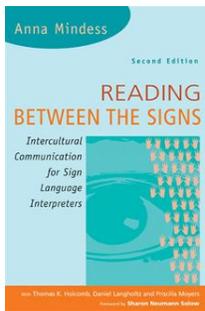


Reading Between the Signs: Intercultural Communication for Sign Language Interpreters

Mindess, A. (2009). *Reading between the signs: Intercultural communication for sign language interpreters* (2nd ed.). Boston, MA: Intercultural Press. Pp. vii+ 296

Reviewed by *Rolf Holtz, PhD, Troy University (USA)*



This book presents the subtleties of a most remarkable human attribute: The ability to understand and communicate language. The focus of the book does examine the basic elements of interpreting and translating for the deaf. However, it takes the reader far beyond the linguistic challenges of American Sign Language (ASL) into the realm of interpreting for world cultures. The book presupposes a well-developed understanding of ASL and readers are expected to already be convinced that ASL is a real language. Deaf and hearing individuals will unquestionably profit from the analyses of culture that are always present in the medical, business, educational, and interpersonal situations in which deaf interpreters are active. Moreover, the book is intended to sensitize interpreters to their own biases in the context of international cultures. The general components of discourse within deaf culture are examined to make readers cognizant of the often unrecognized and unconscious assumptions that influence mutual understanding.

After an overview of what culture is, the aspects of culture that contribute to the meaning of interpersonal communications are examined. Elements like the location of people during their interactions (proxemics) or the paralinguistic features of communication like intonations, rate of speech, volume and distribution of silences are discussed in relation to the risk of misinterpretation in any encounter. Similarly, eye gaze, facial expression, and gestures can determine the success of communication, particularly in the context of intercultural relations. The author identifies variations of these characteristics of communication primarily as they pertain to international cultures (collectivist and individualistic) and to deaf culture. However, these features also reveal the values of a culture, including the values of deaf culture. The point is made that values underlie differences between cultures. Furthermore, the values that define one's cultural orientation serve as markers for those who are trusted and regarded as belonging with other members. The person or group that is trusted shares in decision-making and is seen as deserving of reciprocity in verbal and behavioral exchanges with like-minded others. The person who is regarded as "belonging" is inevitably able to communicate more easily because meanings are already shared and implicit assumptions about what is being communicated make explanations unnecessary. This is especially true when a deaf interpreter attempts to achieve a fluent personal or professional conversation with deaf people.

Chapter 3 describes how intercultural values influence attitudes toward the behaviors exhibited by members of a culture. For example, the non-deaf may expect others to be punctual, whereas the deaf tend to arrive late and stay late. It is argued that the deaf share time-oriented attitudes and behaviors that resemble those in South America or collectivist parts of Asia. Likewise there tends to be a past rather than a future orientation among the deaf that is also true of cultures

like Iran and India that revere their traditions and historical accomplishments. In the case of deaf individuals, pioneers of the past whose struggles paved the way for contemporary opportunities are typically the referents for decisions. Thus, international culture provides a framework for understanding the value placed on subjective reasoning and why objective facts are often not the basis for persuasive arguments among the deaf.

Essential distinctions between American culture and other international cultures that also define differences between non-deaf and deaf cultures are addressed in chapter 4. Americans are fond of assuming their own uniqueness and that there is no such thing as a typical American. But the author notes that many features of American culture distinguish it from other world cultures and from deaf culture. For instance, the pride that Americans feel about their self-reliance and independence is not shared by cultures like the Chinese who are proud to be able to depend on their family for support. And the Japanese regard self-reliance as a sign that one has no identity. Similarly, in American Deaf culture mutual dependence is a survival tactic that carries no stigma. Correspondingly, a person's achievements are regarded by the deaf as group accomplishments consistent with a collectivist identity. In addition, like the pattern exemplified by collectivists, their friendships tend to be deep and long-lasting compared to non-deaf friendships which may be greater in number, but linked to specific activities like school, job, or hobbies. Deaf friendships share qualities of intimacy and a strong sense of mutual obligation that are reminiscent of Japanese and Russian friendships and those of other traditional collectivists. On the other hand, egalitarianism is a norm in both deaf and non-deaf American relationships, without the formality and consideration for status that is coded into actions and forms of address like those used in German, Japanese, and other vertically collectivist cultures.

One outcome of Knowing deaf culture and its relationship to other world cultures is that interpreters and other communicators with the deaf are provided with a framework for delivering and receiving information. The author describes the style of communication between American deaf individuals in chapter 5. How persons were acculturated into deaf culture suggests the mandate that American deaf and interpreters must follow. Many deaf children attended residential schools and relied on ASL and lip-reading as they helped each other cope with life in a hearing world. This aspect of growing up deaf is one major factor producing the collectivist values in deaf culture that are expressed by reciprocity between deaf individuals and an emphasis on group decision making.

It is interesting, though it makes sense, that deaf people prefer a direct form of discourse not unlike the blunt German style or the sandpaper-like Israeli "I disagree" approach. Hinting and vague talk in an effort to be polite can lead to ambiguity for which deaf individuals have no patience. Direct expression is generally seen as honest and authentic, unlike the potentially insincere, and artificial style that some regard as "being smooth." The deaf emphasis on direct and unembellished communication affects several aspects of deaf culture concerned with sharing information with insiders and outsiders. For starters, insiders (other deaf persons) are favored in the same way that other minorities show favoritism to the members of their group. They frequent their own establishments, value time spent together, and regularly hug. Group members feel a familial closeness that quickly leads to an intimate sharing of personal information unadorned by censorship. By understanding these and other unique features of deaf culture can make exotic to hearing individuals. However, the attributes that deaf culture shares in common with other world cultures legitimize the identity experienced by its members.

Specific attributes that facilitate comparisons between deaf culture and particular world cultures are identified in chapter 6. For example, Asian culture has a hierarchical family structure with the father possessing unquestioned authority and the mother responsible for teaching the lessons of culture to the children. The role of the first born instills a sense of duty, whereas the youngest child experiences indulgence. The style of communication may be to use a softer tone and

slower pace that allows reflective thinking to avoid hurting another's feelings when disagreeing. Asians are more reserved than other cultures about physical contact, and they seek emotional restraint. Asians may blame themselves for their deafness, attributing it to poor karma for which ancestors may be held responsible. The idea of saving face has strong implications for how interpreters interact with the Asian deaf.

African American and Black deaf (including Barbados, Jamaica, Haiti, and Trinidad) conform to collectivist values that focus on the extended family for mutual support. Here also, elders fulfill strong roles in the community, but without the extreme authoritarianism that is characteristic of Asian families. The discourse style of the Black deaf also has more emotional intensity due to overlapping and interjections. Specific pointers are provided for interpreters who are working with Asians or with Blacks. Similarly, the author provides culture-specific pointers for interpreters working with Latinos or various nationalities from Central and South America, and for American Indians. In each case, however, the culture is analyzed in depth according to its distinctive attributes and values, and the behaviors of its members.

The remainder of this text examines the role of technology on changes in the cultures already described. Applications to medical appointments, educational settings, and job interviews are also examined by reviewing several of the most likely deaf versus non deaf vignettes in each context. Additional suggestions for interpreters follow in chapter 9 as interpreting challenges related to each culture are described. The interpreter's role and responsibilities are spelled out; and techniques for cultural adjustments among interpreters are described.

This book provides much more than an overview of world culture, deaf culture, and the work of interpreting for deaf individuals. It provides excellent reading for anyone researching the components of specific world cultures and the best routes to mutual understanding, both by people who do the communicating and those who receive the communications. This text offers indispensable insights into how individuals become members of their cultures, the attributes and behaviors of cultural adherents, and the best ways to communicate with group members.

About the Reviewer:

Dr. Rolf Holtz is an associate professor at Troy University. He received his PhD in social psychology from the University of Southern California. Currently, his research focuses on links between collectivism, and social and academic motivations. He has also conducted work in Aceh, Indonesia, on the impact of civil war and cultural orientation on authoritarianism.

Editors' note:

This book review was received in June 2013. We are unable to share the print and digital copy of his book review with Dr. Holtz as he passed away on Wednesday, September 5, 2013 because of an unexpected liver and kidney failure. Dr. Holtz was one of the associate editors in the Journal of International Students since 2011. He was also an inspiring educator/researcher who supported Dr. Krishna Bista, founder and editor-in-chief, to establish this peer-reviewed journal in 2010. This volume of the journal is dedicated in memory of Dr. Holtz.