Hot gossip

Interpreters may have to take complex situational decisions when encountering gossip in the workplace. **Katharine Terrell** reports on why small talk is a big issue

Gossip has a negative reputation, and yet research indicates that it has important social functions, including at work and especially for marginalised groups such as deaf people. For the BSL interpreter in the workplace, it also poses some ethical challenges. Our job as interpreters is to support the inclusion of deaf people not only linguistically, but culturally, and this should include all aspects of workplace communication, including gossip. Yet we are also told we should remain impartial and keep confidential all the information we learn through our work. How, then, can we navigate the complex social world of the workplace in relation to gossip?

This article reviews the literature around gossip in deaf and hearing worlds, before focusing on workplace interpreting and ethical dilemmas. I then discuss an imaginary interpreting scenario, applying ideas around the interpreter's role in navigating complex social situations while making ethical decisions.

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This helps to clarify how we can best provide inclusion for deaf people at work, not only as individuals, but also as part of a team where everyone is responsible for the inclusion of deaf people.

Anthropological and social perspectives on gossip

Gossip has a 'decidedly shady reputation' (Dunbar, 2004: 100), while Federici (2018: 35) explains how gossip has been decried as 'idle, back-biting talk, [. . .] potentially sowing discord'. However, Federici argues that gossip has historically been a way for women to exchange knowledge in a patriarchal world where they had little formal power: a way of strengthening community bonds and developing relationships.

Gossip can also remind people of their group's norms and values (Federici, 2018: 177). Some even argue that it is not just valuable, but 'is the central plank on which human sociality is founded' and even that 'the cognitive demands of gossip are the very reason why such large brains evolved in the human lineage' (Dunbar, 2004: 109). It is therefore undoubtedly a fundamental part of every community and society. As in wider society, 'gossip in the workplace is a central, evolved part of how

people in organisations communicate with each other' and can serve both individuals and groups in creating bonds (Kniffin and Wilson, 2010: 171). However, this does not mean that all workplace gossip is benign; on the contrary, Kniffin and Wilson (2010) also explain that it can be harmful. Sign language interpreters must take gossip seriously as an important part of human interaction.

Deaf people and gossip

As with hearing communities, gossip has had negative connotations in deaf communities. Nearly 150 years ago, Gallaudet (1873: 204) himself argued that deaf people should not 'rely for their mental aliment on a weekly or monthly dish of deaf-mute gossip, deaf-mute news, deaf-mute stories', arguing that such information was 'weakened to the too low average capacity of the educated (?) [sic] deaf-mute, so that he can enjoy without labor the mental attitude of an animate sieve'! While we might applaud Gallaudet's argument that deaf people need better access to high-quality information, he is clearly linking gossip to a 'weaker' mental aptitude.

In modern times, some deaf people see deaf-majority spaces as full of (negative) gossip. Stephenson (2015: 376), for example, despite recognising the importance of Deaf clubs, describes how her deaf son 'doesn't want to attend club meetings because of the put downs and gossip'. Perhaps this sentiment is widespread, as a deaf respondent to a study of Greek and Cypriot Deaf clubs reports: 'I do not like the Deaf clubs because deaf people gossip a lot . . . Gossiping should stop at the Deaf clubs. Deaf people should love and understand each other' (Hadjikakou and Nikolaraizi, 2011: 612). Here, interestingly, some clear positives (love and understanding) are juxtaposed with negative gossip.

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In contrast, deaf people sometimes speak of gossip positively. One survey of 419 deaf people found that easy access to the internet has 'helped to increase the density of deaf people's social networks and to speed up the transmission of information and gossip between deaf people' (Valentine et al, 2006: 8), and the authors of this research do not seem to suggest negative implications.

We might see the potential for gossip, in a deaf person's native language, as a form of community building and resistance to power, following Federici's (2018: 177) argument that gossip can reinforce groups' values. For example, in the Adamorobe community in Ghana, some deaf and hearing people use a mixture of sign languages, sometimes choosing which language to use based on the purpose of their communication, such as 'when gossiping about hearing people in the vicinity' (Kusters, 2014: 147). Here, we can see that people from a minority (deaf) group can strengthen and maintain their communal ties through their common language.

Interpreting gossip

The (limited) discussion of interpreters and gossip in the literature tends to focus on what interpreters 'should' and 'should not' interpret. Murray and Wynne (2001) describe doing social research interviews with non-English speakers via a spoken language interpreter. They explain that, while it is impossible for interpreters to provide 'exact, unequivocal translations of a

person's dialogue', some interpreters engaged in 'selective translation', not translating the whole of what a person is saying simply because they 'do not want to transmit the meaning' (Murray and Wynne, 2001: 166). One example they give is an English-Italian interpreter who, after a 'prolonged exchange . . . told the researcher 'that's just gossip' rather than interpreting what the participant said (Murray and Wynne, 2001: 168). The authors disagree with this kind of approach, saying that it is inappropriate for the 'role' of the interpreter to choose not to interpret something just because it's gossip.

This concept of 'role' is one to which researchers have repeatedly returned. Notably, Llewellyn-Jones and Lee (2009, 2014) have argued that interpreters should not be bound by prescriptive and proscriptive guidelines regarding what is and is not part of their 'role', but should rather take responsibility for complex situational decisions. Furthermore, they argue that making these choices is an essential part of an interpreter's role. Like Llewellyn-Jones and Lee, Dean and Pollard (2011) argue that interpreters should not rely on rules, and should instead analyse situations according to their context to decide what the right decision is.

Dickinson and Turner (2010) agree, arguing that interpreters in the workplace need to move away from the idea of 'interpreter as conduit', and act as cultural mediators in complex settings, made up of people with many different social identities, and work with the different interlocutors to come to a shared understanding of discourses. Elsewhere in the arena of BSL/English interpreting in the workplace, Bristoll and Dickinson (2015: 7) suggest that gossip is a form of 'small talk' in the office, advising interpreters to 'keep up with office intrigue and gossip' to do their job well, and arguing that if the interpreter is 'uncomfortable with interpreting

dirty jokes or ribald gossip' they 'may not be providing the appropriate access for the deaf employee, which could in turn impact on the extent to which they relate to their colleagues' (Bristoll and Dickinson, 2015: 12). We can see how this links to the anthropological discussions above: that gossip is a key part of human interaction in communities and workplaces, and deaf people have the right to be included in such interactions. Furthermore, as Bristoll and Dickinson say, not providing inclusion could have an effect on the deaf person's ability to relate to their colleagues, which could perhaps impact them both personally and professionally. Yet, there are other power dynamics involved – Ellwardt at al (2012) found that the targets of workplace gossip were generally those with lower status.

Discussion

Having given a review of the literature on the topic of gossip and interpreting, I now move on to discuss some of the key issues, using an imaginary scenario from an interpreting assignment as a starting point for discussion:

An interpreter is working with a deaf administrator, named Sam, at a college. A hearing employee, Jenny from HR, arrives. Jenny and Sam exchange niceties, which are interpreted. Then Sam asks, 'What's happening with Joan?'

The tone seems to shift. The interpreter knows already that Joan, a student in a different department, is going through a disciplinary

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process, because it came up in a meeting that the interpreter interpreted. Instead of Jenny saying something noncommittal, because Sam is not involved in the case, instead, she rolls her eyes dramatically.

'Honestly,' she says, 'It's been a nightmare. Joan is behaving terribly, and it's really taking its toll on her tutor'. Sam rolls his eyes at the interpreter, indicating his feelings about Joan and asks, 'What do you think about what Joan has done?'

Perhaps in this scenario, the interpreter might try to express, verbally or nonverbally (such as through facial expressions) that they understand Sam's feelings without giving any indication about their own feelings about the situation or to fall on one side or the other. However, Sam sees the interpreter as part of the team, each member of which has opinions on this situation (which should have been confidential).

This could be a real dilemma for the workplace interpreter, especially one working as a designated interpreter with a deaf professional: interpreting with them regularly all day (Hauser and Hauser, 2008). Hauser and Hauser (2008: 4) argue that designated interpreters work against the idea of a 'neutral conduit' model of interpreting, adding that 'existing models of sign language interpreting work inexactly for the situations in which designated interpreters find themselves because existing models are based on a different power distribution wherein the deaf person is the client and the hearing person is the professional'.

In contrast to the 'designated' interpreter with a deaf professional, in a situation where the deaf person is a customer, client or patient client (such as a hearing doctor and a deaf patient), the 'rules' around gossip may seem different. The ethical codes for

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sign language interpreters in many countries include confidentiality (Mendoza, 2010: 6), for example, and to discuss information about a deaf customer, client or patient would clearly go against the bounds of confidentiality in most cases. However, in the workplace situation described above, the client/professional model makes little sense. This is a workplace with one or more deaf professionals on equal footing (at least in theory) with their hearing colleagues, in which gossip is inevitable. Therefore, the gossip should be interpreted – as I would disagree with the interpreter in Murray and Wynne (2001) who asserts that 'gossip' should not be translated on the basis (presumably) that it is not what the participants 'should' be talking about. Rather, the people using the service of the interpreters have a right to know what is being said, regardless of its perceived appropriateness – and certainly avoiding the dreaded 'I'll tell you later' that so many deaf people experience (and hate) (Turner, 2007).

However, when Sam turns and asks the interpreter their opinion about the situation, things become more difficult. While we sign language interpreters often accept that we are not neutral conduits of information, we are not used to being directly asked our opinion on sensitive matters, and our training might not always prepare us for it. Moreover, as the interpreter in this scenario interpreted a meeting with Joan and Adrian, any information learned there about the matter would be confidential, and the interpreter should therefore not share it.

Still, the interpreter is not being asked to share confidential information per se; instead Sam wants to know their opinion as a colleague and team member (as designated interpreters are ((Hauser and Hauser, 2008)). The interpreter could therefore choose their response not (only) to preserve Joan's confidentiality but also to

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maintain a good working relationship with Sam.

When put on the spot like this, it might be hard when the deaf person is looking for a particular response (perhaps looking for a colleague to 'rant' with). The interpreter in this scenario might do best by remaining professional, not breaking Joan's confidentiality by discussing specifics and not offering an opinion, but also trying to show that they understood Sam's frustration at what they saw as an injustice. While we might want to avoid getting drawn into potentially harmful gossip, we must also accept it as an integral part of communication, and therefore an unavoidable part of our job.

'The interpreter's role cannot be neutral, and we must make decisions based on complex social and ethical norms'

A fine balance

In this work, I have shown that sign language interpreters have a complex role to play in interpreting gossip in the workplace. While gossip seems to be ubiquitous and important in all cultures and societies, this does not make it easy to navigate. The interpreter's role cannot be neutral, and therefore we must make decisions based on complex social and ethical norms, including the norms of gossip. Rather than attempting complete neutrality, we must aim to respect people's confidentiality while also respecting workplace norms, as part of the workplace team (Bristoll and Dickinson, 2015).

The imaginary scenario detailed in this article shows how these decisions are not straightforward, yet they can be navigated with some thought. Importantly, we cannot disempower deaf people by unilaterally choosing not to interpret gossip; however, we must consider our role more widely when workplace gossip comes up. △

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