

Seven of the participants talked about speaking and signing simultaneously in mixed groups, but many did not believe they were able to do this well. Ten would communicate in one language and then repeat the comment in their other language, but no one seemed happy with this method, either. Two would ask their friends to interpret or invite friends who were interpreters (BeaE, ChristineN). AliceE recommended hiring interpreters, and AdamN would do something such as “go to the bathroom, if necessary,” to take a break. ElizabethN and ChristineN would simply continue to sign, but later ChristineN worried that doing so might “alienate hearing people,” who AdamN thought might feel oppressed.

TABLE 7. New Values

Property	Who	Example
need clear communication	BarryN, ChristineN, DeniseE, ElizabethN, FrancineN, GloriaN	“But you realize how people don’t say what they mean. People are very vague, intentional or not.” (ChristineN)
shared sense of humor	BeaE, ChristineN, DarleneN, DeniseE	“We have some of that ‘in the trenches’ humor that we can share with each other.” (DeniseE) “I tell everybody when I have to go to the washroom. Everybody needs to know.” (DarleneN) “I realized it [the preceding comment] was an inside joke, and it made me laugh out loud!” (ChristineN)
self-critical	BeaE, BarryN, ChristineN, DarleneN, GloriaN, FrancineN	“My own worst critic.” (BeaE, GloriaN) “I will never walk away and say I did a great job. But the access was provided, and they all knew what was going on. The process worked. I will always leave and say it was awful. I will never leave an assignment and say I feel good about that. Never!” (GloriaN) “I look forward to going to work, I want to work, and I feel excited to work. I rarely feel good about my work, which is odd, to be so excited about it.” (DarleneN) “I can see myself saying that in 10 or 20 years, too. It’s a really warped dichotomy. To be excited about what you feel crappy about!” (ChristineN)
additive bilingual view	AliceE, BeaE, BarryN, CarolE, ChristineN, DarleneN, ElizabethN, ErinE, FrancineN, GloriaN	Learning ASL enhanced my knowledge of English. (AliceE, BeaE, BarryN, ChristineN, DarleneN, DeniseE, ElizabethN, ErinE, FrancineN, GloriaN) I ignore the stigma associated with using ASL in public. (AliceE, BeaE, BarryN, CarolE, ChristineN, DarleneN, ErinE, FrancineN) “I see language as a human right.” (AliceE, ChristineN) “It’s [learning ASL] rounded me out. It’s given me the other half of my personality, which I don’t think would have been developed if I didn’t have that exposure.” (BeaE) “[I] have a better understanding of how the body works because of using classifiers and physical descriptions in medical interpreting.” (DeniseE) “Definitely more comfortable talking in front of groups and using English in a variety of situations.” (ErinE)

Values

As a result of becoming bicultural, the participants had developed new values. Table 7 outlines some of these, such as the novices' expressed need for clear communication, a shared sense of humor, a propensity to be self-critical about their interpretation work, and an additive view of bilingualism.

With regard to being self-critical, ChristineN believed that she and other interpreters "put an enormous amount of pressure on ourselves to . . . become . . . as fluent as possible overnight," but she knows now that "there is the rest of my life to learn [ASL]." BeaE said that eventually she had to come to some level of acceptance: "I had to be happy with it once in a while, or I would never sleep at night!"

Entrepreneurs versus Allies. In a discussion of values, three of the experts (AliceE, CarolE, DeniseE) implied that newer interpreters were motivated by employment opportunities to learn ASL, and four novices stated that learning ASL had led them to a new career (ChristineN, DarleneN, FrancineN, GloriaN). However, three experts had also learned ASL due to their employment with Deaf people (AliceE, BeaE, CarolE). Five of the novices (AdamN, BarryN, ChristineN, ElizabethN, GloriaN), however, disagreed. They found the work demanding and the pay low (ChristineN, ElizabethN, GloriaN) but continued to interpret out of a sense of enjoyment (ChristineN, ElizabethN). GloriaN wondered, "How can you continue doing it" without making a living? BarryN concurred and added, "I think it was probably true back then, too." AdamN also suggested that newer interpreters "might not have that identity in 6 months" (after having started to work).

Deaf People as Positive Foil. Finally, when asked how they and the world benefited from Deaf people, all of the participants reported that they had come to see Deaf people as a mirror of their own lives and as a positive foil. Table 8 outlines what the participants believe they learned from the Deaf community in this role.

Deaf people challenged the dominant ways of thinking and had led them to be introspective about their own culture (AliceE, BeaE, ElizabethN, ErinE, GloriaN). GloriaN, for example, did not know about her own community, the "hearing community," until she started

TABLE 8. Deaf People as Positive Foil

Property	Who	Example
to understand “difference”	AliceE, AdamN, BeaE, CarolE, ChristineN, DarleneN, ElizabethN, ErinE, FrancineN, GloriaN	<p>“But I think, without them . . . again it is so easy to fall into ‘group think’ about what our dominant paradigm is and what a dominant monolingual life looks like.” (AliceE)</p> <p>“Their perception of what we do, as hearing people . . . it’s a lot more acute than what our own perception is of what we do.” (BeaE)</p> <p>“Because it makes you question your own, it makes you question everything about yourself.” (ChristineN)</p>
a new way to look at language enhanced diversity	AdamN, AliceE, DeniseE	<p>“Where people have found a way of expressing every kind of concept possible in a nonauditory or nonvocal way.” (DeniseE)</p>
	AliceE, BeaE, ChristineN, ElizabethN, ErinE, FrancineN, GloriaN	<p>“We are not islands, and we can’t survive on our own.” (BeaE)</p> <p>“I think that the world benefits from having diversity.” (GloriaN)</p>
new collectivist orientation	AdamN, AliceE, BarryN, BeaE, CarolE, ChristineN, DarleneN, ElizabethN, ErinN, FrancineN, GloriaN	<p>“I think I would be incredibly . . . lonely in an individualistic life experience.” (AliceE)</p> <p>I have a duty to give back. (ChristineN, ErinE, FrancineN)</p> <p>“I learned the value of reciprocity” (ChristineN, FrancineN); group consensus (ChristineN, GloriaN); equality (BarryN, CarolE, DarleneN); forgiveness (BarryN, CarolE); the value of advocacy (BarryN, GloriaN)</p>
inclusion and disability	BeaE, ChristineN, GloriaN	<p>“If they weren’t there telling us that we weren’t being inclusive and equal, we would think we were.” (BeaE)</p>
privilege	AliceE, ChristineN, GloriaN	<p>“And I probably took for granted up—until this point in my life—that communication with my parents and family was never—I never had any barriers.” (GloriaN)</p>

working with Deaf people. Some considered Deaf people as role models (BarryN, GloriaN) and were inspired by them (BarryN, ChristineN), especially their ability to resist becoming victims (BarryN). AliceE said that her views about Buddhism, organized religion, homophobia, and discrimination were “absolutely dramatically learned from my work with an ASL-using community.” Remarking on what she had learned from the Deaf community, ErinE said, “Sometimes . . . a topic of conversation is ‘What if there was no such thing as Deaf people?’ That would be tragic. I think that would be a huge loss.”

Discussion

Thesis/Position

Having looked at the data, I turn now to the implications of what was noted in the interviews. In response to the first research question, the interpreters’ comments indicated a dialectic of moving through the thesis stage, where they had some presuppositions about ASL, to the antithesis stage, where they had to reconcile various, new experiences and views. Finally, they arrived at the synthesis stage, which brought them a more nuanced understanding of their own subjectivity.

The properties of the thesis stage included false assumptions, the deaf-as-disability viewpoint, and tabula rasa, all of which spoke to the interpreters’ original expectations with regard to learning ASL. Some either did not equate learning ASL with meeting Deaf people or thought it meant simply learning to fingerspell. A few believed that ASL was universal and were surprised to find an actual community with its own culture. They also expected black-and-white answers to their questions about ASL and Deaf culture.

Antithesis/Opposition

Once embarked on the road to becoming bilingual, the participants encountered experiences that conflicted with their presuppositions (the antithesis stage). Some noted values or behaviors they believed were part of the Deaf community, such as gossip or anger toward the majority, which they resisted adopting. Others did not choose to support the “crab” theory which involved the disparagement of others for self-advancement by Deaf community members or tardiness due to a hypothetical “Deaf standard time.” The novices in particular experienced some first-language interference as they believed that aspects

of ASL were appearing in their spoken language or they had become more self-aware or critical of their use of English.

With regard to the “hearing line” (Krentz 2007), the participants believed that ASL had a lower status than English. For example, the public believed that ASL had no grammar or was a representation of English, it was easy to learn, and required only learning to fingerspell. Many felt the majority saw Deaf people as having a disability and lacking a culture. The participants also believed they were considered “helpers,” an identity that they did not want to accept.

Another property of antithesis was bilingual fatigue: The participants were tired of having to champion ASL as a language and dispel the myths held by the majority population. This meant taking sides at times and also accepting the role of interpreter by Deaf participants, perhaps contributing to a sense of tiredness. The literature characterizes a similar experience as vicarious trauma due to overidentification with a minority group (Harvey 2003).

Synthesis/Composition

Having gone from thesis to antithesis, the participants had then progressed to synthesis and achieved a richer conception of who they were. They had discovered a “hearing” identity, but one that was different both from that of people who had not learned ASL and from a Deaf identity. This new hearing identity included subjectivity as an interpreter, which was different from the subjectivity of a language user (signer). A signer, unlike an interpreter, was free to be a friend of Deaf people, did not have to consider Deaf people’s goals or wishes, and was often forgiven for a lack of fluency in ASL.

With regard to the Deaf community, they would not accept the designation of “expert” on Deaf culture, but they also did not describe themselves as a visitor or a transient (Mendoza 1989). Instead, they had a place outside the inner core. Their position included a need for balance between Deaf community events and other aspects of their lives, perhaps as a way to deal with bilingual fatigue (Watson 1987) and was a life lesson or parable that they wanted to share (McCabe, Capron, and Peterson 1991).

Several used the term *third culture*, a phenomenon noted in the literature (Bienvenu 1987; Cuéllar, Arnold, and Maldonado 1995), pos-

sibly in an attempt to integrate the two cultures (Berry 2003). However, at least four of the participants did not believe the third culture was a culture per se, as there were no clear boundaries defining who could be a member of the group and the third culture had no unique language. Perhaps the concept of identity (rather than culture) might more effectively delineate this new subjectivity.

Becoming both bicultural and an interpreter had led to several changes in the participants' values. Some noted a shared sense of humor and a new tendency to disclose more personal information. They felt they had become more collectivist and community oriented, as well as responsible for ensuring communication in mixed groups. Although this identity included a self-deprecating attitude with regard to language mastery, the interpreters also recognized the need for some level of satisfaction with their work, described in the literature on narrative inquiry as a need for fulfillment and for creating a past of importance (McCabe, Capron, and Peterson 1991).

Most of the interpreters had an altered view of language, noted under the property of additive bilingualism. In fact, several of them now saw it as a human right. They were also more reflective of their own language and identified their need for clear communication.

With regard to values, the participants stressed the need for authentic relationships with Deaf people. For example, most of them reported that they chose to spend time with Deaf peers with similar interests or a comparable educational or socioeconomic background, something that is also noted in the literature (Cooper, Rose, and Mason 2003).

Several behavioral changes have been noted, including the need for eye contact while communicating, code mixing with other bilinguals, and a desire for "third-space" events (in this case, gatherings of bilinguals). The result is the development of parallel societies (Kymlicka 2003), whose behavioral norms and values are a synthesis of both Deaf and non-Deaf worlds and reflect the adoption of a multicultural or segregational orientation (Berry 2003).

View of Second-Language Community

Finally, this study examines the ways in which the participants viewed Deaf people and ASL. The interpreters in this study described a

transformation in their conceptualization of both: At first, either Deaf people and ASL were absent from their thoughts, or the interpreters thought of Deaf people and ASL from a disability point of view. Gradually, however, the interpreters acquired a cultural viewpoint or a multicultural perspective of both Deaf people and ASL (Berry 2003). For example, they indicated a belief in a Deaf identity and their own lack of belonging to this subjectivity. As mentioned earlier, they also explained how they had found themselves fatigued by defending ASL and Deaf culture to the majority population.

With regard to considering Deaf people as a positive foil, the participants reported that their lives had been enriched by knowing Deaf people. They had attained a deeper understanding of difference, multiculturalism, and inclusion and had become more introspective about their own language, culture, and privilege. The Deaf community was a role model for collectivist living, forgiveness, and withstanding life's challenges. The participants seemed to echo what Ladd (2008) writes about Deafhood: that Deaf people have much to teach the hearing world, such as the ability to communicate across cultures, and that Deaf people were divinely created and have equal status with others.

Conclusion

Several conclusions can be drawn from this study. This cohort of 12 individuals revealed evidence that a dialectic of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis is useful in describing the development of their bilingual identities. The process was ongoing and relational to the Deaf community and the broader, English-speaking majority and no doubt will continue. A hearing culture *per se* might not exist, but a bicultural, hearing identity in relation to Deaf people does appear to be present.

By becoming bicultural and adopting such an identity, the participants have experienced many benefits. As noted in the literature, they have found a new and fulfilling career (Lazaruk 2007). They have become more introspective about their own culture and language use and the power of language rights (Clément, Baker, and MacIntyre 2003). They have learned to be sensitive to other cultures and to difference in society (Capirci et al. 1998; Marilyn 2001; Rubinfeld et al.

2007). As they talked about how they have learned many life lessons from Deaf people, it was clear that they have also come to challenge the paradigm of disability ascribed to the Deaf community (Ladd 2008). To sum up their experience and to quote ErinE again, “What if there was no such thing as Deaf people? That would be tragic. I think that would be a huge loss.”

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