

Dynamic Equivalence in an ASL Interpretation

By:

Nicholas James Roessler

Introduction

There are many professional interpreters and students of the profession that enjoy interpreting music. This activity is a phenomenon in and of itself because students that are taking Spanish IV do not want to attempt to interpret a song, but one can turn on YouTube and see many students of American Sign Language (ASL) make attempts to interpret music on a daily basis. When turning the topic to ASL interpreters there are a wide variety of methods one can choose from when wanting to provide an equivalent message. The reason why there are so many options one can choose from is because of lack of a formalized theory when it comes to the translation of music. According to Blackman and Goodman (2004), “without a theoretical approach or model that includes the interpretation of music and text simultaneously an equivalent message cannot be achieved” (p. 1). It is this message of equivalence that is the question at hand; is interpreting only the lyrics of a song enough? Is there more to music than just the lyrics? When one listens to Vivaldi’s Four Seasons one can paint a picture in their head of each season as the symphony moves through each movement. If a clear concept is presented without the use of words, can that concept be interpreted into ASL? Possibly not, but it can be translated.

When discussing the topic of dynamic equivalence, it then becomes possible to translate everything that the song is conveying and not just the content of the lyrics. According to Larson (1984), “This is done by going from the form of the first language to the form of the second language by way of semantic structure. It is meaning which is being transferred and must be held consistent” (p.3). When one takes only the lyrics of a song then it is then considered to be a form-based translation. When referring to a definition, Larson defined it as (1984), “Form-based translations attempt to follow the form of the source language and are known as literal translations” (p. 3). A good example of a literal translation is if a Latino male asked you, “¿Como se llama?” And if an interpreter was being used and they responded with “how are you called?” That would be a literal translation, because native English speakers say, “What is your name?” When discussing music one may think that translating the content of the lyrics is enough, because that is what connects them to the music, but what people do not realize is that it is the implicit nature of the music itself along with the lyrics that builds that connection with the audience, and it is that omission of implicitly that makes only translating the lyrics of a song a literal translation. According to Larson (1984), “In every text that one may want to translate, there will be information which is implicit that is, it is not stated in an explicit form in the text itself” (p. 43).

When looking for a definition of an idiomatic translation, Larson defines it as (1984), “Meaning based translations make every effort to communicate the meaning of the source language text in the natural forms of the receptor language. Such translations are called idiomatic translations” (p. 17). This is the beginning to a more equivalent approach towards translating music. This concept is related to dynamic equivalence, according to Nida (1964), “A translation of dynamic equivalence aims at complete

naturalness of expression, and tries to relate the receptor to modes of behavior relevant within the context of his own culture; it does not insist that he understand the cultural patterns of the source-language context in order to comprehend the message. Of course, there are varying degrees of such dynamic-equivalence translations” (pp.159-60). In terms of adding the implicit meaning behind the music to the meaning of the lyrics one would have to find a natural form or an equivalent form in ASL, so in this instance an equivalent form would be ASL poetry. Using a method such as this would be using dynamic equivalence express the full meaning of a song and not just the lyrics.

After finding translations that were presented in a dynamically equivalent fashion using ASL, the question was asked if members of the Deaf community and people who are not deaf (Hearing) that are fluent ASL users viewed the interpretation, would they exhibit similar emotional responses and have similar memories be elicited by the translations just as a hearing person would experience those emotions and memories when they just listen to the songs themselves? Each group was shown the two translated songs and the two songs without the translation were shown to two hearing people. After the songs were played, four questions were asked that related to memory and emotions. The data after words was compared to each other in order to find similarities of responses between the translated version of the song and the song itself. If there were similarities found then this method of dynamic equivalence can be considered an effective method when translating a song into ASL.

Method

The data was collected was by researching ten subjects. Four of these subjects were Deaf and four of these subjects were Hearing with fluency in ASL, while two of the subjects were hearing but not fluent in ASL, they served as a control to the data and were presented with only the song and no visual stimulation such as an ASL interpretation. Candidacy for the eight participants were determined by fluency. In order to be a participant in the study the Deaf subject needed to be an ASL monolingual which Kannapell defines as (1982), “Deaf people who express themselves only in ASL. They have no skills in English.” The reason for this is because this was the only way to make sure that the subject was fluent in ASL since that is the only way that they express themselves, plus if the subject were bilingual there maybe a different response from viewing the translations and the goal was to look for continuity within each subject of a particular group and little variables in each subject group was needed. The Hearing subjects were determined by their fluency of ASL. The way that the subjects were determined to be fluent enough was by either interpreting certification or by the ASL-English interpretation department at Columbia College Chicago. If the subjects attained a state or national level of interpreting certification, then they were deemed fluent enough to participate in the study. If the subjects were students and placed into real world interpreting practicum situations by Columbia College Chicago; then they were also deemed fluent enough to participate in the study.

After the subjects were determined, they were placed in a private room with only the principal investigator on an individual basis. The two interpretations of the songs

were presented by a nationally certified interpreter at the master level who specializes in performance interpreting, and grew up with Deaf parents. The two songs that were picked were Otis Redding's "Sitting on the dock of the bay" (Cropper, Redding, 1967) and Uncle Cracker's "Follow Me" (Bradford, Shafer, 2001). The interpretations of these videos were presented in a manner that would reflect a Deaf person telling an ASL story. After consent was given, the two videos were shown to the eight participants then asked four questions relating to how the songs impacted them emotionally and if they made the participants think of any specific memories when they were watching and listening to the songs. The recordings were taken either on a Sanyo xacti or an iSight camera on an iMac computer. Those recordings were then transferred to a secure online data storage website then transferred to the principal investigator's password protected computer. The recordings of the interview process were used for analysis and note taking purposes only.

Results

When the first song was played, "Sitting on the Dock of the Bay" (Cropper, Redding, 1967) all participants showed some form relaxation either by facial expression, sitting in a relaxed position, or by making some kind of audible noise, such as sighing, to indicate being relaxed. A few of the hearing subjects that viewed the interpretations actually indicated in the interview that they experienced feelings of being calm or relaxed. They also could discuss specific memories that the songs made them think about as well. This occurred when the videos were shown with and without sound. One of the control participants provided feedback similar to the ASL users that were hearing.

When the second song, "Follow Me," (Bradford, Shafer, 2001) was played there was a clear difference as to how the song impacted the hearing subjects while watching the interpretation and the control subjects who only listened to the song. The song impacted the control subjects in either a positive or a negative way depending on the person and their preference for the song itself the control subjects also experienced memories relating to their personal lives that did not necessarily relate to the topic of the song. The hearing subjects that viewed the interpretations experienced humorous type feelings. Most of these subjects experienced memories relating to infidelity, which relate to the interpretation of the song.

The Deaf participants provided feedback via non-manual behavior. There were a select number of individuals that actually provided answers in the interview portion of the testing phase, however none of the Deaf participants admitted to experiencing memories because of the interpreted songs. For the first song, "Sitting on the Dock of the Bay," the muscles in the participant's faces relaxed towards the end of the song and gave either a smirk or a full smile. The second song, "Follow Me," (Bradford, Shafer, 2001) was not perceived as the humor song like the hearing participants perceived it as. Their faces tensed up and they had a negative eye gaze. One subject even perceived it as being propositioned proclaiming that they are in a faithful relationship. This data shows a clear distinction between the hearing perception of the songs and the Deaf perception of the songs.

Discussion

The clearest indicators that all of the subjects showed interest at all was eye gaze. Even when the subjects were watching the interpretation and listening, only listening to the song, or just watching the interpretation of the song; the subject's attention had a clear fixation on the content being played. This was indicated by a fixed eye gaze and relaxed facial expressions. For the subjects that watched the interpretation; their eye gaze would not shift, instead they would be fixated on a particular part of the screen and possibly use their peripheral vision to view the entire interpretation. Without the use of eye tracking technology, it is hard to tell for certain, but from just watching the subject's eye gaze, there was little or no movement when the subject showed interest in the song being presented. Many of the subjects were sitting at the edge of their chair actively listening to the song. Some would shift to the back of their chair towards the back of their chair when the second song would start. Whether that is an indication of a shift in emotional state is uncertain. When the subjects had little or no interest in the songs; their eye gaze would not be fixated on any particular point. Their attention would be focused on many different activities simultaneously instead of directing their attention solely on the song at hand.

The subjects displayed many visual cues related to eye gaze. They all displayed a pattern in eye gaze when asked questions relating to memory or emotions. Whether this observation is related to the research or just a coincidence is unknown. The subjects also displayed facial features such as smiling, relaxed demeanor, or muscle tension in the face, body, or both to show that there was some form of reaction when being exposed to the songs.

For the second song "Follow Me," (Bradford, Shafer, 2001) there was a clear distinction how the controls perceived the information and how the participants that viewed the interpretation perceived the information. This is due to the ambiguous nature of the song itself. The writer of the song wrote it about his addiction to drugs and the fans took the song and understood it as discussing infidelity. The interpretation leans more toward the popular meaning of the song instead of the personal meaning of the writer, thus creating the different feedback provided by the research subjects. There was no distinction of perception between the controls and the subjects watching the interpretation for the first song, "sitting on the dock of the bay." (Cropper, Redding, 1967) This occurred primarily because the song presents a clear meaning and is less ambiguous than the second song. A majority of hearing subjects provided similar feedback; particularly relating to memories of going fishing either with their father or going fishing in general.

One hearing subject in particular discussed these memories in detail by just watching the interpretation of the first song and not listening to the actual music. This is important because this means that the reason why the subject experienced not only similar feelings, but similar memories was because of the interpretation itself. This also indicates that the goal of the interpretation was met in terms of entertainment value. A wider subject group is needed in order to find out for certain if the goal of the

interpretation was met or if this was a random situation where the goal was met with this particular person. Even one of the Deaf subjects indicated feeling a “happy” emotion when watching the first song. This response would be equivalent to the hearing subjects because it is similar to the feedback of feeling pleasant and/or relaxed that I received from that subject group. A larger subject group would be needed to draw a more formal conclusion.

Conclusion

What the study showed was that when a translated song is presented in a form that is more similar to an ASL story or a poem, the subject watching the translation can receive similar feelings of entertainment. In this case this only seemed to occur when the message of the song was clear. When the song had multiple meanings; the translation would be taken in a specific direction, resulting in a contrast of reaction from the subjects that only heard the song compared to the subjects that viewed the translation. This shows that when the goal of a text is clear, then the translation of the text can be more effectively translated.

This application of this research would be fascinating if were applied at a concert venue. The reason being is that hearing people tend to use music to create a communal experience, which happens at concert venues. It would be fascinating to see if a dynamically equivalent translation is able to create a communal experience at a concert venue. If not, then what would need to change about the translation itself to create a communal experience with the rest of the audience, and still maintain the musicality of the translation.

Some of the subjects when interviewed after both songs were finished were asked questions about both songs. A portion of the subjects could not provide an answer when asked about specific memories and emotions relating to the first song. The reason for this could possibly be that they could not recall since the second song itself was still fresh in the mind. A solution to this would be to interview the subjects after each song. This way the emotions and memories are still fresh in the subjects mind and will be able to provide a more accurate answer to be compared with the other subjects. When discussing the Deaf subjects during the interview portion, many of the subjects were not very forthcoming when it came to answering the questions. This may be in part to the fact that the principal investigator is a hearing person and was not able to create a sufficient connection with the subjects so they could trust the investigator more and be willing to provide answers during the interview portion. A solution to this issue would be to have a Deaf investigator conduct the research with the Deaf subjects. This way there can be a sufficient line of trust that can be built so that the subjects would be willing to be more forthcoming with their answers.

When discussing the Deaf community in a more of a broader sense; more Deaf subjects will be needed to draw a larger conclusion. A recommendation would be to use Kannapell’s six variations of communication styles in order to appropriately group the subjects to reduce the amount of variables. For the hearing subjects that viewed the ASL

translation, there were a few subjects that provided different answers than the rest of the test subjects. Since fluency is more of a learning process than a state of mind, the solution to this issue is to group the hearing subjects into years of exposure and/or immersion of ASL. Then that data can be compared to how they perceived the translations to see if there is a correlation. For the subjects in general, a larger subject group is needed in order to draw more formal conclusions.

For students of ASL and/or the interpreting profession or interpreting professionals themselves, this study contributes to the school of thought when one considers translating a song. Right now more time is being put into how one signs a specific word rather than the concept of a song as a whole. This study shows when effort is put into the translation of the song that conveys the conceptual meaning rather than only reformulating the lyrics into an ASL structure, the translation incites more of a reaction in the audience. This study encourages interpreters of all skill levels to really truly analyze music and think about what is it about music that makes people so obsessed with it, and then figure out how to convey that concept to the proper consumers. This study contributes to the future of the profession by showing interpreters that there multiple approaches to the skill of translating the arts, that if in fact they go out on a limb and try a different methodology, the translator/interpreter can find new ways to meet the goals of a text.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Blackman, M & Goodman, A (2004, December). Views:

Theoretical Approach Religious Interpreting as Performance. RID, 1, 26-28.

Bradford, M, Shafer M. (2001) Follow Me. *Double Wide*. [CD].

New York City: Lava Records.

Cropper, S, Redding, O. (1967) (Sittin' On) The Dock of the Bay. *The Dock of the Bay*.

[Vinyl Record]. Memphis: Volt/Alto.

Kannapell, B. (1982). Inside the Deaf Community. *The Deaf American*, 34(4):23-26. In: Kelly, J.(2001). *Show Me the English*. Alexandria, VA:

Registry Interpreters for the Deaf.

Larson, M. (1984). *Meaning Based Translation*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.

Nida, E. (1964). *Toward a Science of Translating*. Netherlands:E.J.Brill and

Leiden. In: Marlowe, M. (2009, July). *Dynamic Equivalence Defined*.

Retrieved April 19, 2010, From Bible Research Website:

www.Bible-Researcher.com/nida1.html