

Dress the part



Neutral, culturally appropriate and professional, interpreter attire is a minefield. And what happens when the code is strictly sequins? **Katharine Terrell** reports

As a trainee interpreter, I have heard many opinions on what interpreters 'should' and 'should not' wear. I have often found myself considering in some depth what clothes are appropriate for what job. In some workplaces, for example, we are expected to fit in with staff, wearing practical but smart clothing. In other settings, safety clothing is required. A particular favourite memory of mine was wearing a hard hat and waterproofs to interpret in an underground cave at a National Deaf Children's Society (NDCS) event – others who have worked or volunteered with NDCS probably have many similar examples!

This article explores key issues around interpreters' clothing choices and how this relates to the communities we serve and the ever-contested role of the interpreter (Llewellyn-Jones and Lee, 2013).

I begin by giving an overview of some of the literature around interpreters' clothing choices in the history of interpreting, with different standards expected across cultural and historical contexts. I then discuss the concept of 'professional' dress in different contexts.

Dressed to impress?

The academic literature covers a few areas in relation to clothing choice for interpreters: firstly, it focuses on (spoken and signed language)

interpreters wearing clothing that is culturally appropriate. Historically, culturally appropriate clothing was somewhat different to looking 'professional' and meant wearing clothing that is appropriate to a modern interpreting assignment. While guidelines for professional clothing may be the same for signed language interpreters as for those working between two spoken languages, the visual nature of signed languages means a second consideration comes up in the literature: that wearing clothing that does not interfere with the client's ability to understand the language. This is especially important for deafblind people and for BSL on screen. Finally, a less-discussed area is how interpreters express themselves (or not) in their choice of clothing. This has particular importance when considering the interpreter not as an 'invisible' conduit but as an active participant in interpreted interactions (Llewellyn-Jones and Lee, 2013).

In contrast to community interpreting, modern conference interpreting for high-level

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international communication is generally traced to the start of the 20th century. Still, interpreters have existed for much longer (Pöschhacker, 2022: 28–31) but unfortunately we have limited information about this, so we must look to the history of spoken language interpreting for historical background. For example, historically, power dynamics between nations have been reflected in the clothing worn by spoken language interpreters. One such example is interpreters working between European languages and native American languages during the conquest and colonisation of the Americas. Araguás and Jalón (2004: 136) found that one such interpreter (working between Spanish and a native language of Mexico) was depicted in a painting wearing clothes similar to the Spanish authorities who employed him, rather than the clothes of the native Mexicans. This, the authors suggest, might imply 'a biased performance of the interpreters' duties' – supported by historical evidence that interpreters were not impartial or unbiased, but were frequently on the side of the coloniser. Similarly, Footitt's analysis of images of World War Two interpreters shows that clothing continued to demonstrate interpreters' allegiances and role as 'mediator of orders rather than the initiator of action' (Footitt, 2014: 122).

Both of these examples are relevant to modern sign language interpreters because, as Metzger (1999: 2) points out, 'for thousands of years, controversy has centered around the ways in which translators and interpreters can render source messages into target messages in as neutral a manner as possible'. Yet, Metzger argues, this approach may be misguided and it may instead be better to recognise that the interpreting process is never neutral. As Llewellyn-Jones and Lee (2013: 59) say, in relation to sign language interpreters: 'The problem, of course, is that impartiality or neutrality is rarely, if ever, possible'. The perennial question of the position

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of interpreters and their role as 'mediators' has interested interpreting studies for decades (eg, Cokely, 1985; Llewellyn-Jones and Lee, 2013). Sign language interpreters' clothing choices might therefore reflect some of the power dynamics in interpreted interactions that continue to this day.

Practical considerations

It is generally accepted that signed languages are easier to 'receive' when the signer is wearing plain clothing. Discussion has revolved around this for 50 years or more, with Sternberg et al (1973: iii) stating that 'much has been said' about clothing colours and other matters of appropriate attire. They suggest that interpreters should avoid 'assertive colors and patterns' (Sternberg et al, 1973: 37) and that 'skin color and clothing should contrast' (ibid: 14). Potterveld and Lambert (2001: 9) state: 'Beginning in the 1970s, interpreters at California State University at Northridge [CSUN] were required to carry solid colored smocks to wear over their street clothes', and that there 'is still value in carrying a contrasting garment to each assignment'.

This is especially true if the client is deafblind. One deafblind person describes how interpreters 'are surprised when they encounter deafblind consumers' because they assume all clients will be deaf but not blind, and are therefore not prepared with appropriate clothing. 'It seems as though interpreters' clothing choices get worse as they spend more time in the field,' he says. Although this is one person's opinion, they clearly feel that interpreters are not adequately prepared

in their clothing and appearance to work with deafblind people.

Dumont et al (2014) argue that we do not need to 'revert to the CSUN smock days' but that we must take seriously the impact of our appearance, including clothing, on deaf people and that each of us should ask ourselves, 'does my attire and overall appearance reflect my commitment to appropriately represent the deaf people with whom I will work, and the environment in which I will work?' While the accepted knowledge has, for many years, been that interpreters should wear plain clothing that contrasts with their skin colour, our choices go beyond this to include the hazy concept of 'professionalism'. This means that our clothing choices do not just impact on how easy it is for deaf people to understand us, but also that these decisions impact on deaf people's interactions with others and their potential success.

There are also technical considerations when translators or interpreters are on video – either VRI/VRS or in-vision interpreters. In one video project, 'the caption colour was sampled from the interpreter's clothing and the drop shadow from her skin tone', and the team 'chose cream as a single neutral colour to contrast with skin tone and work sympathetically and clearly with the colour themes of the film without being lost against the picture' (Crow, 2005: 11), showing evidence of creativity in the consideration of access for deaf people, in both captions and sign. Similarly, a report on Australian Sign Language (Auslan)/English on-screen translators found that viewers: 'preferred presenters in contrasting clothing (eg, dark, if fair skinned) that covers skin on torso and

arms for contrast to the information on their hands and face, ie, no low neck tops or short sleeves. The presenter's clothing needs to contrast sufficiently with the background and with their skin tone.' (Hodge et al, 2015: 32)

They add, however, that 'clothing that works well for one individual may not work well for another' and therefore that people should experiment with different options 'rather than simply relying upon the customary black shirt as a default' (ibid). Again, this suggests an expectation that the signer has light skin – but at least leaves the option of other choices open. We can therefore see how practical considerations may impact interpreters' choice of clothing, especially on screen.

Cultural considerations

Another theme comes out strongly in the literature: clothing that is appropriate for the culture and setting of the interpreting assignment. For example, Crow (2005: 11) explains that, in a historical piece of film, 'the interpreter wore simply-styled clothing – not period, but not too modern either'. This might be seen as an attempt to dress the interpreter part-way between the audience (modern) and the actors (period costume), perhaps reflecting an understanding of the interpreter as a mediator (Cokely, 1985) between two groups of people.

Culturally appropriate clothing is also recommended to interpreters by various professional bodies. For example, in educational settings, ASLI's guidelines (2021: 17) recommend that interpreters should 'dress appropriately for the setting, matching formality and safety requirements of the workplace'. The Finnish Association of Translators and Interpreters et al (c. 2003: 7) add that interpreters should 'dress according to the cultural aspects as well as other circumstances (eg, the weather when interpreting outdoors) of the assignment'. García-Beyaert et al

(2014: 27) argue that appropriate clothing is part of the ethical principle of community interpreters' conduct reflecting 'the highest standards of the profession by showing adherence to professional ethics and best practices' which sends 'a clear message about the value of professionalism in community interpreting'.

Another theme that comes up repeatedly in the literature is that signed and spoken language interpreters 'have to dress according to the situation in order not to attract unnecessary attention' (Finnish Association of Translators and Interpreters et al, 2003: 7). The idea of not drawing attention to oneself is repeated by an interpreting agency that states that 'ostentatious manicures and jewellery should be avoided at all times' (Nuevo Vallin, 2020: n.p.) – without explaining why. The idea of certain styles being inappropriate is evidently widespread, with Napier (2008: 39) finding that deaf Australians listed 'inappropriate clothing' as one of the worst things about interpreters. This is an important finding when deaf and hearing people rely on interpreters in myriad contexts to facilitate communication and have the right to feel comfortable with the interpreters they work with. However, it seems to be a difficult grey area: what crosses the line into attracting 'unnecessary attention' – inappropriate clothing or ostentation?

Aspects of our appearance, from clothing choice to hairstyles, are cultural, meaning that what is 'appropriate' or 'professional' can mean different things for different people. For example, Carpenter (2017: 33) found that American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters of colour 'know they have to work harder, be more professional, and dress more professionally to get the respect White interpreters to receive just by showing up'. Related to clothing, we know from other arenas that Black people's hair (and perhaps especially Black women's) is often under considerable scrutiny, with certain hairstyles deemed 'unprofessional' in workplaces

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(Greene, 2011). Therefore, guidelines stating that interpreters must look 'professional' or avoid 'drawing attention to themselves' might require more consideration and nuance, to ensure that ideas of professionalism are inclusive of different racial and cultural backgrounds. Otherwise, we are basing these ideas on Eurocentric standards that disadvantage interpreters of colour, putting them under further pressure which may not only affect their work but also impact on their emotional and mental wellbeing.

Another aspect of the difficult decision of what to wear is gender presentation, meaning the different ways people express their gender through their appearance. ASL/English interpreters in Artl's (2015: 50) study of gender identity 'consistently discussed the impact of their physical appearance, clothing choices, and decision to use or not use makeup' on their work. One interviewee, Chloe, expressed the difficulty in deciding what was appropriate 'professional' clothing, and how this interacts with both her gender and the expectations of the work setting (Artl, 2015: 50). In particular, she states that she wears 'ugly professional clothes' to avoid harassment from men (Artl, 2015: 51). Artl concludes that women interpreters must make decisions about their appearance, including their clothes, before they can focus on providing communication access. One interpreter interviewed by Artl (2015: 52) explains: 'If we're coming in with heels on and a skirt and a low-cut shirt and curled hair, we're impacting that situation just by us being there, when really we're there to communicate and facilitate communication... We need to dress

..... 'Our clothing choices impact on deaf people's interactions with others and their potential success'

the part too'. Similarly, one researcher found that 27% of lesbian ASL/English interpreters surveyed changed their appearance to 'look more heterosexual' (Ehrlich, 2020: 41) including aspects such as 'hairstyle, clothing style and mannerism' (2020: 11). Women interpreters clearly feel that they must consider how to blend in, and become less visible, to avoid harassment as well as to fit in with normative gender expectations. This adds to a picture of pressures on interpreters to adapt their appearance to fit in with prevailing racial, gender and cultural expectations.

Glitz and glamour

However, there are times when 'fitting in' might be a bit more 'glitz and glamour'. When Rose Ayling-Ellis was a contestant on *Strictly Come Dancing*, she used a team of three interpreters, 'one for the judges, one for up front and one for backstage' (Anonymous, 2021: n.p). Unlike BSL interpreters for the deaf television audience, these interpreters were working only with Ayling-Ellis, so the audience 'may occasionally see an interpreter on camera' (Craig, 2021: n.p) because 'it's not about the interpreter, it's about a deaf person dancing' (Anonymous, 2021: n.p) again repeating the idea that interpreters should not be the centre of attention.


But when all the dancers are wearing sequins and tassels, what is appropriate for an interpreter to wear? In the launch show, for example, the interpreter wears a smart jumpsuit which meets the expectations of appropriate colour contrast to her skin tone. She also wears some subtle jewellery and her hair is in a 'half-up, half-down' style. This complements the culture of the show,

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in which glamour is important, without drawing attention with the kind of outfits that the host and dancers are wearing, such as sequins and shiny material (which could also interfere with Ayling-Ellis' ability to understand the interpreter under the studio lights).

Later, in Week 9, Ayling-Ellis was dressed as Anna from the Disney film *Frozen*, albeit with added shine and sequins on the dark green bodice. The interpreter's dress is dark green, perhaps intentionally echoing the colour of Ayling-Ellis's outfit. However, the length of the skirt and sleeves, as with other interpreters throughout the show, is more conservative, offering both more coverage to allow for better contrast with skin, and perhaps also not to draw too much attention, in comparison to Tess Daly who is wearing a short, bright pink, sequined, off-the-shoulder dress.

Conclusion

Interpreters' clothing choices are complex, involving both practical and cultural considerations. The literature review has showed that clothing has always reflected interpreters' (perceived) role and expectations of neutrality and invisibility that can never be met. Rather, interpreters must navigate cultural expectations, including not drawing unnecessary attention and considering 'appropriate' clothing and hairstyles according to (often unspoken) cultural rules. Again and again, interpreters are urged not to draw attention to themselves. However, we are never invisible. We must do our best to provide deaf people with access to professional interpreters who act appropriately for a job, including appropriate clothing and appearance. But we must also be alert to the complexities of this and not enforce rules which mean that some, such as interpreters of colour and LGBTQ+ interpreters, are under pressure to conform in a way that could be oppressive, to the SLIs themselves and also to the deaf communities they work with. 

Style notes

▲ **Paul Belmonte:** My most memorable outfit while interpreting was when I was working in a kayak and had to zip myself into a wetsuit.

▲ **Ruth Peaker:** I've done several jobs in my swimming costume – in the water of course!

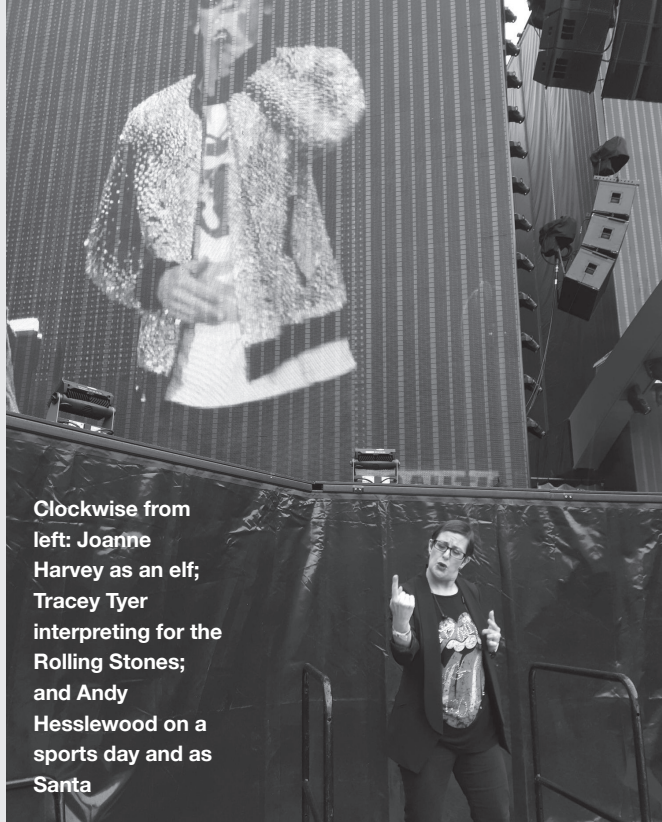
▲ **David Wolfenden:** I was booked to attend a reception at number 11 Downing St where I was one of two interpreting Drummer Boys in a very fetching lycra outfit complete with brass buttons. At an away day for staff of a deaf charity, I was in full Waterloo regalia for a signed rendition by ABBA (platforms, silver jumpsuit and blonde wig).

▲ **Jenny March:** I wore chef's whites once for a job with a deaf hotel chef. I didn't look like an interpreter when I wasn't signing so a lot of the other staff gave me funny looks as to why I was standing there not cooking or anything.



Above: Karl Llorca at Leicester University for 'Drag Queens and Zombies'; **Far left:** Andy Carmichael interpreting at a conference in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia; **Left:** Sebastian Probert gets ready for a performance of 'Shrek the Musical'





Clockwise from left: Joanne Harvey as an elf; Tracey Tyer interpreting for the Rolling Stones; and Andy Hesslewood on a sports day and as Santa



Clockwise from left: Rachel Radford prepares for the opening ceremony of the Commonwealth Games 2022; Katy Smillie and performer in the Scottish Superwomen of Science show; Jacqui Beckford interprets for 'The Salon Project' and below, in 'Muhammad Ali and Me'; Katy Smillie





Top left: Beatrice Osborn at her local ParkRun. Top right (on right): Pettra St Hilaire at Black Pride 2022. Bottom row: Layne Whittaker at a vegan festival, Katharine Terrell and Rani Ashton-Smith in scrubs

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