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Interview with Sergio Peña, Multicultural and Multilingual Interpreter and Educator

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Abstract

Sergio Peña is a certified interpreter in ASL, English, Spanish, and Mexican Sign Language (LSM). He is the co-author of *Lo que hace a un interprete ser interprete. Técnicas y herramientas para los intérpretes de lenguas señadas y español* [What makes an interpreter be an interpreter: Techniques and tools for interpreters working with signed language and Spanish]. Claire Ramsey and he also co-authored “Sign Language Interpreting at the Border of the Two Californias,” which was included in *Interpreting in Multilingual, Multicultural Contexts.* (Locker McKee & Davis, 2010). He holds a bachelor’s degree in liberal studies from San Diego State University with a specialization in linguistics. He is a coordinator and teacher in the Interpreter Trainer Program at Universidad Autónoma de Baja California under the school of languages in Tijuana, B.C., Mexico. The following interview was conducted as part of a graduate course experience in which students conversed with educators outside of North America.

Keywords: trilingual, multilingual, Spanish, English, American Sign Language, Lengua de Señas Mexicana

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Marla: Would you mind discussing your background?

Sergio: I was born in Los Angeles, California, but raised in Tijuana, Mexico —I call myself Mexican with dual citizenship and not Mexican-American. Both my parents are Mexican: My mother is from Tecate, Baja California, while my father is from the city of Las Palmas, Jalisco. Our native language is Spanish. However, growing up in a city that borders on California in the United States gave me exposure to English as a common second language for the community.

Our traditions in regard to language, family, food, music, and loyalty are very much part of the Mexican way of life. Being Mexican has always been a way of life. Being American has always been a commodity and to some a privilege, to others, an opportunity, and to many members of my extended family, the “American Dream.” In my immediate family's case, we had all of it. We benefited from the opportunities on both sides of the border. My father learned English, while my mother did not. This meant that English was not a language we used at home. English was used to understand the broadcast news (Dad) and for myself to try to understand the cartoons and daily shows on TV. I went to elementary school in Tijuana, so Spanish was not only my social language but also the language of my academic foundations. I commuted to the States to go to junior high and high school there. This is when my English started to sprout. All through my school years in the States, I struggled with the language. I had so many ELL (English Language Learner) classes that I only took one elective that I can remember outside of the reading, writing, English, and communication types of classes. My issue was that throughout my school years in the States I could not think in English. Spanish was the language I thought in. I would always translate everything I would read, hear, or see to myself back into my native language. I think this is why I became an interpreter.

Marla: What brought you into the interpreting profession?

Sergio: As I just mentioned, moving from my L1 to my L2 was automatic for me. My mom would sit next to me during a TV show and she would ask me what they were saying. I would start interpreting everything simultaneously into Spanish for her. Telephone interpreting became a daily task: “Call the doctor, set up an appointment with this person,” there and then, or I might need to find out an estimate for something. Although, I did have an older and a younger sibling, I was somehow the designated interpreter/translator for my mom. Mail was a big issue, even for my father who understood English. I was always “sight translating” all kinds of letters for my parents, medical stuff, banking or credit-related documents, and so on.

During all this time, I was also involved in my spiritual activities with our local congregation in Tijuana. I was the sign language interpreter for the deaf members (which was a small group of about 10, including two children my age) from the time I was about 10 years old. I learned social communication skills by interacting with the deaf kids when I was about 5 or 6 years old. I believe that these deaf friends were the ones who convinced me that

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languages and interpreting were my thing. We used to gather for spiritual meetings three times a week, twice during weeknights and once during the weekend. And I remember that I would get home, do my homework and then go to Raquel's home (she was a deaf member of the congregation) and prepare for the meeting's discussions, talks, and participation by/in the congregation: We were always given a study program in advance.

Going back to your original question, it was the two deaf kids, Teodoro and Gerardo, and Raquel who caused me to move into the sign language interpreting field. My mother was the one who encouraged me to move into English language interpreting.

So how did I end up in the profession? College, of course! When I finished high school, I had no idea what I was going to do with my life. I had a friend who was into electronics and he convinced me to pursue a career as a technician in electronics. So I started taking classes in this area. However, while I was looking at the school catalogue for classes for the second semester, I saw a class called American Sign Language/Interpreting, listed in one of the first pages. My jaw dropped with excitement. I thought: "You mean, I do this for free when I can actually get paid and turn it into a profession?" I started to analyze all the requirements for becoming an ASL interpreter and decided to change majors. I also encountered Spanish/English interpreters in court settings, and thought it was an awesome profession.

Marla: What was your path to becoming a trilingual/multilingual interpreter?

Sergio: I think I explained the foundations in my previous answer. However, the whole idea of trilingualism or multilingualism was not even something that I ever believed would be part of me. I had become convinced that I was a strong Spanish speaker with weaknesses in his English, because I always had to take additional English classes throughout my education, even during my college years.

Marla: Are you affiliated with Mano a Mano²?

Sergio: Yes. I have been part of Mano a Mano³ from the day Mano a Mano was created during our inaugural gathering in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1999.

Marla: You co-authored the book Lo que hace a un interprete SER INTERPRETE, Técnicas y herramientas para los intérpretes de lenguas señadas y español. [What makes an interpreter be an interpreter: Techniques and tools for interpreters working with signed language and Spanish] What was your goal in writing this book?

Sergio: First of all, we need a corpus in our language. There are hundreds and hundreds of books on interpretation/translation in English. The Spanish-speaking community has always had to rely on the English text. I started out thinking, "Why not translate some of the books that are out there, so we can start using them as our sources to mentor and guide interpreters working with Spanish?" I even started to contact some of the authors of books already written in English in the field of sign language interpreting to ask them if they would allow a group of specialists to do the translation of their books. I presented it to them in a way that is made it hard to say no. Some said they would be willing to give permission; however, the more I got into drafting the project, the more I realized that these writings needed to be adapted to our Spanish-speaking audience, our Latino culture. Our idiosyncrasies were such that the professional roles in the English-speaking communities did not overlap with our

² Mano a Mano is a volunteer, non-profit organization of trilingual interpreters working between Spanish, English, and ASL (<https://www.manoamano-unidos.org>)

³ In 1999, with support of the National Multicultural Interpreter Project, the first national gathering of interpreters who work in Spanish-influenced communities occurred in Boston, Massachusetts, and Mano a Mano was created. See: <https://www.manoamano-unidos.org/about-us/>

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Spanish roles. So I decided to start from scratch. I started to look for a co-author, because two heads are better than one. It took over a year before I decided to invite José Luís Magaña to join me in this enormous task. The second reason for writing this book was something I mentioned when we presented it in Mexico City. I told the audience,

I hope this is only the beginning of many books that will be also written by all of you. You too have so much to contribute to our field. For years, I have asked you not to tell me how to do it, but rather, document it. Put it in writing, give me the sources of your claim. Therefore, I know many of you are going to be “poked” by our book, and there will be some areas where you have more to say about it, or disagree, or claim that you said it first, and so forth. Well, now is your chance to put it down in writing. Let’s start writing and documenting it and backing up everything we say and share about interpreting for the Deaf in Spanish-speaking communities. -Sergio Peña

Mexico has an oral culture. We hand down folk stories, sayings, and proverbs orally; we do not write them down. Our heritage tends to be spoken and not written, although things are now changing in this new era of technology. Although in our field we have linguists, historians, anthropologists, successful teachers for the deaf, researchers, and so forth, we as a culture do not share our findings, our research. We like to be the owners of our research and our “knowledge.” Why is this? The economy is not at its best (actually, it never has been), there is a lot of corruption, and people are afraid that their work will be plagiarized or pirated. It has happened in the past in so many fields. Even if you take your case to the authorities, corruption is obvious, because whoever pays wins the case. So I do understand why my people don't want to publish something, however, I do believe that the benefits outweigh the risks. This was also why it took me so long to find the right co-author. He or she had to be willing to accept that our published book would be eventually pirated and that others would profit financially from our book.

There are people out there who are more qualified than I am, or have more education than José Luís and myself, but these qualified people are not writing up their research and findings. Let us see what happens when the entire Spanish-speaking communities and interpreters for the deaf do this and they see that a precedent has been set. With the exception of one or two countries, there are no Spanish textbooks that universities or any kind of schools can use to train interpreters. That is why we decided to write it in such a way that all countries where people interpret for the deaf into or from Spanish could use it.

Marla: For whom would you recommend this book?

Sergio: This book is written for all kinds of readers: novices, bilinguals, trilinguals, and others who work with Spanish-speaking cultures in whatever way, as well as sign language users. If Spanish is a language you would like to improve in, there is a whole chapter dedicated to analyzing and understanding the cultural/linguistic aspects of it.

Marla: You also wrote [a chapter entitled] “Sign Language Interpreting at the Border of the Two Californias” with Claire Ramsey. Can you describe if and how these works relate to each other?

Sergio: Let me tell you first how they don't relate to each other. The latter one focuses on how two interpreters were exposed to two different kinds of sign languages and two different kinds of spoken languages. However, it is not because we are foreign language learners or taking classes as second or third or even fourth language learners like many polyglots do. The phenomena happened because Claire and I just happened to be at the right place, at the right time. In my view this chapter focuses more on the anthropological approach as opposed to the linguistic and skilled base of the *SER INTERPRETE* book. We share our behaviors based on the influences of these four languages⁴ which we encountered during a crucial part of our life. These four languages shape and make who we are and why we do what we do. Is this something common? Of course not, because we not only adapt any of our

⁴ Four languages refers to Spanish, English, American Sign Language and Mexican Sign Language

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four languages and four cultures as needed, but our brains are always wired to look for more and more ways to contribute our knowledge and experiences to our colleagues, our mentors, our mentees, and our friends from both side of the border. Doing so can allow us to be some sort of hybrid individuals which gives us the “opportunity” of being one step ahead of many people in the fields of sign language interpreting, sign language teaching, spoken language interpreting, and of multicultural and multilingual experts. Claire and I were ahead of the times; multiculturalism, privilege and social justices were not yet variables in the preparation or training of interpreters for the deaf. Our interpreting community was still busy trying to understand deaf culture and hearing culture and the meaning of being *bilingual/bicultural*. When the philosophy of multiculturalism and the diversity, the celebration of cultures and languages and identities started to “boom,” Claire and I did not have to transition into it because we had already been living it for years.

Marla: What are you most proud of in terms of developments with trilingual/multilingual interpreting?

Sergio: We live in a time when diversity and multilingualism are at their peak. Interpreters who do not acknowledge all the diverse elements of cultural intersectionality and social justice will not remain in the interpreting field for long. The deaf community is no longer just about deaf culture, it is now about Latino deaf, Black deaf, Straight or LGBT deaf, Bilingual deaf, Educated deaf, deaf Interpreter, deaf Women, deaf Immigrants, Undocumented deaf, South American deaf, deaf with Spanish-speaking parents, deaf people familiar with the Latino culture, deaf people who are monolingual or bicultural or multicultural, and so forth. Some of these people belong to many identities and groups rather than just one. So my question is: do you want to be part of our interpreting community or an ally to the Deaf community? Multiculturalism is a must. Multilingualism is about skills and if we learn or acquire those through exposure to the language, it won't be too demanding. Multilingualism allows us to be part of many cultures if we include language as part of that. The hardest thing about learning a new language is the second one. If you already know two languages, your brain is hardwired to acquire a third or fourth and so on.

Marla: What are your thoughts on the current state of interpreter curricula in the U.S.?

Sergio: I believe that many interpreting programs and their curricula do not prepare interpreters to be job ready, especially when it comes to voicing skills. The curriculum should include English-language analysis, writing conventions, and public speaking. These courses could allow interpreters to focus on actually understanding the English language as much as the curriculum requires [students to have] ASL experience at ASL Levels I to V or higher.

Marla: What recommendations do you have for educators who want to bring in curricula that addresses trilingual interpreting?

Sergio: There is definitely a need for trilingual interpreting. Our Spanish-speaking Latino Deaf consumers increasingly require the services of trilingual interpreters. However, if the bilingual curricula are weak, the trilingual curriculum will also have deficiencies. There needs to be a strong and successful bilingual program before we can add a third language to the equation. Educators should consider that trilingualism is an opportunity to revamp the bilingual IPPs [interpreter preparation programs] as that will allow adding in a third language. At the moment the need is for Spanish, but later down the road, there could be a need for a third or fourth additional language.

Marla: What keeps you awake at night when you think of trilingual interpreter education and/or access?

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Sergio: Most of our trilingual interpreters have not been trained as such. Many are skilled certified bilingual interpreters who have added Spanish to their résumé because they know social or family Spanish. However, they lack academic Spanish, and a very high register is required when interpreting in an immigration prison [for example], otherwise the appropriate language is not being used when interpreting in that setting. This is also true in every other setting within the judiciary system. There are very few of us out there in the trilingual field who are qualified or certified to meet the high demand for services in these specialized assignments. In order for me to have a good night's sleep, we need to have more trilingual trained and qualified interpreters providing access to the Latino Deaf Community and their family members.

Marla: What would you like to see done differently?

Sergio: I wish the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf⁵ would include Spanish on its list of certifications. Puerto Rico needs a certification that could allow their Spanish/ASL combination skills to be part of the options evaluated. This is not offered, even though there is a local RID chapter there. I would also like the RID to allow the BEI (Board for Evaluation of Interpreters) Certification⁶ as an acceptable form of an interpreter certification. If the EIPA (Educational Interpreting Performance Assessment®)⁷ is an evaluation that RID accepts, then BEI should be too.

Marla: What excites you these days?

Sergio: The production of more trilingual types of corpora. We need books, videos, online training, college training, workshops, and so much more. When more resources are produced to help trilingual interpreters, I am beside myself with joy.

Marla: What's an article or book that changed how you viewed interpreting?

Sergio: Cokely's (1992) book *Interpretation: A Sociolinguistic Mode*. This book showed me the human side of being an interpreter.

Marla: What questions should I have asked you but I didn't?

Sergio: One question is: How do you manage all the different dialects of Spanish when interpreting? I do consider myself a trilingual interpreter, however my third language and strong skill-set is in Mexican Spanish. I am Mexican-American, my parents are Mexican, and my heritage is Mexican. Like most Mexicans, there is some Spanish (from Spain) in me, but over the generations it has become highly diluted. This said, I consider myself effectively qualified and skilled in Mexican Spanish. However Mexican Spanish is only one of many of the dialects that our consumers use here in the States. We have Spanish from Spain, Spanish from Puerto Rico, Spanish from the seven countries in Central America, Spanish from nine different countries in South America, Spanish from two countries in the Caribbean, and Spanish from one country in Central Africa. Although most of these countries share a basic and academic Spanish making it possible to communicate in a mutually intelligible manner, idiomatic Spanish varies greatly [among all these regional variants]. This creates a challenge for trilingual interpreters like myself.

⁵ See: www.rid.org

⁶ See https://www.michigan.gov/documents/mdcr/BEI_Study_Guide_Oct_28_368105_7.pdf

⁷ See: <http://www.classroominterpreting.org/eipa/>

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One way this can be managed is by using comprehension techniques such as relying on context to define specific or autochthonous terminology. Most of us have a list of vocabulary for the different countries which all use different terms for things we are familiar with, but we use different names in our native Spanish. We also rely a lot on our team interpreters when we work with one. It is a great experience to work as one of two trilingual interpreters with different Spanish backgrounds. Of course, there is always the prep prior to an interpreting assignment as well as the research afterwards. Eventually one ends up learning and memorizing the specific vocabulary from the 21 different Spanish-speaking countries.

A second question that I think is important is: How different are the cultures among the different Spanish-speaking communities that come from North America, Central and South America, and Spain? The idiomatic language used may be quite different and the reason has to do with culture. There are many shared customs among these countries including music and family values, but food, festivities, proverbs and sayings, television, entertainment, government and education are quite dissimilar. These latter differences are the items that are a challenge to trilingual interpreters, just like the regional Spanish dialects. One has to continually be studying and reviewing these differences in order to be an efficient trilingual interpreter.

Marla: Thank you very much for the interview, Sergio.

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