

“SORRY HARD UNDERSTAND STRONG ACCENT!”

Racial Dynamics of Deaf Scholars of Color Working with White Female Interpreters

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WHAT DOES THE TITLE MEAN?

“SORRY HARD UNDERSTAND STRONG ACCENT!” (SHUSA!) is a phrase in American Sign Language (ASL) that a Deaf Scholar of Color may see an ASL interpreter say.¹ When this phrase is produced spontaneously in response to the interpreter’s struggle to understand speakers, especially those explicitly marked as having nonnative English accents, the scholar often does not know how to evaluate the situation. Did the interpreter just commit a microaggression, or were they genuinely struggling to understand the speaker and were informing the scholar about it? In either case, the scholar would not always know whether to interject or keep quiet to allow the interpreter to finish interpreting the speaker’s talk. The scholar then would have to process the interpreter’s stance and decide whether to address it or to let it go. This is an example of the many awkward moments that a Deaf Scholar of Color may experience when working with ASL interpreters in academia. It is also an example of the mediated representation of other people’s voices that scholars experience through their interpreters’ own understanding.

The above example is inspired by our personal experiences of working with interpreters in academia. We are two female Deaf Faculty of Color employed at predominantly hearing and minority-serving institutions, and our understanding of such experiences has been shaped by our lives growing up in the United States as children of immigrants. When we started working at our respective institutions, we found ourselves constantly negotiating the dynamics of presenting our language to audiences and asserting our expertise, and those topics became a recurring theme in our conversations with one another and other Deaf Scholars of Color. These issues have not received much attention, so writing about such

a delicate topic has put our vulnerability in the limelight. We acknowledge the potential risks and consequences of writing about such experiences. It is not our intention to target particular individuals or groups; rather, our intention is to flag the unique challenges of working with interpreters in academia from our intersectional perspectives and to call attention to the challenges of negotiating intersubjectivity with interpreters and to make recommendations for more inclusive interpretation practices. It is our privilege, owing to our multimodal abilities to accommodate hearing non-signers in everyday contexts and our interdisciplinary training in multiple social science fields, to be able to reflect about such experiences in this space.²

This chapter explores the lived experiences of Deaf Scholars of Color who navigate and negotiate predominantly hearing spaces with white ASL interpreters at higher institutions, where the scholars deal with the mediated representations of themselves and other people.³ What does it mean to be a Deaf Scholar of Color who works with white, female hearing interpreters who interpret and voice for them on a daily basis? Many Deaf scholars use ASL as their primary and dominant language and use academic interpreters to mediate communication with hearing people such as colleagues, students, and administrators who do not know ASL. The interpreters are not only tasked with the job of interpreting between signed and spoken languages, but they also have to represent everyone as accurately as possible, which requires them to construct the meaning of messages. Hearing people rely on the voice of the interpreters to understand Deaf people's signing. Interpreters rely on the voice of hearing speakers to interpret their messages into ASL. While this volume primarily frames accent as one of the first things people notice from listening, this privileges the phonocentric experience of perceiving (and using) spoken language, something that both of us do not relate to. Yet the spontaneous reaction of listening to speakers and judging them by their accents is undoubtedly part of the hearing ASL interpreters' experience. When the Deaf scholars themselves are People of Color and the interpreters are white, there is a greater perceptual incongruity—and also two distinct entities with their own lived experiences shaped by intersectionality, which has profound implications for the racial dynamics of intersubjectivity, including the mediated representation of language.

We start with some background information about what it means to speak and perceive "accent" in the context of spoken languages. The perception of an accent contains an implicit bias about different speakers based on their backgrounds, including racial bias, which is a central theme we highlight here. We briefly discuss how the concept of accent operates differently in signed languages to the extent that there are no direct analogues between accents in speaking and signing. Next we offer an overview of literature on Deaf scholars working with interpreters and move onto a much-publicized example of a white interpreter's refusal to voice a Black Deaf consumer accurately as a way of introducing microinvalidations, a type of microaggression. Next we present the stories of various Deaf Scholars of Color

who work with ASL interpreters in academic spaces, negotiating the dynamics of intersubjectivity in which racial microinvalidations occur through mediated representations of voices. Finally, we close with some thoughts about calls for the incorporation of social justice in the future training of hearing interpreters.

SPEAKING—AND SIGNING—WITH AN ACCENT

Everybody has an “accent,” regardless of whether they speak or sign or what language they use. The question is how Deaf Scholars of Color negotiate the racial dynamics of intersubjectivity when they are represented and perceive the representation of other people through largely white sign language interpreters in academia. It may be helpful to first briefly discuss the concept of “accent” in spoken languages, which is simultaneously tangible and elusive (Lippi-Green 2012). Many people understand what an accent means when it is compared to something and assessed through the perspective of a listener, but otherwise it is difficult to explain in isolation. When one says that a person has an accent, it is implied that the person sounds like they are speaking differently from what one is accustomed to. One reason for the difference might be that the speaker is using a language that is their second language; this non-native speech phenomenon is known as a foreign accent (Moyer 2013). When a person is said to have a “strong accent,” it is often interpreted to mean that some of their first language’s phonology, or sound system, comes through when speaking the second language. No two languages are exactly alike in their phonologies, and various biological and sociocultural factors can influence how a person “sounds” when using their second language. What makes the perception of an accent subjective is that no two listeners process accents in the same way. Listeners’ perceptions are shaped by an interplay of biological, cognitive, and sociolinguistic variables, such as their life experience of listening to certain accents and their implicit bias about the physical appearance of so-called prototypical speakers of different languages.

Another reason for the difference in perception of accent is the association of variation in some element of the prosody or the pronunciation of words with another variety of language based on a social group, a region of a nation-state, or another country; in some cases, the difference may be more about a language variety, or dialect.⁴ For U.S. English language varieties, one would generally be considered to be speaking with an “accent” and/or using a “dialect” if they are not speaking Standard American English (SAE). African American English (AAE), for example, encompasses a collection of American English varieties spoken by U.S. people of African descent and the African diaspora (Weldon 2021). AAE has been called by various names, from “Negro dialect” to “Black Vernacular English” to “African American Language” (Green 2002); the names represent long-standing ideologies about the linguistic status of AAE in U.S. society that are built on the foundation of white supremacy. From the perspective of monolingual listeners who use SAE, when they hear someone speaking AAE, they may say that the

person has an accent or dialect. The same listeners hearing another person speaking SAE may say that the person does not have an accent or a dialect. Moreover, the listener may decide that the person speaking AAE sounds “Black” and the person speaking SAE sounds “white.” The use of auditory cues to assess the speech of a speaker—and to assess their racial identity—is known as linguistic profiling and is an analogue to the use of visual cues for racial profiling (Baugh 2003). The profiling of AAE and SAE speakers is hardly an objective representation of linguistic differences, but rather an implicit—and racial—bias about which language variety is superior on account of the prestige of the social group that uses it.

Then there is the gray area of culturally specific knowledge that is not widely shared by the whole group of language users. Many people such as immigrants and children of immigrants with linguistically marginalized and racially minoritized backgrounds are bilingual or multilingual to varying degrees. Even those who self-identify as dominant in English retain some culturally specific words and phrases from their home languages and can be sensitive to the orthographic representation and pronunciation of these words, especially when it comes to personal names. A well-documented example in recent memory is the debate over the anglicized and non-anglicized pronunciations of the Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor (Bucholtz 2016). How one pronounces a name is an act of performativity that indexes social meaning that is tied to context of use, and the choice of pronunciation illuminates language ideologies about different languages (Bucholtz 2016; Rosa 2019).

What constitutes an accent in signed languages is not as well understood as it is for spoken languages, and it has not been investigated as much. Deaf signers who use a second sign language in adulthood may be perceived as having a “visible foreign” accent (Quinto-Pozos 2008; Sandler, Belsitzman, and Meir 2020). Deaf people who learn to sign later in childhood and hearing people who learn to sign as adults may be perceived as having accents too. But accent in the sense of phonetic-phonological variation does not appear to translate well to signed languages. Variation in signed languages has been observed in the lexicon and beyond. In a large-scale study of regional variation in British Sign Language (BSL) in the United Kingdom, Deaf BSL signers strongly associate accent with lexical variation, that is, with signs that are perceptually distinct from one another, not with phonetic variation of perceptually similar signs (Rowley and Cormier 2021). Black ASL is considered a distinct variety of ASL that emerged from segregated residential schools for the deaf in the U.S. South (McCaskill et al. 2011; *Signing Black in America* 2020; Waller 2021). Linguists have described various linguistic features that distinguish Black ASL from the ASL used by white deaf signers; those features are manifested through the whole body, from the number of hands used to the signing space to the rhythm of movement to the incorporation of AAE. So what renders signing accented to deaf eyes appears to be the presentation of the whole body, not merely how a sign is “pronounced.”

A far more complicated issue about accented signing is that there are no direct analogues between accents in signing and speaking. It would not be appropriate to compare the more standardized variety of ASL to, say, SAE. Signed languages have never been on a par with spoken languages, and the variation associated with signing varieties is a product of the complex histories of Deaf people intertwined with multiple types and layers of oppression. The lack of analogues between signed and spoken accents add a whole dimension of complexity to sign language interpretation, especially when qualified interpreters in the United States are overwhelmingly white women (Obasi 2013). The vast population of these white female interpreters is discussed in the next section.

WORKING WITH SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETERS

To be considered qualified, interpreters must be certified by the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID). It is a U.S. organization with a national certification system; the certification is for general—not specialized—interpreting.⁵ A white paper authored by the RID in 2019 stated that their organization has a total of 14,452 registered members from all over the United States (Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, Inc. 2019). Most of the members are certified. Out of 11,004 members who self-reported their racial/ethnic backgrounds, only 1,689 members identified as People of Color.⁶ The majority of the members also self-reported their gender as female. There is no information about the linguistic and educational backgrounds of the members, but our lifelong experiences of working with interpreters lead us to deduce that most certified interpreters grew up speaking SAE as their first (and only) language and vary in their highest level of education completed from a high school diploma to a master’s degree. Interpreters who know another spoken language, such as Spanish, often as their home language, tend to identify as People of Color. Thus, Interpreters of Color constitute a small minority of interpreters in the national registry, and those with multilingual backgrounds may be an even smaller minority. This statistic may include Deaf Interpreters of Color, who are conflated with the total number of 317 general Deaf interpreters, but the exact number of Deaf Interpreters of Color is unknown.

Literature about Deaf scholars working with interpreters has focused primarily on collaboration between Deaf, hard-of-hearing, and late-deafened scholars and professors and their interpreters (Trowler and Turner 2002; Woodcock, Rohan, and Campbell 2007; Campbell, Rohan, and Woodcock 2008; Hauser et al. 2008; Burke and Nicodemus 2013; De Meulder, Napier and Stone 2018). General interpreters do not share the educational background and specialized knowledge of Deaf scholars, which presents a big challenge for interpretation. This is where designated interpreters come in. They may be employed as permanent staff, not as contractors, and are responsible for working closely with a Deaf professional and becoming familiar with the Deaf professional’s role, their relationships with

other colleagues, and the culture and language of the work environment (Hauser and Hauser 2008). They acquire some of the ambient culture and language that facilitates interpretation. Unfortunately, most Deaf scholars do not have access to designated interpreters and tend to work with general interpreters.

Burke and Nicodemus (2013) stated there is no standardized ASL terminology for specialized academic or occupational fields because there are not enough Deaf professionals in each subject to reach a certain critical mass. Most Deaf scholars do not have the luxury of having designated interpreters, so they are not always assigned the same interpreters in each situation. Deaf scholars must therefore generate new signed vocabulary for their assigned interpreters, who are not professionally trained in their specific discipline. They must repeatedly engage in this task, taking valuable time away from concentrating on the issues at hand (Chua et al. 2022). The issue of interpreters also affects graduate students—the largest part of the pipeline to incoming generations of Deaf faculty—who struggle to locate qualified and even designated interpreters capable in both speed and the ability to comprehend the subjects of their classes (Woodcock, Rohan, and Campbell 2007; Chua et al. 2022).

At a minimum, having a qualified, if not designated, interpreter is essential for constructing an appropriate persona; otherwise, Deaf scholars can lose face by being misrepresented, sometimes unbeknownst to them at the moment. Stapleton (2015a), a hearing member of the faculty in a Deaf Studies department, has witnessed unqualified interpreters voicing a Deaf colleague in important meetings and has described how interpreters “stumbled, used a lot of ‘ums,’ missed important details and big concepts, and relied on a very limited vocabulary” (2015a, 58). As a result, her “highly intelligent [Deaf] colleague came across as a nervous, unclear, and unskilled presenter who could not accurately articulate ideas” (ibid). Her recollection showcased the severe issue of insufficient high-quality interpreters, and, to make matters worse, the number of Interpreters of Color whose skills are suitable for a particular discipline is microscopic.

Other literature has examined the role of the interpreter’s stance in mediating intersubjective discourse (Janzen and Shaffer 2013), or the phenomenon of “the translated deaf self.” That includes hearing people’s perceptions of deaf people through sign language interpretation in the workplace (Young, Oram, and Napier 2019) and deaf signers’ bimodal translanguaging strategies for maintaining their professional identity in interpreted interactions with hearing people (Napier, Oram, et al. 2019). In addition, there is no standard procedure for interpreters to prepare for interpreting an organized lecture or new or unfamiliar speakers (Swabey et al. 2016; Napier, Skinner, et al. 2019), although many designated interpreters do, in fact, undertake such preparation. The absence of such procedure contrasts with the usual conduct of interpreters to request preparatory materials from Deaf presenters (Campbell, Rohan, and Woodcock 2008). Any implementation of procedure will better prepare interpreters who are not familiar with the speakers’ materials or voices.

Accent in sign language interpretation, however, has seldom been mentioned in the above literature with the exception of a recent study on the influence of the regional accent of Dutch-speaking interpreters on hearing people’s perception of Deaf signers (Heldens and van Gent 2020). The gap in literature can be attributed to the more pressing issue of getting a qualified interpreter that shares the Deaf signer’s background. The gap can also suggest that race and ethnicity have not been considered or have been trivialized in the mediated representation of Deaf signers. Yet there have been published some personal stories about Deaf scholars from racially minoritized backgrounds working with sign language interpreters (García-Fernández 2014; Stapleton 2015b; Gallon 2018; Moges-Riedel 2020). Since most sign language interpreters are reported to be white, Deaf Scholars of Color are unlikely to get Interpreters of Color whose voices and physical presence, as well as experiences and worldviews, could best represent the scholars. No publications have explored in depth the experiences of this underrepresented group working with Interpreters of Color and what this could mean for Interpreting Students of Color (Shambourge 2015; West Oyedele 2015).

Even if a Deaf scholar of Color does get to work with an Interpreter of Color, the scholar still has to labor for quality control in ASL interpretation. A Chicana Deaf scholar, García-Fernández (2014) explained her method of gathering data for her dissertation study with a non-designated trilingual interpreter.⁷ The interpreter was tasked with providing a Spanish translation of questions from ASL and was not sensitive about word choice of “deaf.” The interpreter picked a word that translates to “deaf-mute” instead of “deaf,” so García-Fernández would “read through the questions and interpret them using certain words [she] prefer[s] as opposed to their words of choice, in order to be as conceptually accurate as possible. Overall, all interpreters found this very helpful since the list helped them be more prepared and stay close to [her] research questions and interpret both questions and answers accurately” (García-Fernández 2014, 102). Despite both the researcher and interpreter sharing the same racial identity, García-Fernández, as a Deaf Scholar of Color with Latinx and Deaf epistemology, had to maintain firm control of research data collection and experience. Her example illustrates how crucial it is for Deaf Scholars of Color to find interpreters who are a good fit for them *and* can accurately represent their language. This is a sentiment widely shared by Deaf People of Color.

MICROINVALIDATING THE LANGUAGE OF DEAF PEOPLE OF COLOR

In 2019 Nikita Williams, a Black Deaf female, went viral after a vlog post in which she boldly claimed that “we need more Latinx and Black interpreters” was featured by the Daily Moth, an ASL radio show (The Daily Moth 2019). Williams first shared her deep frustration with video relay service (VRS), which is a phone interpreting service that uses a video screen for Deaf and Hard of Hearing consumers to

communicate with hearing non-signing people. Her anecdote revealed that the white female interpreters on VRS refused to accurately voice the words she chose in her ASL-signed conversation over the phone. Her word choices included curse words, such as the “f-word,” and she claimed that those white female interpreters felt those words were inappropriate due to their religious beliefs, while Latinx and Black interpreters would authentically capture and voice her accurately and justifiably. Williams’s exclamation, “If you can’t translate all the words I signed, then don’t do the job. Find another career!” (The Daily Moth 2019, 15:52), was echoed by many Facebook users, leading to more than six thousand shares of the vlog upon its release. This significantly shows the shared experiences of Deaf People of Color being misrepresented by white interpreters who voice them inauthentically. This performance of dismissing Deaf People of Color’s preferred voice interpretation such as AAE (or Black English) is an act of microinvalidation, a type of microaggression.

Microaggressions are defined as “subtle insults (verbal, nonverbal, and/or visual) directed toward People of Color, often automatically or unconsciously” (Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso 2000, 60). Sue (2010) explains that microaggressions can be covert or overt incidents and are “numerous, continuous, and have a detrimental impact upon targets” (40). He identified three different forms of racial microaggressions: microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations (Sue et al. 2007; Sue 2010). A microassault is categorized as an extremely explicit form of racial derogation performed consciously. A microinsult, which can be either conscious or unconscious, conveys inexplicit messages that are considered rude and insensitive to a person’s racial identity/ies. Finally, a microinvalidation is a usually unconscious behavior that excludes or trivializes the experiences or achievements of People of Color. Vulnerable people who are triggered by microinvalidations often question whether what they saw or heard was a microaggression (Sue et al. 2007; Sue 2010). This goes back to the Deaf Scholars of Color listening to their interpreters who were quick to criticize a speaker for their “strong accent” and wondering if that was a form of microaggression. Gallon (2018) added three different types of racial microaggressions performed by interpreters with university students: infantilizing, assumed authority, and taking credit for the accomplishments of Deaf People of Color. Her findings are truly noteworthy; we expand them with our focus on racial microinvalidations that emerge from the dynamics of intersubjectivity between Deaf Scholars of Color and their interpreters in academic spaces.

UNDERSTANDING THE NARRATIVES AS EMBODIED LANGUAGE USE

To best understand the racial microinvalidations as experienced by Deaf Scholars of Color, we approach language as an embodied phenomenon in which bodies produce language and language produces bodies (Bucholtz and Hall 2016), with an emphasis on the racialization of bodies. This approach dovetails nicely with sign languages, the natural languages of Deaf, Deaf-Blind, and Deaf-Disabled people,

as evidenced by some sixty-odd years of research from linguistics, sociolinguistics, and linguistic anthropology. It also captures the reality of how we signers use our whole bodies to perceive and produce language—and to make social judgments about people and their bodies based on how they produce their messages and how they perceive our messages (see Moges 2020 about the embodied signing styles of Deaf female-bodied masculine lesbian ASL signers). Because sign languages are located in the whole body, it is virtually impossible for signers to have a “disembodied” voice, even with sign language interpreters. Bodies must be visible for communication in visual sign languages. The corollary is that both linguistic *and* racial profiling evokes language ideologies about people, especially those from linguistically marginalized and racially minoritized backgrounds. Interpreters, along with everyone else, are not exempt from the practice of profiling.

The data presented below were drawn from personal and collective narratives from various Deaf Scholars of Color employed at different higher education institutions and other academic spaces in the United States. Some of the data were originally reported in the dissertation of one of this chapter’s authors (Moges-Riedel 2020). Each narrative represents a mismatch of intersubjectivity: the discomforting presence of white female interpreters occupying the physical space of a Black male scholar, the linguistic and sociocultural constraints that a Latinx scholar encounters in working with white interpreters, the mispronunciation of non-anglicized names that an East Asian scholar tried to redress, and the tension of the mismatched assignment of white interpreters to an all-Black-and-Deaf panel that a Black scholar had to facilitate.

THE DISCOMFORTING PRESENCE OF WHITE INTERPRETERS

It is important to consider what happens to conferences because presenting and sharing one’s work is a crucial responsibility of tenure-track faculty’s research agenda. The first example, which takes place at an academic conference, conveys how the visible whiteness of an interpreter can determine how Deaf Scholars of Color appear to others, rendering them approachable for some people and unapproachable for others. A Black male conference attendee, Dr. Joseph Hill, who is a tenured professor, shared his conference experience on Twitter under the handle “@jaceychill,” posting about being assigned white female interpreters (see figure 8.1). Interpreters of Color were frequently unavailable or not considered appropriate to be hired at those social events at conferences, since the practice of assigning interpreters focuses on providing basic access rather than on providing appropriate representation of the Deaf Scholar of Color. Hill adds another perspective to his dilemma in addition to the problematic representation of him sounding white: the problematic physical presence of his white interpreters.

This anecdote suggests a notion of a safe space or POC space that is infiltrated by white interpreters and how for Deaf Scholars of Color it is not their language



FIGURE 8.1. Screenshot 1 of Dr. Joseph Hill's Twitter post from a thread about his experience of white interpreters at a conference. Twitter, October 12, 2019, <https://twitter.com/jaceyhill/status/1183267937450283010>.

or modality of ASL that is a barrier but rather the race of the interpreter. Hill did not realize that until his Black colleague brought up the issue of the discomforting presence of whiteness around him (see figure 8.2). However, it was not within Hill's power to make specific requests for an interpreter, as is often the case for conference attendees, especially at national conferences that rotate between different states. Importantly, a white interpreter is usually a foot or further away from the body of a Deaf Scholar of Color, thus producing an unintended repellant in POC spaces. This is truly difficult for Deaf Scholars of Color to control due to the limited supply of Interpreters of Color (Street Leverage 2015; Jones 2020).



FIGURE 8.2. Screenshot 2 of Dr. Joseph Hill’s Twitter post from a thread about his experience of white interpreters at a conference. Twitter, October 12, 2019, <https://twitter.com/jaceyhill/status/1183268745566806016>.

SOUNDING WHITE AND . . . MULTICULTURALLY INCOMPETENT?

Moges-Riedel (2020) conducted extensive interviews of fifteen Deaf Faculty of Color who work at postsecondary institutions. Some of their narratives revealed a recurring theme of working with white interpreters. While those faculty members are already racialized because of their identity, the voices of their white interpreters present an additional complication in terms of how they present themselves through speaking. For tenured and tenure-track Deaf faculty at institutions of higher education, the interpreters can spend a substantial amount of time voicing

for the Deaf faculty as part of interpretation. This creates a pressing challenge for Deaf faculty and interpreters who do not share the same racial and ethnic background, which may inadvertently lead to the racialization or the lack of racialization of Deaf Faculty of Color, whose racialized identities are presented via their white, female voice(d) interpreters. The interpreters may lack knowledge of culturally specific words and may not be aware of how they sound “white” when voicing in SAE. Many Interpreters of Color have more cultural knowledge and background of multi-ethnic words (West Oyedele 2015) and more training with multilingual practices, such as trilingual skills with ASL, English, and Spanish, than their white peers (Treviño and Quinto-Pozos 2018).

Antonio shared his experience with a white interpreter who wasn’t able to interpret Spanish:

They’re struggling with the French names and the pronunciation, and not knowing how to get that out clearly, and then I’m wondering, . . . what are you going to do to Spanish when you hear those names? And you know the students who would speak Spanish. . . . So the students would speak Spanish, in my class, you know, just a few little words, and then another student would hear that, and they would say, “Hey, what did they just say?” But the interpreter had no idea what to tell them [since] they didn’t understand the Spanish at all. They weren’t able to completely interpret all of it. And so, I’d ask for, you know, some type of spelling and they couldn’t lip read it, and I would be stuck.

The interpreter who was unskilled at voicing Spanish and not culturally trained obscured Antonio’s Latinx identity by making him seem to be ignorant of any non-anglicized names or any basic Spanish words. Due to his lost opportunity to claim his Spanish-speaking culture, his identity was obstructed by the inability to access a clearly racialized voice from his white interpreter, and he was not able to build connections with those Spanish-speaking students. In addition, he felt too embarrassed to join any Spanish-speaking events on campus with any of the staff interpreters, who were all white.

Antonio continued by mentioning a revelation about how a Latina ASL interpreter had contributed to and validated Latinx identities in a classroom. He had never had that experience until he had a substitute Latina interpreter, and consequently they had this eye-opening experience together. Antonio shared how she understood the cultural behavior of Latino gestures:

You know, when you sign “eat,” how we sign it. So in the Latino culture you usually have . . . closed fingers and [a] flat, open hand [the palm is facing upward and you bend fingers repetitively toward your mouth] for “eating,” and that would be a Latino gesture, for example, but other interpreters wouldn’t catch that. But this Latina interpreter caught it and I felt great about that. I felt validated with that. And it allowed me to further assess myself and realize, “Okay, I have my own identity and my own behaviors that match who I am, that match my parents. This is all part of me and who I am.” And that was awesome for me, that validation, that feeling from that incident.

. . . It was so inspiring, I was so excited about that, you know, I wanted to just let everyone know that this process . . . occurred.

Antonio had this revelation of the importance of Interpreters of Color, especially those who are fluent in Spanish or conscious of Latinx culture, to experience the validation of his Latinx roots. The insufficient number of Interpreters of Color with ethnic epistemologies has resulted in Deaf Scholars of Color not being able to achieve a sense of belonging or to connect with other POC in academic fields.

(MIS)PRONOUNCING PERSONAL NAMES AND
DEMONSTRATING MULTICULTURAL COMPETENCE

Names matter, and pronouncing them correctly not only signals respect, but it can also signal how the user perceives the bearer of the name. In the United States many names of racially minoritized and/or linguistically stigmatized backgrounds have been subject to anglicization (Bucholtz 2016). As someone who grew up having her Mandarin Chinese surname frequently mispronounced in the United States, Hou, one of the authors of this chapter, is sensitive to the complex racial politics of “foreign” names and the trauma that comes with the experience of hearing (or seeing) the mispronunciation of one’s name. She works in a linguistics department in which the majority of students and faculty use multiple language varieties and languages in their personal and professional lives. A substantial percentage of the graduate students (and even some of the faculty members) pronounce their personal names according to the phonology of the language that they grew up using. The department maintains a member directory that includes the pronunciation of names in the International Phonetic Alphabet, an alphabetic system of phonetic notation used for transcribing speech sounds in Latin script. In principle, everybody adopts the pronunciation of a name as explicitly modeled by the bearer of that name from that list, but in practice most people rely on the most frequently heard pronunciation of the name as a guide. Hou works with a team of two designated interpreters: one is not fluent in any other spoken languages apart from SAE and the other is fluent in both SAE and African American English. She trained them to pronounce her surname correctly so the students would know how to pronounce it and, more importantly, students who knew Mandarin would not take offense or even think of their professor as ignorant. What could be more embarrassingly ironic than an ignorant linguistics professor who herself is visibly East Asian? Hou also trained the interpreters to pay close attention to the pronunciation of other people’s names based on how they pronounced the names themselves so they would not mispronounce them when Hou called on someone in class.

There was a Catalan student whose name many English and Spanish speakers often struggled to pronounce. As people tend to pronounce other people’s names more than the bearer of a name pronounces it themselves, there is more room for mispronunciation. Unbeknownst to the author, the interpreters often heard

the mispronounced version from other individuals and used it as an exemplar for their own pronunciation. It was not until an open and frank discussion about microaggressions among several faculty members and graduate students that Hou deduced that the interpreters were validating the mispronounced version of the Catalan student's name. She asked the student to clarify his preference about how his name should be pronounced, and he replied that he wanted it pronounced as it is in Catalan, or at least as close to it as possible, and he found the question empowering. Hou informed the interpreters about the student's preference; in thinking about the emotional labor and cost involved in redressing the situation, she advised them to not take anyone's pronunciation of other people's names as accurate and to directly ask the bearer of the name for a demonstration. This strategy allowed her to exercise more agency over the interpreters' pronunciation of names, which not only signaled respect for and the legitimacy of the student and his personhood, but it also asserted her multifaceted positionality as a linguistics professor and as a woman of color with social justice values.

HURDLES OF UNSOUND INSTITUTIONAL POLICY

Another institution with a strong-led interpreting program hosted an event on Zoom about Black Deaf art. Moges, one of this chapter's authors, an East African American, was asked to facilitate the six other Black Deaf artists. Her tasks were to arrange panel questions in advance, assign the questions to several of the panelists, and ensure that there would be enough time for each topic and for each panelist to participate. It never occurred to her to double-check if the voice interpreters assigned to the panel were Black since she trusted the hosting institution would provide Black interpreters. How mistaken she was to assume they had the common sense to provide suitable representation for Black voices. When she first signed in at the event and saw two unknown white female faces on Zoom, they assured her that they would turn their cameras off during the panel. She was stumped, unable to compose herself in time to speak up and ask if they were just moderating or interpreting. Hoping and praying that they were moderators, not interpreters, she thought to herself, "Well, what if it's the latter? It's too late, right?"

When the event started, the racial difference of the voice interpreters began to manifest in several ways, eventually producing tension and outrage. First, while the cameras of the interpreters were closed and unseen, their names still appeared on the top of the screen above the row of panelists. On the Zoom platform, what kept popping up were their white anglicized names that read as "Lori is talking" or "Shari is talking" (the names are pseudonyms). The pop-ups were extremely distracting and disempowering at the same time. Second, Moges's iPhone was buzzing with texts from Black hearing colleagues who were outraged by watching the panel and listening to the white interpreters trying to sound Black and picking inappropriate words to reflect the struggles described in the stories of the

Black Deaf artists. Clearly, at that moment it was impossible to stop the event and request a Black interpreter or just any Interpreter of Color, as the event was only an hour and half long, and Black interpreters, who are often in high demand, usually require at least two weeks’ advance notice for bookings.

As an afterthought, this event would not have been possible if it weren’t for the COVID-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter movement, which together initiated a series of online panels that increased the visibility and representation of Black hearing and Black Deaf people. The use of Zoom has presented many opportunities for signing communities to watch and listen to Black Deaf or other Deaf presenters online without the need to fly across states to a conference or a university for such an event. However, this increased access did not reassure the Black Deaf panelists about why Black interpreters were not hired from agencies across the nation. They later learned that it was the institutional policy of the event’s organizers that created a barrier to hiring interpreters from an outside agency. The organizers were required to first assign their staff interpreters (who happened to all be white) before requesting that someone from an external service be hired. This presents an institutional and ethical issue for interpreter coordinators to consider. While this code of professional conduct (CPC) is established by the RID, there is no discussion or statement about encouraging event organizers to ensure that the Interpreters of Color have job opportunities to represent Deaf People of Color justly.⁸

SHUSA! (SORRY HARD UNDERSTAND
STRONG ACCENT)

As mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, “SORRY HARD UNDERSTAND STRONG ACCENT!” is a phrase that ASL interpreters sign when they struggle to understand the speech of someone who speaks English as their second language. There is some variation in how the phrase may be translated, depending on the interpreter’s facial expressions and body position. Regardless of what intentions the interpreter has, “strong accent” clearly marks speakers as problematic, that is, it suggests that they are not idealized native English speakers, and it positions them as Others while absolving the interpreters from their responsibility of understanding the speakers. This position is magnified if the speaker has a racialized body. The comment is one of the recurring microinvalidations that we are reluctant to tie to a specific time, place, or individual; this has happened over and over again based on both our personal experiences and those of other Deaf Scholars of Color to the point where it feels normalized.

We are flagging this particular microinvalidation because it gets to the heart of what it means to “think with an accent.” The stories of Deaf Scholars of Color place great value on embodied representations of language that cannot be separated from the whole body or reduced to the voice box, but this sentiment may not be equally shared by the interpreters. On the job, interpreters are constantly filtering

what they hear, focused on relaying as much auditory information as possible to the Deaf consumers, but they are not immune to linguistic and racial profiling. It does not come as a surprise that interpreters are sensitive to hearing accents that do not match their own or are not familiar, since for hearing people, the spoken language accent comes first. Using a phrase like SHUSA! as a normalized practice of interpretation to a Deaf Scholar of Color can be baffling, and even dehumanizing and potentially triggering. This can exacerbate the effects of microinvalidations that are more salient and more important to Deaf Scholar of Colors—such as the visible presence of white interpreters and using the language that does not match the scholar’s persona, as illuminated by the stories presented here—in academia.

CLOSING REMARKS

The stories of Deaf Scholars of Color about working with white, largely female interpreters demonstrate recurring themes of microinvalidations in the racial dynamics of intersubjectivity; these themes relate to the negotiation of linguistic and sociocultural conflicts, including racial microinvalidations through mediated representations of voices. Those conflicts cannot and should not be attributed and reduced to mere individual differences of linguistic knowledge. Rather, they are best understood as products of the complex dynamics of institutions rooted in white supremacy. It is indeed white supremacy that has prized and privileged Standard American English, as spoken by many white people, in the United States. What, then, can be done to address those conflicts? We offer some recommendations for future generations of Deaf Scholars of Color, prospective interpreters, and academics who are interested in demonstrating allyship for those scholars.

To begin, it would be beneficial for the RID to create a registry of Interpreters of Color and their locations to provide to Deaf Scholars of Color. As Professor Hill mentioned, national academic conferences are responsible for the assignment of interpreters for Deaf attendees, so there was no way for him to immediately know all the sources for locating highly qualified interpreters. The emphasis on “highly” is meant to highlight that not all Interpreters of Color are suited to interpret at the postsecondary level or even for specific disciplines, just as we cannot expect all interpreters to be knowledgeable about every discipline. In addition, if a recurring conference does not have an interpreter coordinator, the organizers should consider hiring a qualified one and also take the responsibility of educating themselves and other committee members—especially those who have never worked with ASL interpreters—about accessibility guidelines. In fact, conferences should comply with what are called “standard practice papers” to have consistent professionalism to organize and coordinate with certain agencies of interpreters or support providers.⁹

For a situation such as that of Antonio, who benefited from working with a Latina interpreter in his classroom, Latinx-identified interpreters could have a

stronger networking system with Deaf Latinx faculty members. The interpreters need not necessarily be fluent in Spanish or trilingual, but they should be culturally competent with Latinx cultures. A good start in this direction is the trilingual sign language interpreter agency *Mano a Mano*, which has thirty-plus members registered on its public list. As suggested by García-Fernández’s (2014) study, which is built on Deaf Latinx epistemology, it would be useful for both Deaf Latinx faculty members and Latinx interpreters to connect and become familiar with each other.

Higher education institutions that are looking to hire Deaf faculty can implement a policy that would allow the faculty to select their own team of designated interpreters. The policy could even allow for the hiring of additional interpreters who are more appropriate and qualified than the designated interpreters for certain events. For example, if Hou wanted to attend a campus-sponsored event where a prominent Latinx scholar was presenting, she could ask her university to permit the assignment of Latinx interpreters for this event. This kind of flexibility would not only ensure better quality of interpretation for everyone, but it would also set an ethical precedent about social justice in access and inclusion. Since the number of qualified Interpreters of Color will not proliferate overnight and will be an issue for a long time, requesting a team of two Interpreters of Color may present a greater challenge than requesting one to work in a team with a white interpreter and one who can reinforce with informational support of cultural competence.

As the pool of Deaf Faculty of Color (and Deaf faculty in general) expands and more are employed at higher institutions, including predominantly hearing institutions, there will be a greater need for designated interpreters. There will also be a greater need for networking and mentoring about interpreters. Currently there is no formal training for Deaf faculty for learning how to work with designated interpreters and how to supervise them, much less for learning how to address the challenges of negotiating the racial dynamics of intersubjectivity. Deaf Faculty of Color can be empowered with training, particularly if it includes the topic of racial microaggressions, and be better prepared to address any issues that arise from the dynamics of intersubjectivity. RID chapters and Conference of Interpreters Training (CIT) can provide workshops on such issues so Deaf Scholars of Color will know how to give constructive feedback to designated interpreters, and the interpreters will know how to use it to improve their work.

Finally, sign language interpreter training programs can take an intersectional social justice approach to their curriculum. Sign language interpretation is a type of human service profession that has not historically addressed the relationship between the Deaf consumer and the interpreter with respect to racial inequalities and power differentials. Given that the majority of hearing ASL interpreters are white people who lack the lived experiences of Deaf People of Color (and hearing People of Color) *and* lack training about microaggressions, the interpreters may not be aware when they commit microaggressions (Gallon 2018). Integrating a combination of linguistics, critical race theory, and other social science topics in

the curriculum, for example, can show how different social groups benefit and do not benefit from axes of privileges, and how the more privileged groups can reflect on their implicit bias about minoritized and stigmatized language varieties and the people who use them. They can learn to become more conscious about their own bias, including linguistic profiling, in their interpretation skills of listening to accents and also learn to avoid committing racial microinvalidations. They also can practice how to mitigate the problem of being an unwanted buffer zone when working with Deaf Scholars of Color.

Sign language interpreting training programs can also incorporate a more proactive model of interpretation that would involve higher-standard practices of preparation in advance. Part of an interpreter's responsibilities involves obtaining presentation materials from Deaf presenters in advance to prepare, but these responsibilities could extend to preparing for all presenters. The interpreters could familiarize themselves with the hearing presenters' voices as a practice of listening to their accents and getting accustomed to them. Presenters can do their part too by providing their materials to the interpreters in advance. This practice would not only benefit both the Deaf audience and the interpreters, but it would also set a new precedent for access for everyone.

Lastly, in line with our call for social justice training in sign language interpretation, we need to problematize the phrase "SORRY HARD UNDERSTAND STRONG ACCENT" (or SHUSA!) and replace it with something along the lines of "need more time get used their speak way" or, in English, give one a moment to train one's ears to comprehend another speaker's accent and to focus on the bigger picture of embodied representation. To the ears of hearing people, the spoken language accent comes first, but to Deaf people, it does not. It is the whole body.

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NOTES

The order of the authors of this chapter is alphabetical.

1. Sign languages do not have conventionalized writing systems. It is common practice for researchers to use English glosses in capitals for an approximate representation of the meaning of ASL signs. However, the glosses do not sufficiently capture the nonmanual markers of sign languages such as facial expressions and body movements.

2. In this chapter we have chosen not to go into detail about the heterogeneity of spoken language capabilities among Deaf and hard-of-hearing people, including those with intersectional identities and multilingual backgrounds. See Padden 1980 for the cultural perspectives on this issue.

3. We capitalize "Deaf" and "Color" to highlight people's cultural identities. When we cite other publications, we use lowercase for "deaf."

4. There is no clear-cut boundary between accent and dialect, since the delineation of language varieties has been strongly intertwined with language ideologies, e.g., beliefs about what are considered “standard” languages and what are not. However, there is a general consensus about how accents refer to differences in phonological characteristics of a language variety, while dialects encompass differences in all levels of linguistic structure, including morphology, syntax, and semantics.

5. There are specialized certifications for legal and medical interpretation but none for academic interpretation. Most interpreters work as ad hoc, freelance, or general interpreters, and often work contract jobs.

6. Of the 1,689, 592 identified themselves as African American/Black, 203 as American Indian/Native Alaskan, 210 as Asian American/Pacific Islander, and 684 as Hispanic/Latinx.

7. Trilingual interpreters interpret from ASL/English to a third language, which is usually Spanish in North and Central America, or from Spanish to ASL. There are very few certified trilingual interpreters. More information can be found at <https://manoamanoinc.org/>.

8. To learn more about this code of professional conduct (CPC), established by National Association for the Deaf (NAD) and the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) together, see <https://rid.org/ethics/code-of-professional-conduct/>.

9. To learn more about this practice, visit see “Coordinating Conferences” at <https://rid.org/about-rid/about-interpreting/setting-standards/standard-practice-papers/>.

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