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A Case for Profanity Education and a Collection of Strategies used by sign language interpreters

Kelly Murphy

Abstract

Sign language interpreters are language professionals who experience all aspects of life, from birth to death, of their consumers. They work with the most formal to the very intimate of registers and everything in between. One particular aspect of language that deserves further scrutiny is profanity. It is by its very nature extremely powerful, commonly misunderstood, and interpreters do not have the luxury of ignoring this class of words. It is to an interpreter’s benefit to understand this aspect of language and class of words on a more conscious level, be able to analyze his/her own filters and biases, have access to strategies for managing utterances that contain profanity, and be aware that cultural differences do exist. Interpreters from across the United States and Canada were given a common education and then put their learning into practice. The data from these shareshops indicate by providing profanity education to sign language interpreters, there is potential for improvement in service delivery.

Literature Review

Interpreters are facilitators of communication and mediators between two cultures. As they interact with these separate worlds, conflicts and miscommunications can arise. Profanity is a hot button for interpreters as individuals, as a female dominated profession, societal perceptions of women using profanity, the demand for professional behavior while working, and because they pursue the goal of message equivalency.

Profanity as a Function of Language

Human communication allows an arbitrary system of sounds or symbols to represent thoughts and emotions. As a
way to express the intense emotions, profanity is a distinct class of words that is ever evolving, restricted and powerful. Profanity:

serves the emotional needs of the speaker and [profanity] affects listeners emotionally. [Profanity] permits a speaker to express strong emotions and/or produce an emotional impact on a listener. The impact can be positive, as in joking and sexual enticement, or it can be negative, as in name calling and sexual harassment. (Jay, 2000, p.10)

We have developed many terms to talk about this class of words – profanity, obscenity, cursing, swearing, foul language, dirty words, “four letter words,” and colorful language. For simplicity, in this text, the term “profanity” will be used.

To be considered profanity, the words or phrase must have two aspects, the power to offend and it must be restricted, or taboo, by the culture surrounding it. The ability for language to cause emotional harm, either in a speech act or in print, is a defining quality of this class of words. In a recent study, it has been shown that even printed profanities have the ability to elicit a physical response, or emotional arousal, without being directed at the reader. (Jay, Caldwell-Harris, & King, 2008)

The old children’s rhyme “sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me” couldn’t be further from the truth. These words can and do cause lasting harm when used as a weapon.

The taboo quality of this type of language is dictated by the culture and society within which it exists. The strength of the taboo against profanity is a positive feedback cycle - in that there are two aspects of the cycle, offensiveness and avoidance.
As people avoid using profanity, due to religion or government or the rules of society, it increases its power to offend. The more offensive a particular word is considered, the less likely it is to be used (Figure 1). (Jay, 2000; Wajnryb, 2005) It is through overuse that a particular word or phrase loses power. In the United States, though many people would identify f**k as the most offensive, the most offensive profanity is actually c**t, a word that degrades women or associates a negative feminine aspect to males it is used against. (Jay, 2000) The author had the unique opportunity to witness a spontaneous mass response to profanity, in a theater playing “Inside Man,” starring Clive Owen and Jodie Foster. Foster’s character dealt in networking, favor currying and blackmail. At one point in the film, her character is blackmailing a political figure. As a response of resignation to her terms, the political figure calls her a “magnificent c**t.” The majority of theater, full of adults, inhaled strongly and then laughed or giggled nervously. This response was not fitting for the context of the scene.

In recent history, we can see the changing standards in broadcast television and radio as case in point for the taboo cycle. Settled in 1978, the radio station that aired George Carlin’s “Seven Words” monologue lost its suit against the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) in the Supreme Court. The FCC was confirmed in its right to “regulate indecency.” Many of the words on the original “list” are now used on broadcast television without sanction from the FCC. This is a radical departure from film guidelines from 1927, which restricted words like “Christ, h**l, d**n, and gawd.” (Jay, 1992)

Offensiveness is the general label applied by the surrounding culture. Offendedness denotes the audience’s sensitivity to the utterance. (Jay, 2000) For example, the word f**k has a strong offensiveness according to society, but how a nun or a teenage male react would be quite different. Interpreters not only manage the societal perception of an utterance, but also take into account the audience reaction when assembling a target message.

Like other aspects of language, profanity obeys syntax and grammar rules. These terms can be used connotatively and denotatively, as a proposition or non-proposition, and they follow pronominal adjective ordering. Denotative meaning is the concrete object or term that the word refers to, connotative
meaning is more abstract. For instance, the term a**hole can mean anus denotatively or worthless male connotatively. (Jay, 2000) Profanity can appear propositionally, as a premeditated speech act, or non-propositionally, as an uncontrollable outburst, as with Tourette Syndrome and dementia patients. (Jay & Janschewitz, 2008) Pronominal adjective ordering means that the more literal the meaning, the closer the adjective should be to the noun. Jay’s (2000) example, the sh**ty little boy and little sh**ty boy are understood to mean “bad” little boy and little boy covered in feces respectively. The utterance of profanity follows a specific production sequence:

First, there is an antecedent to [profanity], something that causes the emotion. Second, there is the resultant feeling or felt emotion, a reaction to the antecedent. Finally there is cognition, or an evaluation regarding what is happening in the scenario. [Profanity] is not merely ballistic or automatic; it is an emotional reaction that unfolds over time. Automatic or reflexive [profanity] occurs more quickly than strategic [profanity] but both forms are meaningful and purposeful. Herein lies the mindfulness of [profanity]. One can be upset and call a woman a wh*re but one does not call a suitcase a wh*re … . Even the reflexive is semantically appropriate. (Jay, 2000, p.61)

Most of what we know today about profanity and its function as an aspect of language has been discovered in the last forty years, with a steep increase in the last two decades. Prior to this, the very taboo nature of the topic inhibited it from being a research subject for linguists. Additionally, linguists attempt to analyze language without emotion – and the very essence of profanity is emotion. Prior works have been either from a historical perspective (Allan & Burridge, 1991; Hughes, 1991; Montagu, 1967), from a dictionary-like format (Rawson, 1989; Sagarin, 1962), or irreverent (Johnson, 2004). Fields such as psycho-linguistics and socio-linguistics approach language from a more holistic approach, accounting for the neurological, societal or cultural factors influencing an utterance.

Interestingly, profanity has been found to be processed by the brain differently than non-profane language. Emotion arousal words are processed through the amygdalar-hippocampal
pathway, whereas non-arousal words are processed through the hippocampal-prefrontal pathway. (Kensinger & Corkin, 2004) The function of the amygdala in the brain is for emotion processing and defensive behaviors. (Dewey, 2007) The lexicon of profanity is stored in the right hemisphere, as evidenced by left brain damage (LBD) patients being able to use profanity non-propositionally. Other disorders such as Tourettes, aphasia and dementia in Alzheimer’s show unique presentations of profanity, despite difficulty with or damage to normal language production. (Jay, 2000)

We know that children, with normal hearing, begin acquiring the lexicon of profanity as early as they pick up non-profane language, in the toddler years. (Jay, King, & Duncan, 2006) Like other aspects of language, this learning originates from parents and peers. Gender roles in profanity become apparent when children begin attending school. (Jay, 2000) Perhaps starting as mimicry, the reaction of their guardians causes this class of words to gain “long-lasting emotional connotations.” (Jay, King, & Duncan, 2006)

“Young children and non-native speakers require time and experience to attain an adult native speaker’s knowledge of what is offensive or rude.” (Kasper, as cited in Jay & Janschewitz, 2007, p.269) Roughly ninety percent of deaf, deaf-blind and hard of hearing children have hearing parents. (Neisser, 1990) Many of these children did not begin language exposure until they attended school. Residential schools and day schools offer an opportunity for immersion in sign, either through the curriculum and/or from child to child transmission, if signing is restricted. Mainstream settings, particularly those where the deaf, deaf-blind or hard or hearing student is isolated, offer limited language modeling – primarily from the interpreter or teacher of the deaf. Some mainstream settings collect the deaf, deaf-blind and hard of hearing students into a group, allowing for peer to peer exposure. In homes where sign language is the child’s first language, it would seem that these children have the greatest advantage to learn a profanity lexicon. (Lane, Hoffmeister & Bahan, 1996) Add to this that their parents, if deaf themselves might not have received enough exposure to develop a fluent lexicon, how profanity is used and developed within the signing community is unknown. The acquisition of a profanity lexicon by deaf, deaf-blind and hard of hearing children needs to be researched further. At this date, the
author is not aware of any study pertaining to these topics.

In sign language, there is a distinction between American Sign Language and Signed English, a manual coding of English, and it would stand to reason that a similar division would exist for profanity in sign. It could be that signs that interpreters know as profanity are truly Signed English Correlates, a manual code for English profanity and a separate lexicon exists for American Sign Language profanity. More research needs to be done on this topic. Branching off the work of Jay, studying deaf, deaf-blind, or hard of hearing Touretters might lend some clues, as this syndrome is culturally bound in its manifestation and varies from country to country. (Jay, 2005)

Societal Perceptions vs. Reality

Since World War I, profanity has been considered the realm of men and manhood. (Burnham, 1993) Even today, the idea persists that profanity is not “ladylike” speech, instead women would turn to weaker forms of profanity for their emotional outlet. (Coates, 1986) In older times, women were expected to weep when men would have used profanity. According to Montagu (1967), weeping is the most childlike stage of emotional outbursts. The opinion of Lakoff (1975) follows the same lines, “women don’t use off-color or indelicate expressions; women are the experts at euphemism.” (p.51) It was considered improper for men to use profanity around women.

Perhaps due to the women’s liberation movement, women’s use of profanity appeared to be on the rise. Bailey and Timm (1976) found, with a self-reporting survey, that women use profanity less than men, the frequency ratio being 6.3 to 10.2 times, respectively. In their research they came across a surprising factor, that women age 31-35 used stronger profanity more frequently than their younger counterparts. They remarked that this might be due to their affiliation or sympathy with the women’s liberation movement. Their research briefly went into the idea of how the audience affects word choice. The key question is if they would swear in front of their mothers or the opposite sex. For the most part, all of the participating women said they would soften or abstain from profanity use in these situations. From their research it is clear that audience has a significant effect on word choice.

Staley’s work in 1978 found that men and women’s profanity use was virtually the same, with a frequency of 5.96 times
for men to 5.64 for women. The study looked deeper into the perceptions people have of the opposite sex and found that men consistently under-predicted women’s profanity use. The women believed that men’s use would be significantly more than what was actually reported. The types of responses predicted also followed; women thought men’s word choices would be stronger than they were, and men thought women’s would be weaker. Staley also stated in the conclusion that “men and women used strong expletives most frequently when alone and less frequently when in the presence of individuals with a greater degree of social status.” (p.377) The work was summarizing with “cultural expectations lag behind” and that “the two sexes are indeed becoming equal, but no one knows it yet.” (p.377) Knowledge of this perception is important to keep in mind when interpreting for the opposite sex and striving to put out a native sounding discourse.

In a very apt statement, Selnow (1985) opens with the fact that “language . . . serves the reciprocal role of reflecting shifts in society while simultaneously contributing to the character of that society.” (p.303) Citing Lakoff, he makes mention of the idea that women have been taught to “avoid forceful language” and the “more compliant female language style.” (p.305) In another self-reporting survey, he found that the ratio of men to women’s profanity use to be 2.85 vs. 2.38 respectively.

Comparing two studies conducted by Jay (2000), it is easy to see that women’s use of profanity in public has risen. In 1986, women were 32% of the collected sample, men making up the rest. Moving forward to 1997, women are up to 47%, almost equal that of men.

Religiosity of the speaker or receiver can have a significant effect on the perception and production of profanity. Belief systems and denominations place different amounts of weight on the prohibition of profanities. Individual devoutness can also be an indicator that they would not tolerate production or reception of profanities. (Jay, 2005) However, the linguistic need for this class of words is still evident, exemplified by college students of the Mormon faith using euphemistic forms of profanity or using other words in their place. (Ushijima, 2004)

Children begin using profanity at an early age and it persists into senility. Initially starting as mimicry of “coping with stress,” the reaction of the parental figure teaches children early that profanity is emotionally disturbing to
listeners. (Jay, 2005) There is strong anecdotal and research based evidence that mothers often “use soap as a form of punishment for [profanity], and both parents use a verbal reprimand” to punish children’s use of profanity. (Jay, King, & Duncan, 2006 p.6) Selnow’s (1985) study also looked into respondent’s memories of parental profanity use. While both sexes agreed on the frequency of their father’s use, they differed on the mother’s use. Selnow proposed that this could be due to either mothers feeling more comfortable using profanity around their daughters, or sons glossing over their mother’s image. It ties into the statement that “good girls don’t use bad words.” (Selnow, 1985 p.310) Again this brings us back to the fact that audience is key for a speaker’s word choice.

Taking into account societal perceptions and the reality of use, it is important for interpreters to develop a variety of lexical choices that match their consumers. This can be garnered by surveying other interpreters of various ages, races, religion and sexual orientations, keeping in mind the goal of what an equivalent individual without hearing loss would sound like.

### Analysis of Intent and Word Classification

One of the primary concerns when interpreting is the speaker’s intent. This is similar to the Gish (1996) processing model, where defining the goal of the speaker is one of the first steps of processing an utterance. Most goals or intents are implicit, especially in profane utterances. There are four main classifications—cathartic, abusive, social bonding and emphasis/intensification (Jay, 2000).

Cathartic utterances are generally exclamatory or ejaculatory, an emotional kneejerk reaction, often in response to pain, frustration, surprise, shock, relief, etc. Their use is reflexive and not pre-meditated. This is the profanity that is used when, for example, the speaker hits their thumb with a hammer while constructing a fence.

Abusive utterances are easily identified, as these are the moments when profanity is used to degrade someone or something. This use can be reflexive or premeditated. A semi-spontaneous reaction would be cursing at a driver that has just cut you off, whereas a premeditated example would be telling off a co-worker who angered you the day before.

Social bonding is one intent that is difficult for the outside observer to readily identify. It can be used to show
camaraderie, in sexual word play, joke telling, and to establish approachability. Young men insulting each other with smiles on their faces can be a show of camaraderie. Couples might use profanity during intimate moments. Use of profanity by an authority figure, such as a college professor, can reduce the disparity of power between them and their audience by bringing a more casual level to the interaction.

The use of profanity to provide emphasis or as an intensifier is widely used, but can be misunderstood. It can be used in a positive, “the girl is f**king gorgeous,” and negative way, “what a f**king idiot.” The profanity increases the impact of the following term. The singular power of profanity to be used in this function has been recognized by the Supreme Court (Eastland, 2000).

English profanity can be loosely classified into four groups; religion related, scatological, animal names and sexual referents. Religion related are words like god, Christ, damnation, h**l, etc. Scatological words are those that refer to bodily fluids and elimination, such as p**s, crap, etc. Animal names are used in an effort to equate the subject to the status of the particular animal; for example pig, dog, cow, and b**ch. Sexual referents are words that talk about genitalia and sex acts; this category contains words like f**k, c**t, pr**k, etc. (Jay, 2000; Mabry, 1974)

While English is a linear-auditory form of communication, American Sign Language is a visual-spatial language which requires the directionality of profanity. In short, the interpreter must know which way the profanity is pointing. This is loosely divided into “No One” and “Others.” The classification of “No One” is the utterance that does not have a specific target, such as a cathartic profanity, and it exists in a neutral or exclamatory space. The other side, “Others,” can refer to a person, an inanimate object, animal or the speaker themselves, as in abusive and social bonding. An additional factor for working into or out of a three dimensional language is the “vehemence” of the utterance. This has simply divided into high and low. In Figure 2, the four intents discussed above have been charted. Please note that emphatic intent is located in the center due to the fact it can be in any quadrant. (Murphy, 2007)
The category of euphemisms for profanity adds an additional layer of difficulty to the act of interpreting, much like idioms. Allan and Burridge (1991) define euphemisms as “an alternative to a dispreferred expression, in order to prevent [social embarrassment of self or offending another party].” (p.11) The speaker has the same intents listed above, but does not want to cross into profanity—and yet most people can easily recognize which profanity the euphemism is replacing, provided they have a shared set of knowledge. Euphemism allows the speaker to “break the taboo with relative impunity.” (Wajnryb, 2005 p.198) In the shareshops, some often reported euphemisms were “shoot” for sh*t, “darn” for d**n, “flippin’” for f**king, and “cheese N rice” for Jesus Christ.

**Additional Concerns for Interpreters**

Profanity can be a part of an interpreted event in a variety of settings. School classrooms, mental health settings, corrections facilities, theatre productions, video relay calls, chemical dependency units and support groups, healthcare procedures, social work intakes and assessments, government offices, sports events and a variety of work places, to name a few. As one participant put it, “it can happen anywhere.” It is to an interpreter’s advantage to have schemas for this form of discourse, in an effort to focus on the intent of the speaker and be cognizant of our own biases.
In addition to our own biases, we must be aware that the presence of an interpreter during discourse can potentially influence communication, we are not truly invisible. (Napier, McKee, & Goswell, 2006) The status of the interpreter, whether it is their gender, age, race, or other superficial differences, could restrain or encourage the use of profanity during an interpreted event. In an interview with Jay and Wajnryb, both indicated the professionalism of the interpreter could be called into question when voicing profanity.

Interpreters who are certified and associate members of the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) adhere to a Code of Professional Conduct (CPC). Many of the tenets, and subpoints of the tenets, provide conflicting advice that could be applied to profanity during interpreting. The Professionalism tenet states that interpreters are to “render the message faithfully by conveying the content and spirit of what is being communicated.” (RID, 2005, p.3) Contrastingly, the Conduct tenet states that interpreters are to “present themselves appropriately in demeanor, [...] and comply with established workplace codes of conduct.” (p.3) The Respect for Consumers tenet states that interpreters are to “approach consumers with a professional demeanor at all times” (p.4) and yet also to “facilitate communication access and equality, and support the full interaction and independence of consumers.” (p.4) The CPC leaves interpreters in a right versus right dilemma (Kidder, 1995) – it is right that the interpreter should maintain their professionalism, but it is also right for consumers to be able to communicate freely. In an interview with Jay and Wajnryb, both stated that the use of profanity in the workplace would reflect negatively on the professionalism of the interpreter. (2006) This would be especially true for female interpreters, since the use of profanity by women is still stigmatized. (Jay, 2006) Our consumers expect that we will “facilitate all communication, regardless of vulgarity.” (Cartwright, 1999, p.5)

Considering the multitude of situations where profanity can happen and the complexity of the ethical decision, there is a dearth of profanity education available for interpreters. There are infrequent workshops offered, two outdated books (Woodward, 1979), and one video (McCannell & Bridges, 1997) of which the author is aware. Some interpreters have reported that they received limited profanity vocabulary instruction in their interpreter training program (ITP) (Murphy, 2006).
This difficulty in accessing resources to prepare adds to the complexity of the interpreting task at hand and may lead to a higher potential for inaccuracy.

**Previous Research on Interpreters and Profanity**

In a study from 2006, the author conducted a test of the impact of an interpreter’s gender on stimuli containing profanity. The literature and previous studies indicated that due to the societal perceptions, women might use profanity less than men, and men in turn would be more accurate in the vehemence of their profanity use. In the study, a small sample group of interpreters volunteered to come in for research. They had no prior knowledge of the study, the current literature and were not advised that profanity was the topic, which allowed for a spontaneous candid reaction. They were given a written scenario, then asked to voice for a videotaped signed stimulus of a deaf Caucasian male. Afterwards they were asked to complete a brief survey regarding their comfort level with profanity and their experience with profanity on the job.

The interpreters were evenly divided by gender and had a variety of experience, ranging from 2 to 28 years in the field. They also had a range of ages, from late twenties to late forties. The majority of the sample attended an ITP. All participants indicated they could comprehend the signed stimulus and every participant voiced profanity at least once. In the stimulus there were three opportunities of signed English correlates. The interpretations were analyzed for accuracy of intent and vehemence.

The primary result was that there was a consistent error percentage of thirty-nine percent inaccuracy rates in both the intent and the vehemence, regardless of gender or experience. The study did not analyze directionality and word type. With the availability of vocabulary workshops, the novel approach of profanity education, focused on speaker intent, would be a different method to address the issue at hand. Would receiving further education on intents, word type, directionality and vehemence raise the accuracy rate?

**Method**

**Participants**

In 2008, shareshops were facilitated through sponsoring interpreting organizations – a variety of states, RID regions
and at the Canadian national conference. From an organization advertisement online or in a conference programming guide, participants self-selected to join the share shop. Participants were a mix of genders, race, culture, age, sexual orientation, disability, certification status and levels of education. All organizations and participants were informed via the presenter application, printed biography of the presenter and verbally during the shareshop that the data collected would be used for research and that their identity would be kept anonymous. They were not required to participate and some chose to opt out. Participants were offered CEUs for learning about the topic.

**Apparatus**

- PowerPoint presentation – visual support for verbal lecture
- Printed workbook – writing activity to increase knowledge dissemination
- Audio cassette players (1:= or <10 participant ratio)
- Audio cassettes – verbal English stimulus
- Printed scenario – context for stimulus
- Printed worksheet (see appendix A) – group analysis of stimulus, demographic data

**Procedure**

The participants listened to an approximate one hour lecture on the information contained in the literature review, to provide baseline knowledge of the topic and establish common terminology. During the lecture, they were asked to note their comfort level, in a forced choice scale, “on the job” and “in normal life.” They were also given an opportunity to discuss their previous experiences while interpreting and from that developed a list of strategies (see results section). The participants then divided themselves into groups, ranging from 2-13 people, and each group received a printed scenario, audio cassette player, audio cassette, and worksheet. They were given approximately 45 minutes to work as a group to complete the worksheet and prepare model interpretations of the audio sample. They were able to access the notes from the lecture and ask the researcher clarifying questions on the lecture content, as needed. On the worksheet, they were asked to fill in their comfort ratings and they had the option to identify their years of experience, certification and gender.
Design
The independent variables were the same set of audio stimuli, written scenario and instructions. The dependent variable was the accuracy of classifying a given stimulus; identifying the correct profanity phrase or phrases, word type, intent, directionality and vehemence. The participants self-selected their groups, given a numerical maximum for group size. The groups were tested independently, with each shareshop having the same set of stimuli to choose from and no duplicates in the specific shareshop. Groups randomly selected their stimuli by letter.

Results
Demographics
Each group was given a Profanity Analysis worksheet, on which they were given the option to list their gender, certification status and years of experience. A total of 415 participants took part in the project, with eighty-one percent female, ten percent male and nine percent that chose to not identify. This sampling is close to known female to male ratios in the field. (Figure 3)

![Figure 3](image_url)

Participant Gender
The certification status was sixty-three percent holding either national or state certification, twenty-seven percent who chose not to identify and ten percent were not certified. (Figure 4) Though there are a great variety of certifications, due to interpreters holding multiple certification types it, was not possible to get a clearly delineated percentage of each type. (Figure 4)

![Figure 4: Certification Status](image)

**Certification Status**

The striation of experience was divided by less than one year, one to ten years, eleven to twenty years, more than twenty years, and those that chose to not identify. Thirty-six percent fell into the one to ten years of experience, twenty-seven percent had eleven to twenty years, seventeen percent had more than twenty years, thirteen percent gave no answer, and seven percent had less than one year of experience. (Figure 5)
**Profanity Comfort Level**

As part of the lecture, participants were asked to note their comfort level with profanity, on the job and in normal life. The scale was a forced choice scale, with one being the least comfortable and four being the most comfortable. As part of the worksheet, they were instructed to enter those values onto the form.

“On the job” was defined as while working as an interpreter or in an interpreting situation. Forty-five percent listed themselves as being most comfortable, twenty-nine percent moderate comfort, sixteen percent moderate discomfort, nine percent least comfortable, and one percent did not identify. (Figure 6)
Figure 6

Self-Indentification of On the Job Comfort

“In normal life” was defined as either being around profanity or personally using it. Forty percent rated themselves as most comfortable, twenty-two percent moderate comfort, twenty percent moderate least comfortable, seventeen moderate discomfort, and one percent did not identify. (Figure 7)

Figure 7

Self-Indentification During Normal Life
**Accuracy of Scenario Analysis**

There were eleven samples of verbal English on audio cassette, with accompanying printed contextual information, from which the groups could choose. There was no duplication of samples in each shareshop. Participants were asked to identify the profane word(s) or phrases, the intent of the speaker, the directionality, the level of vehemence, and word type. There were a total of 58 groups, with the median group size being seven people.

Ninety-five percent of the groups were able to correctly identify the profane word(s) or phrases. Ninety-one percent were able to identify the correct word type. Eighty-six percent correctly identified the level of vehemence. Seventy-four percent were able to identify the intent of the speaker. Seventy-one percent were able to correctly identify the directionality of the utterance. (Figure 8)

*Figure 8*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scenario</th>
<th>Accuracy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Type</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vehemence</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Direction</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intent</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phrase</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Overall Scenario Classification Accuracy**

For intent, participants were asked to label the sample as Abusive, Social Bonding, Cathartic or Emphatic. Eighty-two percent were able to accurately identify Social Bonding. Eighty-one percent were able to correctly identify Abusive. Seventy-eight percent were able to correctly identify Cathartic. Only fifty percent were able to correctly identify Emphatic use. (Figure 9)
When asked to label the directionality of the utterance, the participants were given the option of “no one” and “others,” with the definition that “no one” meant that it was NOT directed at anything living or inanimate, “others” meaning directed at someone or something. Eighty-two percent were able to correctly identify utterances directed at “others.” Fifty-six percent were able to identify utterances directed at “no one.” (Figure 10)

Vehemence was defined as the intensity of the utterance. Participants had the forced choice of high or low. Eighty-seven percent were able to correctly identify high vehemence. Eighty-six percent were able to correctly identify low vehemence. (Figure 11)
Word type was categorized by scatological, religion related, sexual referent and euphemism. Ninety-five percent were able to correctly identify religion related words. Ninety-two percent correctly identified euphemism. Ninety-one percent were able to identify sexual referents. Eighty-eight percent were able to identify scatological words. (Figure 12)

From the collective wisdom and experience of the shareshop participants, a set of strategies was compiled. While not all strategies are appropriate at any given time, this list offers options. Quite often, interpreters would use more than one strategy at a time or a progression of strategies. Some strategies were employed prior to the interpreting act, during the act or post act as part of the debriefing. The following labels were
created by the author, but the definitions were developed from the shareshop participants.

**Prior/Post**

**Meet with Team**

If the team knew profanity would be used in the upcoming assignment, discussing and reaching a consensus was effective. Theatre is an example, such as the play “The Vagina Monologues,” access to the script and other materials offered the opportunity to be cohesive and prepared. In the case of special education teams, particularly with students or classmates with Tourette’s or Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, they may decide as a group how profanity will be handled.

**Cultivate Vocabulary**

Many interpreters reported feeling at a loss for sign vocabulary or generation/culture specific English profanity combinations. Some interpreters had limited training in their ITP or had gone to a signed profanity vocabulary building workshop. It was also suggested that they contact local deaf mentors for further education, as there can be significant regional differences. For English, online resources, such as www.urbandictionary.com, and local resources, such as interpreters of another age group or cultural group, were suggested.

**Practice/Desensitize**

Due to the deep emotional response, societal conditioning, or religious training, some interpreters shared a discomfort with uttering profanity in sign or verbal English. Practicing voicing English or signing profanity, as well as desensitizing to profanity receptively, reduced the interference from the interpreter’s personal background.

**Meet with Consumer**

While this strategy is primarily employed with deaf consumers, it can also include hearing consumers as well. The most common situation shared was middle or high school sex education class, when the student met with the interpreters (and possibly the teacher) to address how graphic topics would be handled, prior to class. This allowed the consumers to make an informed decision and get the most out of the subject.
Develop Policy
Where there is the potential or likelihood of the consumer to verbally, or in sign, abuse or harass the interpreter, it was suggested the team or employer develop a widespread policy on how interpreters should respond or what actions they should take. This strategy is applicable in mental health, chemical dependency, VRS, and school district settings, to name a few.

During

Fingerspell
When interpreting from voice into sign, many interpreters used fingerspelling as a strategy. This was particularly effective when the consumer or the interpreter wanted to prevent onlookers from learning signed profanity. Also, when managing a lack of vocabulary or trying to elicit a sign preference, this was sometimes successful in getting a feed from the deaf consumer. This might also be appropriate for a deaf consumer who wants the specific English word or phrase.

Just Do It
In voice to sign or sign voice, this strategy means putting out what you see/hear. For deaf consumers who are English savvy, this can be successful. A caution must be added, in that there is the potential for miscommunication - conceptually when going from voice to sign, and receptive comprehension and producing natural sounding discourse when going from sign into voice. The second caution is the potential for cultural differences within the Deaf community. (see the “cultural mediation” strategy and the discussion section)

Use Processing Time
This strategy was reported for voice to sign situations where the interpreters or consumers wanted to prevent hearing onlookers from learning signed profanity. Case in point would be K-12 settings or stage acts, where delaying the output into the target language allows the onlookers’ attention to diminish.

Adjust for Context
When going from voice to sign or sign to voice, one of the goals is to produce natural sounding discourse. In this strategy, interpreters take into effect many factors, such as age, setting,
race, culture, sexual orientation, religion, etc., to develop a schema on what a similar person without a hearing loss would sound like, or vice versa. Case in point, if you are interpreting for an elderly dementia patient who is deaf, a similar person without hearing loss would most likely use more traditional forms of profanity.

Redirect
While there are a variety of options to accomplish it, the goal is to re-establish who the message is originating from. In heated moments or when consumers don’t fully grasp how the interpreting process works for them, it can be misconstrued that the profane message is originating from the interpreter. Each of these techniques varies in levels of subtlety and can be used in a progression.

- **Eye Gaze** – used primarily in sign to voice situations, the interpreter does not make eye contact with the hearing consumer, to focus attention on the deaf consumer, even when the deaf consumer is not signing.
- **Positioning** – this technique is useful to keep the dialogue participants as the primary object in their field of vision.
- **Third Person** – using a third person perspective or using the source participant’s name or title can help emphasize who is speaking.
- **Indexing** – sometimes used in conjunction with another redirect, this can be used in either sign to voice or voice to sign for a more obvious clarification of origin.
- **Role Clarification** – in this technique, the interpreter stops the process and explains to the participants how the interpreting process works and emphasizes our role as representing the individuals involved.

Edits
Editing a source message can have significant effect on its perceived vehemence or conceal a deliberate breaking of social rules, so the following techniques must be used with caution.

- **Placeholder** – when the utterance is rapid or continuous, the comprehension and interpretation of each phrase is not possible, or if the deaf consumer requests it, a placeholder
can be used in place of or to talk about profanity. Placeholders are also a way of talking about profanity without actually using it, such as “F-Word” instead of “F**k,” assuming the consumer has a common frame of reference.

• **Euphemism** – a softened form of profanity, usually used sign to voice, when it would be appropriate in the specific context and discourse style. This can be used when going from voice to sign, assuming the deaf consumer is English idiom savvy or wants the exact English. An example would be using “Jerk” in place of “A**hole.”

• **Use Tone/Facial Expression/Body Language** – going from voice to sign, facial expression, body tension, larger signs and more rapid signing speeding can be used in place of profanity. Vocal tone and volume can be used going from sign to voice. In face to face settings, allowing the body language of the deaf consumer to make the impression on the hearing person can sometimes be effective.

**Educate**

While limited in their applicability, these strategies allow for cultural information to be shared with the consumer outside the culture in question.

• **Consumer to Consumer** – this strategy allows consumers to educate each other about social norms. This can be useful in work and school settings, where not assimilating to the organizational policy can be a matter of disciplinary action.

• **Expansion** – in this technique, it is the interpreter that specifically provides the cultural information, either to the deaf or hearing consumer. This has been used in school settings, where the interpreter also functions as an aide, such as in the early school years. It can also be useful when a deaf consumer’s body language and animation can be misconstrued as aggression, for example in a police setting.
Clarify with the Consumer

Used almost exclusively when going from sign to voice, the interpreter asks the consumer if they want the profanity voiced. This allows the interpreter to ensure their understanding of the consumer’s goal and word choice. This is an interesting phenomenon, as no anecdotal evidence indicates the hearing consumer is consulted prior to signing the message. Please see the discussion section for further information.

Cultural Mediation

Cultural mediation is a label applied to the strategy of adjusting the target product for what would be culturally appropriate for the target language. Similar to adjusting for context, this requires sufficient knowledge of the implicit information in an interaction. Different languages often have different word classes that function as profanity. For example, in Japanese, being called the equivalent of a “country bumpkin” is very inflammatory, whereas in English it’s comparatively mild. (Wajnryb, 2005) While there are signs for English profanity, they are not necessarily Deaf culture expressions and they might not have the same weight that they do in spoken English. Please see the discussion section for further information.

Discussion

The demographic data indicate that this sampling was a fair representation of the interpreting community, by gender and certification status. The author is not aware of any concrete census of experience, age, race, and education. With at least eighty percent of the sample being female, it was surprising that seventy-four percent reported relative comfort with profanity on the job. This could be caused by the inability to avoid this type of language while working. It could also be due to the profession drawing individuals with high comfort levels. Or simply that those that are relatively comfortable with the topic are most interested in this type of workshop. It is the opinion of the author that it is most likely a combination of the three.

When comparing “on the job” comfort and “in normal life” comfort, it is interesting to note that the relative comfort level drops by twelve percent. And most remarkable is that those that reported the least amount of comfort shifted from nine percent “on the job” to twenty percent “in normal life,” more
than doubling. Being in the role of a professional might account for a shift in comfort level. This could also be an example of the situational adaptability of profanity in language. Many interpreters reported feeling like they “have to deal with it,” rather than it being a matter of personal choice.

This research and data collection also looked at the accuracy of being able to correctly identify five parameters; profane phrase, word type, vehemence, speaker’s intent, and directionality of the utterance, as discussed above. Looking at the Scenario Classification Accuracy, figure 8, we can see that all five parameters are over seventy percent successful. While one hundred percent accuracy in an interpretation is unlikely, the analysis of each parameter lends insight into places for further education and practice, as well as areas that are exceptionally met by this format and time frame – those percentages being at ninety percent or above. Eighty percent to eighty-nine percent was considered above satisfactory, seventy to seventy-nine percent satisfactory and sixty-nine percent and below considered not satisfactory.

The participants showed an extremely high percentage of being able to recognize the profane utterance. The attendees are multilinguals, with most of them having English as their first language. This could be due to the fact that people are the most cognizant and sensitive to the force of profanity in their first language. Second languages learned in artificial environments, versus immersion environments, do not develop the same connotative force. (Dewaele, 2004)

The parameter of word type had an exceptional percentage of accuracy, at ninety-one percent, and during the shareshop the participants seemed to have a strong grasp of the lexicon. Having a system for classifying words appears to be beneficial to participants.

Compared to vehemence analysis in the 2006 study, it seemed evident that further education was beneficial and lead to the steep increase in accuracy; with sixty-one percent in 2006 going to eighty-six percent in 2008. This was an increase of twenty-five percent. Eighty-six percent is an above satisfactory rate of accuracy. It would be a more clear comparison if, after receiving the education of the shareshop, participants were asked to spontaneously interpret the 2006 stimuli. However, looking solely at the 2006 study, sixty-one percent is not a satisfactory rate, so there was room for improvement.
The ability of the participants, after receiving the shareshop education, to identify the intent of the speaker increased thirteen percent, to a total of seventy-four percent, over the 2006 study. This was a satisfactory rate. Speaker’s intent is an area where even more education and practice could show further improvement and benefit.

Directionality was not analyzed in the 2006 study, so a comparison is not possible. However, seventy-one percent is a satisfactory rate, though there is still potential for an above satisfactory accuracy rate, or greater, with even more education and practice.

Further breaking down the category of speaker’s intent, the accuracy by specific intent was analyzed. Social bonding and abusive were both above satisfactory in their accuracy. This could be due to the novelty of the concept of social bonding, interpreters inquired about it at length. The author would contest that abusive intent is the most easily recognizable of the four due to the potential impending harm and our own fight or flight response. Cathartic received a satisfactory rating, so there is room for more education and practice with this intent. Emphatic clearly needs more education and practice as it was well below the bar for not satisfactory, lower even than the 2006 study.

Directionality was a stark contrast, with profanity having a target obtaining an above satisfactory rating and profanity without a target being twenty-six percent lower at fifty-six percent. More education and practice is needed to be able to satisfactorily recognize how profanity works in three dimensional space.

The vehemence of an utterance was well understood with an above satisfactory rate in both categories. It would be interesting in a future study to see if participants would be able to discern a more complex gradient of intensity.

Word type classification was exceptional, with most categories above ninety-one percent, only scatological words being lower at above satisfactory, with eighty-eight percent. This parameter was well suited to the format and time frame of the shareshop.

In regards to the strategies collected, it is more than clear that professional discussion of interpreter’s work and sharing approaches can lead to enhanced understanding and service delivery for consumers.
It is interesting to note the specific strategy of “Clarify with the Consumer” happens only when interpreters are voicing for a deaf consumer. Further research into why that happens would be beneficial. Hypothetically, this could be due to the lack of comfort or lack of lexicon in the interpreter’s second language. A study comparing second language adult learners and Children of Deaf Adults (CoDAs) in this situation would be ideal.

The strategy of cultural mediation is not only a matter of discovering a profanity lexicon within American Sign Language, but also researching politeness, as transmitted (or not) from parent to child. In the research of Jay (2000 & 2006), it is apparent the much of what people, with no hearing loss, learn about the rules of social politeness comes from our parental figures. Communication barriers within the home have the potential to hinder the transmission of social mores and taboos.

Conclusion

Profanity is a part of daily life, and as interpreters can be involved in every aspect of life, further understanding is beneficial. Knowing that it obeys semantic, grammatical and syntactic rules allows for a more native sounding interpretation. Being cognizant of the power of these words, for good or ill, gives the opportunity to use them with greater precision. The changing nature of appropriate and not, depending on setting, gender, age, race, and speaker power, can radically shift where interpreters can expect to see profanity and how it might manifest.

Being able to further analyze the parameters of intent, word type, directionality and vehemence provides a way for interpreters to talk about the work on a more objective level. This will also help them navigate the ethical dilemma that situations with profanity can pose. And hopefully this will encourage interpreters to seek more education on this topic.

In many of theshareshop evaluations from the participants, they expressed gratitude and enjoyment of education in this topic. It is clear that interpreters will benefit from profanity education and that much more is left to be discovered. Most specifically, uncovering how profanity manifests in American Sign Language and its use, as defined by Deaf culture. Understanding how people typically used profanity, and the unique social rules for gender, race, age and religion, will help
interpreters improve their service delivery for their consumers and allow for a more natural discourse and fuller access to communication— in all its forms, profane or not.

Notes: An unedited version of this study is available by contacting the author – kemurphy00@yahoo.com.

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References


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Appendices

Appendix A

Scenario Analysis Worksheet
Scenario Sample Letter___

1. Profane phrase or word: ____________________________
2. Speaker's intent: Cathartic - Abusive - Social Bonding - Emphatic
3. Directionality: No One - Others
4. Vehemence: High - Low
5. Word Type: Religion Related - Scatalogical - Sexual Referent - Euphemism
6. Other factors and how they influence:

   __________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________

7. Applicable Tool Box Options:

   __________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________
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