



Are all Deaf people the same?

Please allow me to describe three different groups that I have observed during my life as a Deaf person, a performer, and a workshop presenter. Of course, each individual can “self-identify” using specific terms to clarify their identity and which groups they affiliate with. My exploration of language and interpreting preferences has brought three groups to my attention, and each deserves respect for their own preferences. My intent in providing three hypothetical groups is not to divide, but to assist in discovering effective communication strategies.

First, let’s define "code-switching" – this is a linguistic term that means adapting language types to an individual, group, or situation. Also called "communication-shifting" as a less formal term, this “switching” means changing communication expression from one language to another, from one style of language to another, from one regional dialect to another, and from any one type of communication to another.

In the past, as interpreters worked, I have checked with Deaf people to see if they were comprehending the interpreted messages. This kind of information-gathering is called "back-channel feedback." Often, I noticed that some Deaf people were not getting the message that the interpreter was hoping to send. There was no real connection. This may happen at various times and in various circumstances, due to lack of consideration for audience characteristics and preferences, consumer isolation, or consumer personality traits, such as shyness, that might inhibit consumers from asking for a change in communication style. More rarely, there may be times that communication styles are mismatched due to Audism (condescending attitudes of hearing people toward Deaf people, and violation of the civil rights of Deaf people).

From my training workshops, my experience assisting people to prepare for evaluations, and my experience with code shifting, I've found that it's extremely important to tackle all of the interpreting challenges that come up. It’s vital to be flexible and ready to code-switch, if necessary, to connect with a particular audience. Once, a certified interpreter didn't want to interpret a lot of compound sentences, nor to use classifiers to expand a message visually. She wanted to perform at merely a "basic level" without making the effort to develop, professionally, and to expand her communication strategies. That seemed awkward and disrespectful. Perhaps this person had little concern for consumers, and was not worried about losing her certification. Her attitude might be that many Deaf people don't know how to file complaints and some Deaf people may behave with passivity, not asking for clarification. I am here simply to encourage you to be thoughtful in how you approach a Deaf person. To relay messages effectively is a wonderful communication service for which we are all grateful. Development of professional skills is admirable. I applaud sign language interpreters who are dedicated to their work!

In my travels, I've noticed three different group identities:

- ◆ High Visual-Gestural Deaf People
- ◆ Ambicultural Deaf People
- ◆ Deaf Professionals

High Visual Gestural

- Tends to have a long-term, stable “blue collar” job
- Close to kin/family, stays close with friends, mostly locals
- Uses captions, text, interpreters
- Limited education (high school diploma, certificates)
- Tends to use strong, straight ASL
- Tends not to have a focus on health
- Tends to have some limitations in writing skills (English)
- May be willing to accept government support

Ambicultural Deaf Person

- Mixed, 50/50 (Prefers ASL; may or may not have English fluency)
- Gets along with hearing and Deaf people
- Communication misunderstandings commonly occur

Deaf Professionals

- Most have “white collar” (professional) careers and are interested in career advancement
- Deal with a broad spectrum of people and insist on civil rights (such as visual accommodation)
- Focused on use of technology, open to all communication aids
- Attends conferences, meetings, discussions
- Has a higher educational level
- Cares deeply about health
- Cares deeply about learning more English (building vocabulary, improving writing)
- Tends to code-switch, using various communication channels: PSE/“contact sign”, ASL, gestures
- Frequently writes in English
- Tends not to accept government support

Whenever I'm on the road, I always love meeting Deaf people. I care about their dreams and challenges. I know all of us are, in many ways, in the same boat. I've noticed that many people in the High Visual Gestural group are very enthusiastic about video phones, Skype, Facetime, Glide, and other kinds of visual communication. From my observation with this group, I would recommend providing Certified/Deaf Interpreters to enhance communication in most settings.

As for me, I consider myself a Deaf Professional. Through my traveling experiences, I can survive without an interpreter, and yet, I will always request an interpreter, if needed. I also enjoy texting, reading, journaling, emailing, and access to open-captioning.

Please don't label us as “low functioning” or use other condescending terms that relate to our language preferences. Language preferences help make us who we are. Many people have a strong association with a particular language, and may not feel as comfortable with another language. For example, even people who are fluent in English may be confused by health and car insurance forms, financial planning, and so on. Many Deaf professionals prefer more “visual” interpreting even when we can fully comprehend other interpreting styles. Hope my observations are helpful. Wish you all the best!