

## Interview with a Scholar: In Conversation with Risa Shaw

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# Interview with a Scholar: In Conversation with Risa Shaw

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## Abstract

This open forum article consists of an interview with Risa Shaw, a signed language interpreter educator, in which she reviews her doctoral research. Her study examined narratives and retellings, in both English and American Sign Language, of disclosures to family members of sexual assault. The findings reveal the importance of context in creating meaning and in shaping narrative structure in discourse. In addition, the work highlights the manner in which interpreters must prepare for the work in order to effectively interpret in the diverse settings where narratives are retold. This interdisciplinary study has implications for interpreters and interpreter educators, across languages and cultures, in terms of how the task of interpreting is conceptualized and taught. Finally, the article draws attention to some of the crucial issues that researchers must attend to when conducting linguistic studies that draw on knowledge from non-dominant linguistic communities.

Keywords: interpreters and interpreter education; meaning-in-context; narratives and retellings; American Sign Language (ASL) and spoken English; sibling sexual abuse

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# Interview with a Scholar: In Conversation with Risa Shaw

*Welcome to the Open Forum section of this journal. The intent in this section is to be able to encourage opinion articles and to broaden the dialogue within our profession via interviews with interpreter educators.*

*To that end, we will kick off our first issue with an interview with Risa Shaw. Risa is an interpreter, interpreter educator, and researcher who received her PhD in Interdisciplinary Studies with a concentration in Sociolinguistics in 2007. She is an associate professor at Gallaudet University in the Department of Interpretation. Her work over the years in the field of interpreting has helped many of us to see interpreting from a social justice frame of reference and how the interpreter influences the interaction. Risa co-authored the bachelor of arts curriculum and the revised master of arts curriculum in interpretation at Gallaudet University. She also co-authored a curriculum on interpreting in legal settings (beginning in 1995) that continues to be used throughout the United States, including a fundamentals course and several specific focus courses (i.e., preparation, deaf-hearing interpreter teams, monitor role, law enforcement, role and ethics, jury duty, and mock deposition). Risa was in the first class of master's students to graduate from the Teaching Interpretation Program at Western Maryland College (now McDaniel College), building on her foundation of a bachelor of arts degree with a major in linguistics and an associate of arts degree in interpreting. Much of her career has focused on interpreting in legal settings, and she holds the CSC, CI and SC:L certifications from the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf in the United States. She has based her practice in and lived in the Washington, D.C., area since 1981. Risa is currently involved in conducting a study of interpreters working in legal settings with Dr. Len Roberson and myself, Dr. Debra Russell.*

*Risa is also the editor of (and contributor to) a powerful anthology of writings and art by women who have been sexually abused by their brothers. Not Child's Play: An Anthology on Brother-Sister Incest was published in 2000, and since that time Risa has been invited to speak on radio, television and at numerous conferences. Though this topic is a painful and very difficult one, her book and her dissertation research have shown that the act of speaking up and speaking out is transformative and life-giving. Her work has helped countless women and families find the courage to speak up and talk openly about this taboo subject. Risa's*

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## Interview with a Scholar

*seminal work also has shaped her dissertation work, which is the focus of the interview you are about to read. For more information on Not Child's Play see [Lunchboxpress.org](http://Lunchboxpress.org).*

*For her dissertation research, Risa undertook a very challenging study of childhood sexual assault victims/survivors,<sup>3</sup> examining how narrative retellings in American Sign Language (ASL) and English are shaped when presented in differing contexts. Her study has important implications for interpreters and interpreter educators, and we are fortunate to have Risa walk us through some of the key findings of her study. (Her study also has additional sociolinguistic and traumatology findings, and you can download her dissertation from the Gallaudet website: [http://interpretation.gallaudet.edu/Faculty-Staff/Interpretation/Shaw\\_Risa.html](http://interpretation.gallaudet.edu/Faculty-Staff/Interpretation/Shaw_Risa.html)). What you will read may challenge you to think about how we conceptualize the task of interpreting and how we then infuse that philosophy in our teaching and in the programs in which we work. The findings invite us to consider the critical concepts of *linguicism* and *audism*,<sup>4</sup> and how central those concepts are to the life experiences of deaf people and linguistic minority communities. Further, Risa encourages each of us to examine how we apply those concepts to our understanding of the work of teaching interpreting, to the personal narratives of deaf people, and to the interactions in which we interpret. Finally, the nature of contextual factors, such as shared experience and preparation, emerge as key findings that can help interpreters to determine where and how meaning is co-created in any given interaction.*

*Risa's study also gives us much to consider as researchers, both from a design and from an interdisciplinary perspective. Her insight into constructing effective research in a field that is ripe for rigorous study is helpful to each of us, whether we are action researchers in our own classrooms or researchers within academic institutions. In this interview, we also touch on the changing nature of our international community of educators and interpreters and the ways in which our increased contact with each other is leading to new insights and discoveries. Risa is definitely on my list of "researchers to watch" and after reading this conversation, I think you will see why. I hope that you will enjoy the conversation with Risa and that her comments will stimulate further conversations among you and your colleagues.*

*Deb: Risa, tell us about yourself\_how is it that you came to interpreting?*

*Risa: I graduated in 1983 from Gallaudet University (then Gallaudet College) with an associate of arts in interpreting. I'm originally from Kansas and Nebraska, and I entered Gallaudet with a limited knowledge of ASL. I lived in the dorm, and it was that immersion experience that taught me the language and culture. As I look back,*

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<sup>3</sup> With regard to terminology Risa said: "I use the term *victim/survivor* simply because a term must be chosen. Neither I, nor the study participants, feel that any of the available terms (in either ASL or English) accurately captures the experience of having been sexually abused and living in its aftermath. This is true for the vocabulary available for us and the experience as a whole and applies equally to the terms I have chosen such as *sexual assault*, *sexual abuse*, *incest*, and so forth. See Shaw, Risa. 2007. *Meaning in Context: The Role of Context and Language in Narratives of Disclosure of Sibling Sexual Assault*. Unpublished dissertation. Union Institute & University.

<sup>4</sup> *Audism* is a term coined by Tom Humphries in 1977 that refers to "the notion that one is superior based on one's ability to hear or behave in the manner of one who hears." (Shaw, 2007, p. 86).

## Russell and Shaw

I know I was there at a really fabulous time. The ASL Language Research Laboratory was there \_as were Charlotte Baker Shenk, MJ Bienvenu, and Dennis Cokely (leading ASL research scholars), among others. I had ASL classes nearly every night of the week, and at the time, there was a small enough number of interpreters in the D.C. area that the interpreters all knew each other. I also had the great fortune of being introduced to interpreting as a meaning-based process of transferring meaning, coupled with putting that into the context of culture. My undergraduate work focused on linguistics and women's studies; then I did a master's in teaching interpreting. Again, I was fortunate to be able to participate in this program that included visiting students from several counties, all of whom brought their own context and perspectives. I was required to do research projects for both my bachelor's and master's programs (the first was on register and the second on team interpreting and the use of written notes), which gave me a taste for research.

*Deb: What did your career path look like after that?*

Risa: I started teaching and giving presentations in 1987\_I think that was too early in my career, as I had only four years of interpreting experience. However, in the master's program, which I began in 1986, I had a chance to teach with others. That was such a rich experience; I got the opportunity to work with other students who are now leading practitioners and educators in the signed language interpreting field, including Karen Malcolm, Sandra Gish, Carol Fay, Cindy Herbst and Robert Hahn. This helped build a more solid foundation for my interpreting and teaching practice, as did teaching consecutive interpreting. Consecutive interpreting offered me an opportunity to analyze the work in a deeper way\_a way that really allowed looking at what it is you're doing as an interpreter, how you are interpreting, and what that means in terms of how the message is being expressed.

It was, and continues to be, cyclical\_the more interpreting and the more teaching I did, the more knowledge and interest I developed for both. When I started interpreting, I interpreted a lot of music, which really meant that I did a great deal of translation. Because it was the early 1980s, there was a lot of opportunity to do interpreting with women's music. I would study the lyrics and then talk to the musicians about what the lyrics represented. I had the help of a brilliant and very skillful deaf ASL coach, Dr. MJ Bienvenu, and we would work with the translations and consecutive interpretations (even if we didn't call it that back then).

*Deb: Tell us about something that you are proud of in the early stages of your career?*

Risa: I co-authored a legal interpreting curriculum with Carla Mathers, which is still being used today, and delivered numerous intensive trainings for interpreters working in legal settings around the United States.

*Deb: What led you to the PhD that you completed in 2007?*

Risa: It was one of the conditions of employment at Gallaudet when I was hired in 2001, and though the logistics of being in school and working full time were tricky, I am very aware of how lucky I am to have had this

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## Interview with a Scholar

opportunity, and I am delighted with what I got to do! I chose Union Institute & University, in part because of the knowledge of doctoral programs I had gained through interpreting in many of them.

*Deb: What excites you about your current work?*

Risa: The teaching and the research. Working with students, many of whom I get to be a part of ushering them into their careers, is very exciting. And in the end, the students we work with become our colleagues. One of the courses I usually teach is a foundations course for interpreting, and to see people get so excited about what it means to interpret...is the best. The research learning and opportunities I have had have been incredible. I'm looking forward to more opportunities, to writing up my research findings, and to teaching research courses.

*Deb: Anything else you want to say when you think back about your own experience as an interpreter and your journey?*

Risa: Now that I am done with my doctorate, I've begun to interpret more again. Whether we are interpreting, teaching, or conducting research, I think one of the most important and joyful experiences is finding the people who inspire, motivate, and guide us. I have been very fortunate in this area as well, and those who have taught, mentored, and guided me along the way have been such gifts to me.

*Deb: Let's talk a bit about international issues. What do you think are the current issues facing us as educators in North America and other countries, and are we developing international collaboration? What do you think we're learning from each other?*

Risa: I have not done a lot on an international level yet, but I think that work is essential in broadening our perspectives and improving our work. I think that there are some important events that are shaping us as an international community—for example the World Association of Sign Language Interpreters (WASLI) has done a lot to bring attention to signed language interpreting in an international context. I think the *International Journal of Interpreter Education (IJIE)* will also help to facilitate our conversations at the international level in the spoken and signed language interpreting professions. I am delighted with all of the journal sections that will allow for a deeper and broader way to talk about the work and that will encourage us, as an international community, to share perspectives. Conferences like *Critical Link: Interpreting in the Community* also help to broaden our thinking and allow us to share with each other. We need to always consider the dominant culture, the privilege that is attached to it and that informs much of what those of us in the dominant culture(s) do, and the ways in which the dominant culture/people impose our/their influence and power, and how that affects what we do and how we do it. This is not a stagnant or monolithic notion, and it requires us to continually be open to, and consider, our privilege and use of power, especially when it is “well intentioned” or unintentional. I think WASLI will help us with this, having had the first conference in South Africa and returning in 2011.

## Russell and Shaw

I think we have a great deal to learn from one another, *because of* the different languages we work with and cultures in which they are embedded. When we place our work and ourselves in a wider context and are open to various cultures, our practice can blossom and change for the better.

I am fortunate to be at Gallaudet University where I've worked with a number of students (and have been their advisor) from various parts of the world. This has been fantastic in terms of increasing my understanding of global perspectives and decreasing my culture-bound attitudes. For example, I worked with a European, white, hearing woman living in an Arab culture who contributed perspectives and ideas that we never would have considered otherwise. This also applies because of the deaf Italian student who graduated from our program—a student whose work between two signed languages opened many people's eyes and hearts. Another example is a student we had from Cameroon who arrived with several languages: his tribal language, French, English, Cameroon Sign Language, and some ASL. His presence fostered/forced a great deal of creativity from the faculty and other students as we approached the learning in a collaborative way. It became clear that our own limits and cultural barriers were the constraining factors in education and that the students' education and experience were the riches. I believe one way I can contribute to the international community is to encourage and help these students to retain their home languages, especially if they will return to their home countries.

*Deb: What do you think are the biggest issues facing all of us as educators?*

Risa: We need to create (or maybe simply own) and teach from coherent philosophies of how we view interpreting and how we teach interpreting. As well, I think we need to work towards understanding interpretation through a lens of discourse analysis and context. This would require that we move away from coding and looking for meaning on a lexical or phrasal level without considering the context. Unfortunately, I don't see enough of either of these happening in our field.

There is more and more research about interpreting and that which applies to interpreting, and this is wonderful. *And*, we need to develop a more critical analysis of the work. In order to make our research base stronger, we need to be able to reflect on the previous studies, learning from the strengths and also the weaknesses of those studies. I think we are shifting in a positive way towards critical analysis and discernment in research versus accepting all research as well done and methodologically sound. Doing this is an indication of maturation of the field. I also think that more cross-cultural and international research is needed with an eye to looking through the lens in a way that might stop the privilege of the dominant way of looking at things. Interdisciplinary studies and research that focus on non-dominant, non-majority issues and people is beneficial for everyone.

Another issue is that many programs do not screen for bilingual fluency prior to accepting students into interpreter education/training programs. This is something that would be helpful to us as a field, seeing language learning and interpreting learning as being separate, with language learning preceding interpreting skills. This could produce more competent interpreters, and in addition, it would stop sending the message (however unintentional) that the fluency required for signed languages is less than that for spoken language. As a field, we

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## Interview with a Scholar

don't want to perpetuate the idea that proficiency in one of the two languages is any less necessary or less important.

*Deb: Tell us about your research\_what did you study and how did you create the study?*

Risa: I studied language use and interaction in both ASL and English, separately. It was a sociolinguistic, interdisciplinary, multilayered study that was designed with a change in context (conversations vs. interviews, different participant backgrounds, and different purposes for the talk). I thought many of the findings were applicable to both the teaching and practice of interpreting and translating. The focus of discussion in the first 116 contexts is women victims/survivors of sibling sexual abuse talking with each other (and later an interview about having disclosed to one or more of their family members. So, it explores how victims/survivors talk about revealing the fact of having been sexually assaulted by their brother to one or more family members.<sup>5</sup> The first context I looked at were conversations between two victims/survivors; there's a conversation in ASL and a separate conversation in American English and the participants knew those conversations would be held between the victims/survivors, who had both disclosed to their families.

*Deb: And it didn't matter when they had told?*

Risa: Right. The study actually spans having disclosed about the abuse from the age of 12 to the age of 40-plus, and that span also extends from having told nearly 30 years prior to the study, to just several months prior to it.

The second context was interviews with interviewers who had not experienced sexual assault of any type. Each of the four participants, the two deaf participants and the two non-deaf participants, were interviewed in their native language by a research interviewer. The interviewers had training in the areas of sexual abuse, domestic violence, trauma, and research interviews. The study participants told the same disclosure stories in the interviews that were told in the conversations.

To summarize, I designed the study to see whether contextual factors (see below for more on context) did or did not emerge as salient features in the discourse and interactions by looking at direct discourse. What I mean by that, is discourse that was unmediated by an interpreter. Some people have asked why I didn't look at interpreted interactions, why I didn't have the non-deaf and deaf people talk to one another. This was because I wanted to look at the discourse and interaction in the two different languages in order to compare across

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<sup>5</sup> Though not the focus here, the study illuminates themes that emerged in the disclosure stories and the significance of disclosing and further telling one's stories. All of the study participants displayed a similar pattern and trajectory. First, their narratives demonstrated taking control and asserting their agency by disclosing in the first place. This was followed by a sense of diminished agency when dealing with family responses (retraumatization) to the fact of the incest. That was followed with more agency by integrating the abuse, disclosures, and family responses, and understanding the significance of disclosing. The data also showed that the participants experienced transformation by reclaiming their agency in disclosing, telling and retelling their trauma stories.



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## Russell and Shaw

languages. I chose un-interpreted interactions because the mere presence of an interpreter and the act of interpreting changes, to a greater or lesser degree, how people communicate and interact.

*Deb: Let's talk about your findings\_what stands out from the study?*

Risa: In general, the study highlights that meaning is dependent on contextual factors, and understanding those factors can provide a way to more fully understand the discourse. So, the study shows the importance of the interplay between contexts, which includes the setting and purpose of the interaction; who the interlocutors are and their relationships with one another; the expectations, goals, shared knowledge, and background knowledge that interlocutors bring to an interaction; and the actual discourse used by the participants. And I think that because meaning resides in context, interpreters must seek to learn and understand these contextual factors in order to interpret effectively.

*Deb: How might your study be applied to interpreting practice and the teaching of interpreting?*

### ***Finding #1: Conceptualization of the task of interpreting***

Risa: There were five areas in which I applied the findings to interpreting and teaching interpreting. The first area of application, *how* we conceptualize the task of interpreting, is of the utmost importance. This study corroborates the sociolinguistic notion that meaning is co-constructed, that meaning is dependent on and intertwined in its context. So, for interpreters and teachers there are two key issues or implications linked to how we conceptualize the task of interpreting. First, how we think about the task determines where we think we can *locate* meaning. And second, how we think about the task determines how we think we can *express* meaning. So if we conceptualize the task of interpreting as a more literal, a more “word equals word,” a more lexical level *location of meaning*, if you will, discovery of meaning, our focus of where meaning will be, is on the words and phrases because that is where we see the meaning residing. Inherent in this notion is that we don't need to know a lot about context because context doesn't play an important part in this way of thinking. What follows then, is that if you look for meaning on a word or phrase level, you will only be able to deliver it on a word or phrase level.

Now, if we look at the task of interpreting as locating and delivering meaning-in-context (following the sociolinguistic notion of meaning being co-constructed in any given interaction)\_and lots of people have talked about this over the years, you (Deb Russell) have talked about it, as have Anna Witter-Merithew, Betty Colonomos, Dennis Cokely, Danica Seleskovitch, and others\_in order to discern that meaning, then we must search out, understand, and take into account contextual information. If we say our job is to discern meaning on the level of who these people are; what their relationships with one another are, in this interaction, and may have been; what their goals are and, maybe, how those goals changed through the interactions; what the setting is; what the expectations are; what the norms are; and what the content is; then, we are looking at the task in a very different way than if we believe the meaning lies mostly/only in the words and phrases. If how I conceptualize the task means I have to know something about all those things *in order to* understand what those words mean. . .that's very different.

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## Interview with a Scholar

If we conceptualize our job as figuring out meaning-in-context, then we can determine how the discourse may be expressed. We will be able to determine when discourse needs to be expressed on a more literal level, and this will be determined *because* of the context in which the interaction occurs.

*Deb: Do you have an example that might help people see that what you are saying?*

Risa: The one I often give to students is that my mom comes to town, and she wants to watch me teach. I teach in ASL, and she doesn't know the language, so I hire an interpreter. Part of what I tell the interpreter is that my mom is interested in seeing me teach; she's less interested in what I'm saying, less interested in the information. That may be a secondary interest to her, but she more wants to see how I interact with students... what I'm like in a classroom. My mom will be embarrassed if you draw much attention to her. I will introduce her to the class, but she is not going to want the interpreter to stop me for clarification on her behalf. She won't really want to participate; she'll just want to get an overall feel for things. My mom will talk with the interpreter before we start class. The students are very likely to want to say hi to her, they'll want to get to know her a little. They will all sign. So the interpreter will be interpreting between them and her, as well, because the language of the classroom is ASL. The interpreter is now going to think about what my mom wants to get out of this interaction and interpretation. The interpreter is going to know that my mom won't interrupt the class, and the interpreter may choose to interpret in a more narrative form at times. For example: "Right now they're talking about the lesson they did last week. I'm ("I" being the interpreter) not sure what the specifics were, but Risa is challenging them to think more deeply about what they wrote." Contrast this with the same setting when the dean has non-deaf guests visiting the university from other universities, and they've asked if they can observe my classroom. These people are watching how a teacher teaches and operates in a classroom, how I talk to the students, what information is being discussed, etc. The interpreter is going to focus on what the visitors, the dean, the university, and I want to get out of the interaction, which is different than what the interpreter would have focused on with my mom visiting my classroom. Unfortunately, these two very different situations are often cataloged as one and the same, simply a classroom visit by someone outside of the university.

*Deb: Tell us about your second research finding.*

### ***Finding #2: Shared experience and backchanneling (including linguisticism and audism)***

Risa: The data showed that one contextual factor, shared experience, influences the way language is used by the interlocutors, and so this has implications for us. In the study, when the victims/survivors talk to one another, they use backchanneling (or watching/listening responses) to index their shared experience or identity. One of the study participants characterized this as communicating, "I *totally* get what you're saying/I *know* your pain/I'm in your shoes." This type of back-channeling appeared with two types of shared experience: having experienced sexual assault and having grown up deaf in a non-deaf world. The backchanneling came in the form of sentences, lexical items, gestures, paralinguistic devices, laughter, and non-verbal behaviors in both ASL and English, and often more than one form appeared at a time (for example, laughter and lexical items). The variety of

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## Russell and Shaw

forms and the meaning was relative to the interlocutors' change in language and/or interactive behaviors in their discourse.

For interpreting this means we must be able to identify and comprehend when and why this type of backchanneling is used and to be able to convey it. We have to understand the shared experiences and relationships between the people with whom we are working to be able to access this. That highlights two questions: whether the interpreter has the shared experience or not, will she or he be able to recognize, understand, and convey the information that is present; and is this something that can be taught? There is a logistical element connected to this as well; with some of the behaviors being gestural and non-verbal, interpreters must be able to see the non-deaf participants, as well as the deaf participants, so placement becomes that much more important. This also has implications related to preparation, which I will talk about later.

I want to focus, for a minute, on the shared experience of being deaf (being members of a linguistic and cultural minority and/or disability group) because the *content* of this is applicable for most deaf people and, therefore, it could appear in any deaf/non-deaf interaction. The back-channeling that occurred when the study participants and research interviewers (all deaf) discussed the topic of being deaf in a non-deaf society functioned as “I *totally* get what you’re saying/I *know* your pain/I’m in your shoes.” This arose when they participants discussed “communication issues” in their disclosure stories. (I put that in quotes because the term does not capture the gravity or depth of what that means for the participants.) Another way to say this is that they were referencing their shared experiences of *audism* and *linguicism*.<sup>6</sup>

This leads to several implications for interpreters. The first is our understanding of, and respect for, how the concepts and ramifications of audism and linguicism play a major role in the work we do. To take that a step further, we need to have the ability to recognize the ways that audism and linguicism appear in discourse and interactions. Second, is how we conceptualize the task of interpreting and where we believe the meaning lies. In this data, the participants' meaning lies in their shared experience, not simply in their words. They never use the terms oppression or audism or linguicism, but they index these concepts in what they say and how they say it (their backchanneling signals). This raises the question of how interpreters can integrate this knowledge and these findings into one's interpreting practice, especially if we have never shared that experience, that is, non-deaf interpreters.

The deaf people in my study talked about linguicism and audism happening to them within their families, incidentally to describing how their agency was stripped from them when some of the hearing people in their

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<sup>6</sup> The term linguicism was coined by Skutnabb-Kangas in 1988. Linguicism is defined as “the ideologies and structures which are used to legitimate, effectuate and reproduce an unequal division of power and resources (both material and non-material) between groups which are defined on the basis of language” (Skutnabb-Kangas & Phillipson, 1990, p. 110). It is the belief in the inherent superiority of the ability to hear over those who do not and thereby the right to dominance and control of resources and power (Shaw, 2007, p. 84).

## Interview with a Scholar

families, immediately upon disclosure (in both of these victims/survivors' families), switched from using ASL to using spoken English. The deaf people were deprived of their agency because *someone else* decided to move into a language that is not and cannot be accessible to a deaf person.

I think that as interpreters and as teachers we, albeit sometimes unwittingly, perpetuate linguisticism and audism in our interactions with and around deaf people. My choice to use ASL or to use spoken English can strip someone else of her or his agency. So, for non-deaf interpreters operating within this culture we have to strive to understand and empathize with a deaf person's experience because these are really fundamental cultural constructs for deaf people as they negotiate life in a dominant non-deaf world.

*Deb: Would you talk about your third research finding?*

### ***Finding #3: Narratives\_background information leading up to the telling of a narrative***

Risa: I examined the amount of background information of participants prior to entry into the narratives and found a difference across languages. Entry into the narratives was marked by several features: the use of past tense; naming of the person(s) the participant had disclosed to and was about to focus on in her disclosure statement that she told the named person; and a sustained explanation of what happened in the disclosure. The data showed that the amount of background given in ASL before launching a narrative was greater than in English; this occurred in both the conversations and the interviews. I measured the time and number of propositions in the background information. For the first narrative of each participant the amount was as follows:

	ASL		English	
	Bettie	Pearl	Fran	Grace
Conversations				
Time elapsed:	1 min. 23 sec.	10 min. 58 sec.	13 sec.	38 sec.
Number of propositions:	11 propositions	107 propositions	3 propositions	8 propositions
Interviews				
Time elapsed:	2 min. 42 sec.	11 min. 50 sec	50 sec.	1 min. 5 sec.
Number of propositions:	16 propositions	91 propositions	8 propositions	10 propositions

*Table 1: Elapsed time and number of propositions providing background information preceding entry into first narrative (Shaw, 2007, p.144)*

## Russell and Shaw

Whether this is a linguistic or a cultural phenomenon, or simply a tendency of these four participants, needs to be explored further. If it is not simply a tendency of these participants, it has implications for teaching the languages, as well as teaching interpreters strategies, such as understanding the linguistic structure, what function is being carried out, and how you then construct the language using the appropriate type of discourse in the target language. This information is specific to American English and American Sign, and it is the type of information needed in any language that interpreters are working.

*Deb: You had another finding about narratives, right?*

### ***Finding #4: Narratives\_coherence in first-time telling and first-time retelling***

Risa: I had the great fortune of gathering data that included a first-time ever telling of a narrative and a first-time ever retelling of that narrative. This was serendipitous and very wonderful data that showed me structural differences in the two tellings. In addition, when I asked the study participant about these two tellings, she said, and I'm paraphrasing here, that the second one (the retelling) was much more "smooth" (her word) because she had never told that story to anyone. She also said that because the retelling was her second-time telling of the story, she could judge more easily what she wanted to say and how she wanted to say it. These were ASL narratives, so the findings are language specific (I did not locate any other studies in the literature on this). Research in the field of trauma indicates that lack of coherence in first-time tellings is characteristic in other languages. An example of this is the work done by Mary Harvey and her colleagues.

In the first-time telling there is a lack of time markers, discourse framing, and relationship between ideas and causality; and there is vagueness and ambiguity. The narrator does not situate the story or events in the story in time and does not indicate how information or events are related chronologically. She does not employ framing devices to specify focus (implicitly or explicitly) and the recipient is left with a feeling that the narrator is rambling. The narrator presents and discusses numerous topics and individual pieces of information but does not link them to one another; she fails to elucidate the relationship between ideas. Her discourse is vague and ambiguous; it lacks clarity and purpose of what she mentions and why she mentions it. In the retelling, albeit the first time she has retold the story (as confirmed with the study participant), the discourse is framed in her opening statement (she says *that* she disclosed, *when* she disclosed and *why* she disclosed), she uses time markers throughout, she identifies and inferences how and why topics and information are linked, and she specifies or provides enough information to permit the recipient to draw inferences about what she is talking about.

This provides linguistic structural information about ASL narratives and a lack of coherence in a first-time telling. We need to educate interpreters to recognize and convey coherent and non-coherent discourse and to understand the import of both types of discourse. Interpreters need to understand what a first-time telling might look like and how to determine the meaning of the structural form of the discourse in association with contextual factors. Do interpreters know what a narrative lacking coherence looks like? Again, context is so important; let's look at some specific settings where stories might be told for the first time. Think about police and other

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## Interview with a Scholar

investigators interviewing witnesses and suspects or the disclosures that people make in mental health settings. And also think about teachers getting the story for the first time of what happened on the playground at lunch or what happened at home last night. First-time tellings can happen in any setting. Are interpreters able to intentionally be disjointed or ambiguous in their rendering of the interpretation when that is what is appropriate?

Also, and this is for the second language learner of any language, we have a knack of being non-cohesive and lacking coherence in our second language. We have to be able to control that and use it only when necessary and when guided by the discourse and interaction that we are interpreting.

*Deb: Tell us about your fifth research finding.*

### ***Finding #5: Preparation***

Risa: This is a common thread in everything I've talked about so far. Depending on how we conceive of the task of interpreting, how we consider where meaning lies, and how we locate and express it... this will help determine how we consider preparation. On what level do you prepare; what groundwork needs to be completed for me to be effective as the interpreter in this situation, with these people? It's similar to what level you conceptualize the task of interpreting or find meaning. If I look at meaning and context, once I've concluded that the context is important, I will want to learn everything that I can about the contextual factors in order to then understand the actual interaction and the words/discourse that will be used. If I look at the task as a lexical or a literal translation, I probably will not go as far trying to find out about the context because I don't consider it an important factor, and I may well consider it a hindrance. I think that, often times, when we look at preparation, if we are thinking about doing things literally, we want mostly content information. How can we, in good conscience, accept an assignment without doing the groundwork and bringing to the job the appropriate background?

We also have this unfortunate habit of wanting to know what the deaf person's language is like, but not necessarily wanting to know what the non-deaf person's language is like. This is an example of linguisticism in our field; we teach interpreters to "assess the deaf person's language, to make sure they can understand us and we can understand them." Why don't we assess our own capacity to understand the people with whom we are working and our own capacity to use the range of language that they will be using in the situation, in *their* interaction? This shift in our perspective also shifts the power dynamic; it is a recognition that this is about me as an interpreter, a language user, and as someone whose language range may or may not be suitable for any given situation. Ethically, we must ensure that our linguistic capacities match those of the people with whom we will work.

I hope it is clear, too, how preparation can affect our understanding of shared experience, linguisticism and audism, and narrative structures. We too often think of preparation in limited ways\_what is the topic, what will participants be talking about\_when in fact, preparation means so much more. To me it includes our knowledge of, and adeptness with, the languages and cultures; our understanding of the structures and "cultures" of the settings (such as educational, legal, medical); and the particular activities that will take place (a lecture, a field trip, a test,

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## Russell and Shaw

a demonstration to show proficiency). It also includes the goals of the participants (to enjoy, to learn, to show off, to convince, to be accountable, to remove accountability), our knowledge of and experience with the participants in the interaction, and there is so much more. One example I give students is a meeting I was in once, it was the Council on Graduate Education, which meets every two weeks, has subcommittees, and is, like any other university committee/council, rife with politics among its members. A highly skilled interpreter was sent to interpret for the meeting *the second week she worked at Gallaudet*. She was fairly ineffective, and I imagine frustrated, due mostly to the fact that she did not understand the structures that guided our meeting and discussion; nor was she aware of the politics of the council and the people who sat on it. Had she been at the university longer and become acquainted with the structures, rules (spoken and unspoken), and the people, she would have been more effective and successful *because* of being better prepared. As it was, she didn't really stand a chance. We asked that she return as an observer (not as a working interpreter) and meet with the chair to get up to speed so that she could interpret for us in the future. My point here being, that time in an institution is part of preparation.

Interpreters have to be sensitive to the fact that we can't expect to know everything, so we have to hold plenty of humility that will allow us to discover meaning. If we think, "Well the meaning is in the words, and I'm just going to pay attention to the words/phrases," we will miss and lose so much. And if we think, "I've done my preparation; I know what these people plan to talk about," we don't allow ourselves to understand that there's so much we don't know. We are the outsiders, no matter how many times we've interpreted for the same people or meeting or classroom; we are never there as interpreters on our own behalf.

*Deb: I am so excited when I hear you describe your findings as they clearly have importance for our field and our practice. What do you think educators and researchers should focus on based on your results?*

Risa: The overarching conclusion of this study is that context has immense and profound effects on what people say, on how they say it, and on how it is understood; in essence, on how meaning is co-constructed. In looking at how discourse was affected, changed or not changed, across calibrated differences in contextual factors, this study illuminates both how exquisitely sensitive to context discourse is and how subtle the behaviors of interlocutors affected by contextual changes can be.

I think that for educators it is essential that we have an explicit, coherent, philosophical approach to our teaching; that we convey it; and that we incorporate it fully into our curriculum and program. I want to underscore two core principles that are central to the task of interpreting: interaction happens within a context and the notion that meaning is co-constructed. In building a curriculum that focuses on the significance of meaning-in-context, meaning that organically arises out of context, preparation has to be a significant component. I would submit that the effectiveness of our interpreting is compromised if performed without proper preparation.

Again, the notion of preparation is tied to how we conceptualize the task of interpreting. Then, in addition to having interpreters understand as much as possible about the context, we also have to teach interpreters that by definition we are walking into somebody else's business, we are walking into the lives of other people, that

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## Interview with a Scholar

these interactions do not originate with us as interpreters, and that the interactions are not for the purpose of the interpreters—they are for the purpose of the participants of the interaction. That leads us to two things. One is to realize how crucial preparation is, because we *are* outsiders to the interaction. And second, to realize how much we do not know and probably cannot know. We have to recognize that, so we can be accountable for our own limits; so that we can get out of the way of the participants; so that they can conduct their business on their own behalf.

As educators, we want to remember that, in general, experienced interpreters will be able to take this information and use it more directly, whereas less experienced interpreters or new interpreters may require more guidance to understand the implications.

*Deb: Any advice for interpreter researchers?*

Risa: Yes, do not listen to the naysayers! I had people who said that I would never be able to get videotaped data about such a taboo subject, and yet I did (and I turned down many people who were interested in participating in my study). Other people told me that study participants are too self-conscious about one camera, let alone two or three, and said that taping with two or three cameras just isn't done. I did it. So, it *is* done. And I'm nothing special. I am delighted with the study that I got to do and the research learning that led up to it. I have to say that I love my design and methodology, and I love to talk about it.

I would also advise researchers to seek guidance from mentors on designing your study, mentors who will support what you want to do and help you figure out a way to do it. I used three cameras in each of my data sets. Had I not, I would not have captured the data on back-channeling in ASL and English that was one of my key findings. That information would have been lost had I used only one, or even two, cameras. Your design and methodology is the foundation of your study; don't compromise, and do be creative. Find what excites you about your (potential) research. It will lead you to other research questions and collaborations.

*Deb: Final thoughts?*

Risa: As interpreters and educators, we really need to understand and respect what it means to be in the lives of other people in order to grasp the sensibilities of the situation. We need to learn deeply about communities, cultures, and languages in order to understand the nature of interpreting, meaning, context and preparation. We need to put ourselves in other peoples' shoes.

And, I want to thank you for this wonderful opportunity to talk with you and talk about the work I've done.

*Deb: Many thanks, Risa, for being willing to share your work with us in the Open Forum. You are definitely on my "researchers to watch" list! Thank you again.*