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## Working with Active Interpreters: A Commentary about Interpreting Terminology and Concepts

Hilde Haualand  
*Oslo Metropolitan University*

Anna-Lena Nilsson  
*Norwegian University of Science and Technology*

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# Working with Active Interpreters: A Commentary about Interpreting Terminology and Concepts

**Hilde Haualand<sup>1</sup>**

*Department of International Studies and Interpreting, OsloMet – Oslo Metropolitan University, Oslo, Norway*

**Anna-Lena Nilsson**

*Department of Language and Literature, NTNU – Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Trondheim, Norway*

## Abstract

**This commentary is a critical discussion of some terms that are frequently used when we talk about interpreting. Several of the popular terms may actually downplay the work done by both the interpreters and the other participants in interpreted interaction. In order to accentuate the work done by the interpreter as well as the active contribution by all participants in an interpreted dialogue, the commentary suggests some other terms. We would rather have us talk about working with interpreters than to ‘use’ interpreters, that interpreters interpret from a signed language to a spoken language rather than ‘voice for’, and that we refer to processing time instead of ‘lag time’ or ‘delay’. Interpreter educators, trainers and researchers in the field of interpreting are in a position where it is both possible and desirable to strive towards using terms that more accurately represent interpreting and the interpreting process than some of the terms currently in use.**

Keywords: terminology, working with interpreters, participants, processing time

<sup>1</sup> Correspondence to: Hilde Haualand, [hilma@oslomet.no](mailto:hilma@oslomet.no)

# Working with Active Interpreters: A Commentary about Interpreting Terminology and Concepts

## 1. Interpreting terminology

The terms we use when we talk about interpreting reveal and contribute to consolidating how interpreters, interpreter trainers and others think about interpreters and interpreting. Some of the most common terms that are used may however downplay the work done by both the interpreters and the other participants in interpreted interactions. In this commentary, we wish to highlight and discuss some of these terms, and critically analyze what they say about how we view interpreting and people who communicate via interpreters. We will also suggest alternative concepts for the terms we discuss.

This commentary is in part based on the introductory chapter of the edited volume *Talking – språkarbeid og profesjonsutøvelse [Interpreting – language work and professional practice.]* (Haualand, Nilsson & Raanes 2018). In that chapter, with our colleague Eli Raanes, we discussed the terms we had decided should be used in the book, some of which we now discuss in this commentary. The present commentary text is also inspired by the chapter "Towards a cognitive model of interpreting" (Wilcox & Shaffer, 2005), and several publications about (research on) interpreting as a professional activity from 2000 and onwards (Hauser, Finch & Hauser, 2008; Warnicke & Plejert, 2012; Pöchhacker 2012; De Meulder, Napier & Stone, 2018 and many more). Though the contributions in the edited volume *Talking* are written in two Scandinavian languages (Norwegian and Swedish), the terms discussed in the volume have their counterparts in English as well. We therefore wish to extend our discussion to the English-using interpreting community.

For this commentary we have chosen three sets of terms that we will discuss critically, and also suggest alternative terms to use. None of the terms we suggest are entirely new, but as far as we can observe, they have not yet become part of the everyday jargon used when interpreters, interpreting students and interpreter educators talk about interpreters and what interpreters do. While it is perhaps futile to expect a rapid change in terminology among lay persons and *primary participants* (see below for a discussion about this concept), we do believe that interpreter educators, trainers and researchers in the field of interpreting are in a position where it is both possible and desirable to strive towards using terms that more accurately represent interpreting and the interpreting process than some of the terms that are currently in use.

The three sets of terms that we have chosen for a discussion here are: 1) to 'use' an interpreter, 2) reverse interpreting or voicing, and 3) lag time and similar terms. What the terms have in common is that they are part of everyday jargon when both interpreters and the people interpreters serve talk about interpreters and their work, but they may also conceal what actually happens in an interpreted dialogue.

### 1.1. Working with interpreters

The term to 'use' an interpreter, reveals problematic and partially outdated views on language and communication, the actual work done by the interpreter, as well as the contributions all participants make in an

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interpreted dialogue. ‘Using’ an interpreter indicates an old-fashioned view of both language and interpreting as a channel where a message is sent back and forth through the interpreter. Talk about ‘using’ an interpreter also conveys an underlying idea that the interpreter is a passive tool, through which language flows, which in turn is connected to the idea of the interpreter as a conduit (Reddy, 1979), telephone line or machine – a neutral tool not affecting the “message” sent through it. This, however, is an idea that has long since been abandoned (Roy, 1992; Wadensjö, 1992; Metzger, 1999).

To talk about the interpreter as being *used* also conceals the interpreter’s own actions, the interpreter’s active coordination of, and contribution to, the interpreted dialogue (see more on the active work done by the interpreter in our discussion on *processing time* below).

Also, the concept of ‘using’ an interpreter conceals some of the active contributions from all parties in an interpreted interaction. The interpreting scholar Cecilia Wadensjö has described interpreting as a *dance for three/pas de trois* (Wadensjö, 1992). This means that for an interpreted conversation to work, all of the participants have to contribute. For the professional participants in particular, the presence of an interpreter cannot be reduced to a situation where they merely ‘use’ the interpreter. Without being conscious or informed that the interpreter is part of the interaction (cf. Roy, 1992; Wadensjö, 1992; Metzger, 1999; and many others), participants’ attention to the impact of an interpreter in the situation may be reduced. The presence of an interpreter should rather be considered a signal that they need to be particularly alert and prepared for a different, more complicated and possibly more challenging way of communicating with their clients or colleagues.

Stating that we *work with*, rather than use, interpreters, is also a way to empower the professionals in an interpreted dialogue, since it clarifies that the responsibility for their part of the communication ultimately rests with them, and not with the interpreter or the client(s). By *cooperating with* or *working with* the interpreter, it is possible for professionals to retain their responsibility. This however requires that the interpreter is conscious of their own responsibility, the professional’s responsibility and the division of labor (cf. Abbott 1988) that demarcates the boundaries between their work. Following this argument, we also suggest using the word *primary participants* rather than ‘users’ or ‘clients’ about the people who communicate via an interpreter. Warnicke & Plejert (2012) use the term *primary participants* in their study of the interpreter’s mediation in video relay service calls, where they show the active participation and coordination done by the interpreters. While the coordination may be more salient in a situation where the primary participants do not see or hear one another, we know that the interpreter has an active role in coordinating the talk in any interpreted dialogue.

To mark the difference in participant status between those who want to or need to talk to each other (the *primary participants*) and the interpreter, the term *ratified participant* can be used about interpreters (Pöchhacker, 2012). The interpreter is not a primary participant, but the interpreter’s participation is justified by the primary participants’ need for interpreting services. Informed professionals, of which deaf professionals possibly stand out as particularly experienced, *work with* their interpreters, as they know that communicating via interpreters is different from communicating without an interpreter present. As has been emphasized by for example Young, Oram and Napier (2019), recognizing that the primary participants *work with*, or *communicate via* an interpreter is not only an act to bring attention to all the participants’ contribution to the interpreted dialogue, it also requires an “orientation to deaf people’s cultural-linguistic identity because it would enable an equivalent recognition of all concerned as different language users” (Young et al. 2019, 104).

Considering the primary participants to be *different language users*, leads us to another term related to interpreting that should be avoided – ‘reverse interpreting’ or ‘voicing’.

### 1.2. Interpreting from a spoken language to a signed language

Historically, most of the work sign language interpreters did was conducted in the direction from a spoken into a signed language, perhaps with the exception of dialogue interpreting of for example doctor-patient conversations. Signed language interpreting was primarily a means to convey information from the hearing majority society to a deaf minority, so when interpreters in exceptional cases interpreted from a signed language to a spoken language, this was considered ‘reverse interpreting’. The use of this term fortunately seems to be declining. As higher education became accessible to more deaf people, gradually interpreting “in the other direction” became more sought after, even to the extent that deaf professionals in many cases are known to hearing non-signers through an interpreter (Young et al., 2019). The term ‘voicing’, or sometimes ‘voicing for’, is however still used to denote the

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particular task of interpreting from a signed into a spoken language. The Swedish and Norwegian terms that are often used are similar in that they literally mean 'speech-interpreting'.

It is our opinion that we are, again, faced with a term that tends to hide the work the interpreter is doing, instead indicating that all they do is to "add voice to the signs" that are produced by the signer. However, as the signed and spoken languages the interpreter works between differ in vocabulary, grammar and syntax, this is obviously not the case. The task they are fulfilling is to interpret (often simultaneously) from a signed into a spoken language. The terminology used should reflect this, and thus this task should be described as precisely what it is – interpreting from a signed language into a spoken language – for example from British Sign Language into spoken English. This process is indeed different than simply adding 'voice' to the signs, and it also requires an intense cognitive process that must take some time. The *time* required for proper interpreting takes us to the third term we want to discuss.

### 1.3. *Processing time*

When describing the work of interpreters, and how an interpreted interaction will take place, interpreters often say that there will be a 'delay' before the information reaches the other party, and terms such as 'lag time' or 'time lag' are used. (The French term 'décalage' is also used sometimes, particularly in relation to (spoken language) conference interpreting.) What all of these terms have in common is that they indicate that interpreting takes time, without actually acknowledging why this is so. In the edited volume mentioned initially in this article, Tiselius (2018) discusses a selection of models that aim to explain the interpreting process. Seleskovitch's interpretive theory of translation (Seleskovitch & Lederer, 1984), Russell's meaning-based model (Russell, 2005), Gile's effort model (Gile, 1995), and Cokely's sociolinguistic model (Cokely, 1992) are but a few of the models that reveal the work the interpreter does in order to interpret (simultaneously and/or consecutively) as well as coordinate the interpreted interaction. These models show *why* it takes time to interpret, and in order to make the continuous work conducted by interpreters more salient, we suggest using terms such as *processing time*, also used by for example Russell (2005, 136), and Tiselius (2018). This is a term that recognizes the interpreter's work more than 'lag time' or 'delay' do. *Processing time* may also serve to make others more conscious that the time difference between the primary participants' utterances and the interpreter's utterance is an inherent part of an interpreted dialogue, and a sign of the work being done by the interpreter(s). Acknowledging the *processing time* can also make primary participants more aware of the impact of the interpreter on the interpreted dialogue, cf. our discussion above regarding the primary participants' responsibility for making an interpreted dialogue work.

## 2. Summary

The increasing numbers of deaf professionals who have pursued educational and professional careers, many of whom have extensive experience of working with interpreters, have helped reveal that some popular concepts used about interpreting may conflate and conceal, rather than reveal, what is actually going on in an interpreted interaction. We would therefore like to see terminology used that in a better way reflects how people create meaning when communicating, what interpreters do in interpreted interaction, and also what the primary participants have to do in order for communication to work. Additionally, we would like to see terminology that reflects the fact that interpreters work between two languages - they do not merely "add sound to signs" - and that the act of interpreting between two languages requires *processing time*. Studies of interpreted interactions show that the interpreter is an active participant in the interpreted interaction, and this should be reflected in the concepts we use about interpreting and the interpreter's work.

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