

## **Interpreters: Supporters of an Audist or Audist-Free Zone**

By Gary Malkowski,  
Director, Consumer and Government Relations  
The Canadian Hearing Society

Interpreters are human engines in the language and communication process and can bridge the language gap between Deaf people who use American Sign Language (ASL) and people who use spoken English. Deaf people and English-speaking people are aware of their rights to information, be it direct or through interpreter services. Professional ASL/English interpreters are knowledgeable in the language and culture of both Deaf and hearing people. They provide communication in both ASL and spoken English and are bound by their professional Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Professional Conduct as set out by AVLIC.

In reality, most interpreters have played a part in, or have witnessed audist incidents before, during, or after interpreting in either medical, educational, and/or legal situations, as well as in other settings. Interpreters may even be involved in audist incidents directly and indirectly. Some interpreters may not realize or recognize their behaviours as audist in nature when interacting, interpreting and socializing with Deaf persons.

*Audism* (from Latin *audire*, to hear, and *-ism*, a system of practice, behavior, belief, or attitude) has been defined as:

“...the corporate institution for dealing with deaf people, dealing with them by making statements about them, authorizing views of them, describing them, teaching about them, governing where they go to school and, in some cases, where they live; in short, audism is the hearing way of dominating, restructuring, and exercising authority over the deaf community. It includes such professional people as administrators of schools for deaf children and of training programs for deaf adults, interpreters, and some audiologists, speech therapists, otologists, psychologists, psychiatrists, librarians, researchers, social workers, and hearing aid specialists”.  
(Lane 1992: 43)

“Persons who practice audism are called *audists*. ...”

“The first appearance of the term *audism* in print seems to have been by Harlan Lane in 1992. However, Lane credits the invention of the term to Tom Humphries' unpublished 1977 doctoral dissertation (Humphries 1977). After Humphries coined the term *audism*, it lay dormant until Lane revived its use 15 years later. It is increasingly catching on, though it is not yet in English dictionaries. Humphries originally applied *audism* to individual attitudes and practices, but Lane and others have broadened its scope to include institutional and group attitudes, practices, and oppression of deaf persons.”  
(Gallaudet University's Library of Deaf-related Resources, Frequently Asked Questions: Audism.)

During certain interpreted situations, some interpreters that are privy to audists' behaviours do not convey the information appropriately and accurately. The Deaf consumers are left unaware as the interpretation did not reflect the audism that was present in the discourse. A very few number of interpreters do interpret clearly and accurately the context of audist comments or behaviours during interpreted situations.

Many Deaf consumers do not realize that audist make comments and exhibit inappropriate behaviour possibly due to a lack of understanding of what audism is. They are afraid to speak out and correct such behaviour because of possible reprisals (i.e. risk losing their jobs or interpreter services, or fear of liberation).

Sometimes, in situations where interpreters are interpreting audist comments, interpreters can indeed feel uncomfortable as they attempt to continue their interpretation. At the same time, Deaf consumers are unaware of the interpreters' discomfort while interpreting between audists and themselves.

Some interpreters are audists. Tom Humphries invented the word "audism" in 1975 to mean a certain attitude that people who can hear and speak, or possess good English skills have - thinking themselves superior.

I have been informed by some interpreters that, admittedly, there are times when Deaf people and hearing people are treated differently during the interpretation process. This is evident through the filtration of information and communication. In many cases, Deaf people receive less information rather than full information in the attempt to minimize cultural and cross-cultural barriers and differences as much as possible. In some cases, it is culturally appropriate. However, in other cases it could be protective in nature; not allowing Deaf people to experience and deal with mature issues such as cross-cultural conflicts and the adaptation of their cross-cultural skills when communicating with hearing persons who may be making negative or sabotaging comments. If the omission of information is intentional, this would be described as audist behaviour.

There are Deaf people who experience difficulties obtaining ASL/English interpreters as interpreters repeatedly decline assignments, even with advance notice. Some interpreters say that they decline assignments based on health/safety and security issues. In some situations, this is indeed the case. In others, however, there are no health/safety issues. The interpreter is simply making excuses to repeatedly decline interpreting assignments because the Deaf consumer is difficult to work with or to interpret. Perhaps the consumer has special needs, or a high profile or minimal or highly sophisticated ASL skills. It may be the interpreter's fear of feedback, constructive or otherwise, provided by these popular, or unpopular, consumers regarding their interpreting skills.

On occasion, some interpreters accept higher-paying assignments and cancel their previously booked, lower-paying assignments, often with very little notice. Sometimes consumers are persuaded by interpreters to book their assignments through a higher-paying service provider – an arrangement that disregards the consumer's comfort level or

preference. Deaf persons then serve as pawns on a chessboard between interpreters and funders. This example of manipulation is a form of audism.

### **Examples of Audist Behaviour**

- prejudice or discrimination against Deaf people
- serious attitudinal barriers in the expectations and behaviours of employers, educators and service providers (such as interpreters), regarding the capabilities of Deaf persons
- different treatment when interpreting and relaying information for Deaf and hearing persons (i.e. an interpreter filtering or omitting information provided by Deaf persons while not filtering information provided by hearing persons, and vice versa)
- hearing persons not asking or speaking directly to Deaf persons, but instead asking interpreters for information or clarification in the language exchange situation
- hearing persons making assumptions about the Deaf person's information or communication without realizing that interpreters may misinterpret information provided by either the Deaf or hearing person and may be misleading the communication
- mistrust: not believing Deaf persons' information which may seem to be unreliable or inaccurate and often checking for verification with hearing people and believing hearing persons' information without checking for verification
- providing different degrees of the same information to Deaf professionals and hearing professionals (i.e. providing brief and short information to Deaf persons while providing full and necessary information to hearing professionals)
- hearing people with minimal ASL skills excluding Deaf individuals with sophisticated ASL skills from relevant inside information or informal discussions

### **Statements such as:**

- “Deaf people must learn English (forget ASL) because when they grow up they will have to function in the hearing society and need it to find jobs, find happiness and have a full and useful life”
- “Oh your speech is wonderful. What is your hearing loss?”

- “But we don’t need a TTY. There are no Deaf people here”
- For some hearing professionals who have been in the field of deafness for several years and have not learned or used ASL in order to communicate directly, effectively and meaningfully with Deaf individuals especially if the Deaf individuals are clients or patients in mental health settings:
  - “Learning sign language is not important enough.”
  - “I do not have the time to learn sign language.”
  - “Why do I need to learn sign language; an interpreter is good enough.”
- Any statement relating to the obsession with the use of residual hearing, speech, and lip-reading by Deaf people in order to succeed and function in the hearing world.
- “Deaf professionals are not responsible because they are not capable of confidentiality.”

### **Tips for Fostering Audist-Free Interpreting**

- Break the silence. Audists, who have an obsession with a pathological view of deafness and who have strong beliefs that Deaf people should use residual hearing, speech and lip-reading, interpret the silence from the community as approval of their audism.
- Work with Deaf organizations to establish a joint task force, consisting of representatives from AVLIC and the Canadian Association of the Deaf to address audism issues and anti-audism education for AVLIC members and sign language interpreters to ensure that interpreters and student interpreters learn and stay audist-free.
- Respect and treat Deaf and hearing persons equally (likewise for Deaf and hearing interpreters).
- In response to audist activities and incidents, keep written records and publish articles on audism preventative measures; educate the public; host forums and events in cooperation with Deaf organizations such as National and Provincial Associations of the Deaf; distribute pamphlets and contact the media to educate the public on Audism issues and Anti-Audism education.
- Work with organizations such as the Canadian Association of the Deaf and The Canadian Hearing Society to develop public education, including a public campaign that continues to challenge audists, stereotypes, and people’s audist attitudes towards Deaf persons.

Deaf consumers and interpreters need to work together in order for Deaf consumers to live in an audism-free zone.

Please email me at [gmalkowski@chs.ca](mailto:gmalkowski@chs.ca) if you have any reactions, thoughts, concerns and suggestions for audism-free opportunities to improve.